

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: GREEN CIRCLE

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The speaker in this collection explores the quotidian experiences of daily life. Often restless, she attempts to find beauty or significance in these occurrences. The speaker looks into her personal history in a variety of locations. Many of the poems are set in Washington DC, California, Massachusetts and South Korea and as such, they explore the intersection of memory and present reality.

GREEN CIRCLE

by
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Sura: Providence, Rhode Island

The only Korean word I know is *oma*,
meaning mother. I sit across from her
in the low light of the Korean restaurant
downtown. We hold rice paper menus
up to the candle's glow. On the table,
the kimchi looks like freshly peeled skin
bleeding out on the white ceramic.
She tells me when I arrived in America,
it was as though I had been steeped
in it, the smell of fermented cabbage
stayed in my clothing and hair for months.
We leave it untouched on the table,
choose instead to look out the windows
and watch strings of light suspended
between storefronts come on,
one by one and then all at once.
When I arrived, my mother had a broken
arm. Holding me was hard; I cried at the sight
of her blonde hair. In a drawer next to her
bed, she keeps a drawing I made as a child.
I am a green circle. I sit on a shelf in a store
with other circles—babies waiting to be adopted
by people who walk the aisles with carts
and blue arms longer than their bodies.
They reach toward us to see how much
we cost. I used to think being adopted
meant that I wasn't born. My mother offers
me the sugar bowl before stirring some
into her own tea. It whirls, steam rising
from the surface. She brings
the cup's lip to her mouth, cradles it
with both hands so it doesn't spill.

Because the bed is against the wall

I have to climb over Mason in the middle of the night
to get to the bathroom, which jolts him awake

as though I've shocked him. The woman next-door stays
up late singing songs from failed musicals—Freakshow,

Taboo, Moose Murders, Leap of Faith—loud enough to travel
through the walls. My mother used to sing while boiling water

on the stovetop. We'd sit outside in the suburban quiet
drinking chamomile and watch hummingbirds land on the deck,

draw sugar water from the feeder the way a pinhole draws light.
But tonight, my mother is asleep in New England and I am pacing

this apartment, watching an ambulance make its way down 14th
towards the Washington Monument, the red light at its crown blinking

as always. The woman next door has moved on to Les Misérables
and it's that time of night when you can stand in the yard and lose

your hands to the darkness. Last night, on a rerun of a show
about unsolved mysteries, a woman's keys disappeared

whenever there was a full moon in Montana, and she swore
she saw a blue light over her home, not like the light of heaven,

but electric and foreboding. People thought she was insane
until their dogs were gone from their yards. Sometimes they show

missing persons cases—mostly women who vanished
from shopping malls. It's enticing, the want to disappear.

As a child, I used to run away from home once a month,
which is to say I hid in the bushes outside the kitchen windows,

hoping to hear my parents grieving their loss. I'd stay there for hours,
listening to my mother vacuum or to shouts from my father

watching Sunday night football. Years later, they told me they knew
where I was every time. Mason tells me I'm the kind of person

who wants to stay, even when everything has gone stale or bitter,
but sometimes I can't tell the difference between unhappiness

and insatiability. Sometimes I'm jealous of the way he says I love you
to his sister. Sometimes, I don't fall asleep when his back is turned

to me in bed. I keep having this dream where I confuse him
for my father. I'm standing on Moonstone Beach and in the surf,

Mason or my father surfacing or succumbing to a sea that billows
like a child's parachute. I want to swim out but can't move

without my feet, which are swallowed and thrown up again by the tide
and those stars, threading themselves in and out of the dark fabric of the night.

The Furies

I'm watching a freight train crash into a car on the news—
the aluminum flattened like those cans kicked around the schoolyard.

They were driving so fast a witness says. *They couldn't have known*
how it was going to end. At a party, a woman I've never seen before

put her arms around him for too long, left the red shadows of her fingertips
on his neck after she pulled away. From Olympus, Hera watched the sky

like a blue marble darken with clouds and came down to find Zeus
standing in the woods with an ivory cow. His lover disguised, Hera knew

and sent the furies to pierce the soft flesh of the cow's sides as she wandered.
Men are animals a friend used to say on nights when we'd watch

them orbit around women at bars, settle their hands into the curves
of their backs. I ate nothing that summer but green transparent apples

and saltines and showered in the morning dark so I didn't have to see
my body under the bathroom's white fluorescent bulbs.

There is more than one kind of hunger. The German cockroach eats
anything it can find—soap, glue, the deceased bodies of its own family.

This morning I watched one crawl out from behind the loose switch plate
on the wall. Antennas in the air, it made its way across the counter

searching for crumbs, anything left behind. I found photos
on his computer of a woman—her bare back to the camera,

the lace of her thong dark against her velvet pink curves. I stood at the mirror
for days, clawing at my own bare sides, too soft in the windowless light.

Waiting for the Big Bus Tour Bus with my Mother in Haight Ashbury

She said I hoard memories like some people
hoard cats or expired food. I think she's right.
For hours, we rode on a red double decker
while tour guide Matt told us about Van Ness,
Cow Hollow, the Embarcadero,
how after the earthquake the city burned
and the army bombed the streets
to make a firebreak, a chasm to trap the flames
and stop them from destroying the west end
of the city. I don't know why I remember
everything he told us—the parrots on Telegraph Hill,
the Marina built on top of a landfill, even his roommate
the dog sitter and his father the reporter. Even now,
it isn't hard to picture the leather jacket he wore,
the way he held a Big Gulp in one hand,
microphone in the other. When we crossed the Golden Gate,
I wanted to take a picture so I'd have something
tangible to keep and at night when I'm lonely, take it out
of its hiding place like an ex-lover's shirt, sniff at the faint spice
in the seams beneath the arms, as if doing so might conjure
something more than distant smoke, dust smoldering
in recognition of flames before burning out.

The Leftovers

The weather could be better today
but when I talk to Mason

I tell him I'm enjoying the clouds
because the sun we've been having

was becoming too predictable.
He and I are working on being positive

more often for the sake of the relationship
because when you're in a relationship

you must always continue to work
on the relationship. Sometimes

it would be easier to be alone
but I like sleeping next to someone

and most of the time, he makes me laugh.
We've been binge-watching a show

called *The Leftovers*, about people
left behind on earth

after a mysterious rapture-like event.
People across the world

disappeared simultaneously
while driving their cars, shopping

for groceries, and feeding their kids.
They cry for their missing loved ones

who might've gone all sorts of places—
heaven, a deserted island,

maybe nowhere at all.
Mason wants to be taken

because it's more interesting than staying
behind. I'd rather be left

because I don't like imagining
the alternative. Most of my friends

are getting married or starting families,
which I guess is what you do

when you're in your late twenties.
When my friend Laura got married,

all of the women at the wedding
lined up to catch the bouquet,

an arrangement of baby's breath
and green hydrangeas like foam

that gathers at the edge of the sea
after a storm. I put my arms up

along with everyone else, but when
it landed in my hands, it felt like a curse.

Laura has a one-month-old child now
and says she's happier than ever.

I can't picture what it would be like
to be responsible for another life.

Most days I feel like a child myself.
Visiting my mother for the holidays,

I slept in her bed every night.
We ran errands around my hometown.

Everything still looked
the way I remembered—

the missing H on the sign outside
of North Attleboro Liquors, the yellow slide

outside of the elementary school
where I used to hide during recess,

even the trees, bending over Clifton Street
like a tunnel. Back in my dark apartment,

in DC, the neighbors
were signing songs from Rent

and I felt more displaced than ever before.
Mason says becoming an adult feels

the way an out-of-service metro car looks—
speeding, empty, transient.

I've been listening to self-help audio books
on my morning commute.

They're full of the same advice:
start every morning with a smile.

*Your early twenties are a pivotal time
for self discovery.* My mother asks

if I want to go to South Korea
for my twenty-sixth birthday

so I can see where I was born
and maybe find my birth parents.

I tell her I'm too busy with work,
but the truth is that I'd rather

not know. I don't think of myself
as Korean until someone mentions it,

or I catch myself in a mirror
under unfamiliar light. I've never seen

a photo of my birth parents
because the adoption agency didn't have one

to give, but sometimes I wonder
if I look more like my birth mother

or father. War vets used to talk to me
when I worked as a host in a restaurant

in high school. One said I looked like someone
he met while fighting overseas

and tried to teach me Korean words
I never learned. My mother used to decorate

my room in Asian art—spindles of cherry blossoms
branching across glass vases,

two dolls wearing hanboks on a swing
over my bed. Here in the District,

my bed looks toward a window
out of which I can only see red brick

from the apartment building next door.
My mother asks me if I'm planning

on staying for the indefinite future
and I tell her yes because I don't have anywhere

else to go. Mason says he thinks he could feel
at home wherever, but I've been here

for three years and it still doesn't feel
like home to me. I have a list taped

on the wall in my bedroom of things
I have to do, like completing my tax forms

and cleaning the cat's litter box
and finishing this book about millennials

living in New York City.
They spend their days in cubicles

uptown, and at night, they eat
at Zagat-rated restaurants and drink

extra-dirty martinis. One woman
walks to work each morning

across the Brooklyn Bridge.
She's always wanted to live there,

and when she looks through the spider web
of steel over the East River

toward the city rising like a mountain range
through the hazy midsummer smog,

she knows she's alright.
The book is sitting beneath the dried bouquet

I caught at Laura's wedding.
Pieces of stale petals have started falling

in small handfuls on the wood floor.
From far away, it looks like dust.

All Through The Night

my mother diagnoses me with seasonal affective
disorder sends me a light to simulate the sun each morning

I sit in its white glow drink tea before work I call out sick
take the metro downtown the capitol building is thorny

scaffolding sky grey erasure not a single bird I'm jealous
of migration the swift fly for six months without rest

sleeping seems useless most nights I stay awake trying
to get the earworms out it goes running all through the night

until it ends there is no end I stay awake thinking about what
I should save for morning missing persons for example

two thousand americans are reported missing each day
does not scare me in daylight I imagine they've gone

to the wilderness to find solitude different than loneliness
which makes you stay on the phone with the telemarketer

trying to sell you better homes and gardens I never thought
I would miss suburbia but the city is always moving

under those white street lamps stray cat is crying so stray cat
sings back a garden is nothing more than ivy climbing brick

wall on constitution it snows the nearest shelter the smithsonian
I don't enter the gallery full of windows by andrew wyeth

each canvas a different view a wind from the sea blows lace
curtains inward a white bench painted over a seated man

and an empty hanger I prefer the hanger people are gathering
around a half open window if they wanted to escape

they couldn't a canvas is just canvas a painted path extends
through a field reaches past its vanishing point until it ends

Prey

Like the beginning of a bad romantic comedy,
I told him I love you and he said I know.
For most of the summer, the air has been slung
low and buzzing like an electrical wire downed
across the pavement. My mother spent hot months
of childhood with her hands over her mouth,
afraid of the cicada's white noise, the sound
of their needles sewing shut the lips of girls
who said things they shouldn't say. Some mornings
his skin is almost gold in the early sun
and I feel like a hunter as I watch him sleep.
We're told so much about love—how the heart feels
like it's blossoming. From the kitchen window,
I can see a street sweeper making a small dirt storm
in the side alley—whirlwinds of dust settling,
resettling. I opened the dishwasher days ago and found
a cockroach bright like a coin on a dinner plate.
When I call my mother, she tells me to run
the wash as hot as it will go and hope
the burning steam and water will drive them
back out through the pipes. I've let it go for days
now, afraid to open the door and see
their amber bodies escaping from the light.

Fourteenth Summer

In July, we lay on a blanket
under two moons—one a human design
low and burning from the window
of an eroding bungalow nearby.
Sam shaped notes with his fingers,
his tie-dyed shirt loose and long
on his body, swaying like a plastic hula dancer
on the dashboard. Next to me,
Laura and a boy we just met.
Sam plucked his melody across the sand,
but I watched as the boy traced circles
on Laura's skin and his mouth
covered hers, sucking slowly
like a newborn, sending the first waves
of hunger into my body, a shiver
that asked me to reach for Sam's hips,
Laura's hair, the boy's hand.

Aubade

In the bedroom, you're lying on a mattress without a frame,
blankets kicked to the floor. I don't know how you sleep

through the night. You say it's all in my head—these bites
bruising my inner thighs are just a rash from the weather—

but they're aligned in raised trios like breakfast, lunch,
and dinner, and while you sleep I've seen what crawls

beneath the sheets, on my skin while you dream, your body pale
and unharmed in the moonlight. The pipes are almost

loud enough to break through the plaster walls.
They've been doing this all winter—banging across the silence

of the apartment like background noise which you've become
so good at disregarding. I read that when bed bugs mate, they emerge

before the sun comes up and gather beneath covers in the dark
seams of a mattress. Some people aren't affected by their bites.

All morning in our bed, males climb on females,
piercing their abdomens, making open wounds—it's called

traumatic insemination. They leave marks on our sheets,
constellations of rust, bloody trails you can't see.

What I Remember

Table legs scraped the ceiling
or else the cat too close in bed.

A history professor from Nebraska
gave me his business card and I kept it

in my underwear drawer for months,
thinking about Lincoln, a city built

on wild salt flats. On the radio
animal scientists said isolated ants only live

six days, walking themselves to death
if not starving first. I ate canned soup

every day. Men catcalled outside
Federal Triangle but I didn't mind

the attention. Expecting to see ice,
the reflecting pool was just an empty basin.

It stayed that way all winter. Alone
in my kitchen and watching a fly thrash

between glass and window screen,
the laughter next door was almost unbearable.

My Father Wouldn't Mind Having Elton John's Heart

I've been thinking about the heart—
the way scientists have made one beat

outside the body after death.
In Virginia, my father's beats irregularly,

his chest monitor reads like Morse code.
Unable to sleep, he calls 1-800 numbers,

orders a waterproof flashlight, glasses
to wear while driving on night-darkened roads,

a set of stainless steel knives he'll never use.
The scientists keep hearts in warm boxes—

take them from people who survive car wrecks,
suicide attempts, accidents that leave the body alive

but the brain dead. The doctors tell my father
to consider a transplant. He can't imagine

someone else's heart giving blood to his lungs—
says it would be like a stranger he's never met

living in his home. These days my father sleeps
more often than not. He watches reruns

of PBS specials, tells me about the documentaries,
hour-long broadcasts on World War II,

fish called river monsters, the wildlife
of the savannah. Necessary Evil, catfish bigger

than four-door cars. He says he has the heart
of an elephant—slow-beating and big.

He tells me about celebrities living with heart defects—
Elton John, George Bush, Barry Manilow.

He says he wouldn't mind having Elton John's heart.

New Year's Resolution

Because it's a Sunday
and my apartment building
keeps testing the fire alarms
and I haven't spoken to anyone
all day, it would be okay
to make the drive up I-95
to your place. We could go
to that restaurant, the one
next to the store with taxidermy
Persian cats in the windows
and eat breakfast quesadillas,
or maybe to the park
where you said only dog walkers
and prostitutes hang out.
If it weren't raining, I'd run
because it takes my mind off
of everything except
for what's right in front of me.
A red light, the bridge frozen
over. Sometimes, deer
through the bare trees—
big bucks with new antlers
like velvety knuckles,
the only thing growing in January.
The walls talk in my room,
but it's just my neighbor
on the phone with his lover.
*No baby, don't lose
any weight. I miss you too.*
It's a new year and I want
to make resolutions I can't keep.
Run a marathon. Eat broccoli.
Give up memory. Starting small,
I'll forget the titles of books
on your mantle—*The Remains
of the Day, The Unnamed,*
the spot on your couch
where I shouldn't sit
because of the broken leg,
that hammering sound
your black radiator makes
every morning. I'll forget
the directions to your house—

exit 53 toward the Inner Harbor,
and the name of your street,
but when you lose your memory
you aren't allowed to pick and choose,
so I'll forget the name of my street
too. The city will be like I've never
seen it before—buses unfolding
their smoky glass doors, the sound of sirens
parting traffic. People will stop
and ask if I'm lost, but I'll have forgotten
the answer and language too
and if I see you on the street,
you'll be a stranger—
you're already dissolving
into the faceless crowd.

Dinner Guest

She's standing in your kitchen again—
carving the knives and burning your mail
on the stovetop or whatever it is that ex-girlfriends
do. I felt her come into the room, her back sliding
slowly against the yellow wall when you said
*I used to know someone who put pepper
on everything.* You always say it just like that:
I used to know, as if you had to drag her up
from some dark well hidden in your memory,
as if she weren't always there, scratching
her nails against the inside of your skull. I remember
the last time she visited—the first hot day
this month. From your bed, we listened to the sound
of a motor running in your neighbor's driveway.
The scent of oil came through the open window
low on the air, the smell like burning plastic.
With closed eyes, you said it reminded
you of driving to Michigan. In the sun
coming into your room, I saw strands of her
dark hair buried and stitched into the threads
of your pillows. You divide a sweet potato into halves
before peppering the insides. You hollow out
a spoonful bring it to my lips, but she's already taken
a seat at the table, ready to sink her teeth into our dinner.

Elegy with the Back Bay Blaze

We're sitting in your house as if you still live here,
drinking stale beer from your fridge, leaving
our dishes in piles in your sink, speaking loud,

our voices out the open window a spirited
facade. At the kitchen table, my father reads
an old newspaper, last month's headlines

spread wide like taut and inky wings,
"Back Bay Burns," "Nine-Alarm Blaze Leaves
Two Dead." We don't change your calendar,

flip forward a new month to empty white
boxes that will never be written on. It means
you're still upstairs sleeping to sitcoms,

it means we're ignoring the implication
of your rings handed to us, wedding band worn
thin, silver claddagh in a navy velvet bag,

none of them buried. We've turned your house
into an exhibit, our denial preserving everything,
left the coffee cold in the pot, glasses sightless

on the nightstand, and watered the wax begonias
so they won't wilt. Out the window,
the city is still smoldering above its embers.

Another Search Party

Because I fainted at the party Mason is worried
I'm not drinking enough water but sometimes it's easier
to lie in bed all day and forget about your body.

There's another search party on the highway today,
walking slowly through the tall grass in yellow vests.
The broadcaster on the news says to keep an eye out

for the woman who went missing on Halloween,
her face painted to look like a skull. Her family
says it isn't like her to wander off in the middle

of the night, but she was taking so much medication
it's no surprise she became disoriented. When I came to
on the host's kitchen floor, it felt like waking up

from a dream where everyone's faces are covered
in a hot white glow. Baldessari puts red and yellow
price stickers over faces in photographs because he's sick

of looking at their expressions. When an interviewer
asked him why he left the most mundane parts
exposed—a black sweater, scissors, a ribbon,

he said he wanted the viewer to focus on the bodies,
the actions they performed. I've spent all morning
watching a child throw leaves over the fence

where the trains pass twenty feet below street level.
She picks them up in handfuls and waits until they fall
quietly on the tracks before tossing more over.

Because it's a Sunday, no trains have come by
and I wonder when one does, if the passengers
will look out the windows and see brown leaves

swirling like dying confetti. The last time I took
the train to Philadelphia, I fell asleep and ended up
in New York City. The next train back wasn't for hours

so I went to Times Square where no one sees you
and you feel more crowd than human. I walked down
Fifth where the storefront windows were decorated

for December—red glitter trees, presents in bows
and headless mannequins dressed in plaids
and turtlenecks. That Christmas, my mother gave me

a slow cooker that has sat unopened in my kitchen
ever since. When she calls to ask what I made
I tell her: lentil soup, Italian beef, chicken

stroganoff, but most weeks I can't stand
the thought of leaving the house to wander
the long aisles of the Safeway downtown.

Outside, the 1:30 commuter train goes by
like a small-magnitude earthquake. The child raises
her arms like Jesus on the cross and I'm reminded

of the snow angels I used to make
on my parent's front lawn—my body's outline
made unfamiliar with the addition of wings.

Sleeping Alone

The ceiling fan is off, there are no footsteps
in the hallway or sirens on the highway.

I think I can hear the neighbors sleeping,
the unbroken inhalation and exhalation that only comes

this late at night. Touching my own body, tracing
lines with my fingernails up my inner thighs—

it doesn't burn the same way your fingers did.
I can't remember if the word you used was beautiful

or pretty, or if we were dyed orange or red
in the glow of the lamp. On the radio, slow

and quiet jazz, the trumpets casting their melody
low and deep. I wanted to memorize the notes,

hear them on a night like tonight, fall asleep buried
in you, smell the pine soap on your hands pulling

the hem of my shirt with your fingers. Lift it,
slowly, so I can feel cotton parting from skin.

Ode to Los Angeles

Los Angeles is all I need to be happy. Today in Maryland,
the sky is still grey from a winter that has filled the clouds

with concrete. Walking beneath them is a game of chance—
I'm waiting for the foundation to give way. Just last week

Colleen and I drove through the Santa Monica Mountains
and stood above the county in Griffith Park, the greenery below

burnt gold from sunlight. We were up to our ears
in the salt of the Pacific. We walked through movie studios

in Burbank where set designers constructed a city street
from plaster and paint and created a reality more appealing

than our own. The everyday life is nothing like what the movies
promise. I'm tired of the same less-than-perfect faces I see each day,

the daily commute death march, the sunsets hidden behind brown
office buildings, alarms waking me from the same dreams I have

every night. I've heard some people dream of flying
or their teeth falling out all at once. Most nights I walk

on a high beam suspended over the sea. I've never found
the beginning or end and each morning I feel more tired

than I was the night before. In Los Angeles, there's rehab
for exhaustion—white stucco homes with palm-lined pools

and beds so downy, you have no choice but to dream of flying.
In Los Angeles, dreams are visions that become reality.

The palm trees along the boulevards were the dreams
of the missionaries, who envisioned the new kingdom full

of open palms. The Los Angeles River was the dream
of city planners, who envisioned a flood-free city and the waters

held between a snake of concrete ribboning silent through the county.
I envision myself waking each morning to an unobstructed view

of sunrise or at least to a day that's different than the last.
I envision my life on a Burbank studio lot, where I can yell cut

from the director's chair when the script becomes too dull.
I'd edit out this scene first—the one where I'm sitting alone

in my kitchen, looking at the same unclean tile and listening
to my neighbor subdivide the minutes with a hammer.

Fun House

Overhead, the Natty Boh sign lit
red and round like a harvest moon

and we're sitting in your car arguing
again. You say that I love you

like a child—I always want you
to hold me or forgive me,

I always want too much of you
at once. Some days I'm like a dog

while you're at work and my body
is spread across the couch waiting

to hear your shoes on the steps,
the tin mailbox opening and closing.

I hate the silence of the house at noon—
the way the light comes through

the blinds and clarifies the dust,
the strands of my hair stuck to the microfiber.

You say something about leaving
for the night and I stop listening

to count the number of street lamps
we pass, a calming trick from childhood

my mother called OCD. Seven, eight,
nine—before she put me to bed,

I'd walk heel to toe across the room
counting my steps until I reached the wall

believing my ritual kept out kidnappers,
fires, the ghosts who tip-toed across

the attic floor. All night I'd sit up
in bed, call out into the darkening hall

to make sure she was still there.
You turn onto 25th where cars are parked

on both sides of the narrow street
and it's like we're in a fun house

where the halls stretch for miles
and the walls come closer together

with each second. It's hard to see
the stars in this city, where buildings

are so tall, only a narrow river of sky
shows. It's like driving home as a child,

my father at the wheel and me, twisted
around in the backseat, waving

to my grandmother until the road turned
and I could no longer see her

waving back beneath her porch light.
I'd close my eyes and think about her

all the way down I-95, as if memorizing her
would immortalize her, white sweater

embroidered with flowers, shoulders
that seemed smaller each time I visited.

When she died I told my father
there was a boulder sitting on my chest.

I have a sudden need to sleep,
like those wild foxes I read about

that stopped running in the forest
when they were being chased. They lay down

beneath the trees and slept, giving their bodies
over to exhaustion, shutting their eyes

against the ensuing chase, the forces
telling them to escape. The scientists found

this happening in people, too. A man
in Florida felt tired every time his wife

talked about the bills. A woman
fell asleep whenever she visited her son

in the hospital. Learned Helplessness
they call it. I used to hate falling

asleep, slipping from the waking world.
I imagined all I missed during sleep,

maybe the end of the world, creeping over slow
and quiet like a fog, lights in each latitude

extinguishing one by one. Now, the resignation
of sleep seems sweet. We're silent as you put

the car in park and kill the lights.
We walk to the front door and I count

the number of cracks in the sidewalk.
Ten branching wide in the dark.

The Safeway Parking Lot Reminds Me of You

I thought I was in hibernation
and seeing you again I'd wake

after my heart was used
to beating eight beats per minute

how fast in the chest after all
that sleep lately I'm waking

before my alarm into nothing
no tiredness or confusion or loss

in Safeway I helped a child
looking for her mother

who was peeling husks back
from ears of corn she didn't notice

her daughter was missing
the Safeway parking lot reminds me

of the dozen eggs dropped
on the pavement at your feet

how angry you were I was afraid
that I loved you love was nothing

like what I heard in my mother's
songs on Sundays when she dusted

the house with Pinesol
and Etta James *my lonely days*

are over when my mother calls
I don't tell her about the baby frogs

outside my apartment smaller
than my nail this first sign

of spring was so hard to see
against all that black gravel

More roaches in the fridge today

and I keep visiting Frank Sinatra
at the animal shelter—a ten-year-old

Siamese left by his owner in an alley.
The volunteers at the shelter say

lonely people think having a pet
will make them feel less lonely,

but it's never this way. Mason says I need
to take care of myself before I can

take care of an animal, so all morning
I scoured my apartment with Clorox.

I've eaten nothing but boiled eggs
for an entire week and I'm tired

of their taste like soft rubber
but the thought of driving to the store

gives me a headache and I don't know how
to cook them any other way. Disoriented

the past two mornings, I've woken up
believing I'm in my childhood home.

I miss my parents in a way I haven't
since going to college eight years ago.

When I call they send a package
of candles shaped like waxy pine trees

and a hand-knit blanket made by my mother,
the warm smell of lanolin still on the wool.

She tells me to cut lemons and put them
down the sink to drown out the sour scent

in the kitchen but I hate watching
the yellow slices disappear down the drain.

Mason is all I have in the District,

where people are as transient as the light

in December. Light is a commodity in winter—
the clouds darken like wet stones

before snowfall, the sun is like a flare
burning quick and bright before going dark.

Most nights I can't sleep without his arm
on me like a weight. He talks about moving

back to Chicago, and I don't ask
to go with him. Last night I stayed

up until three reading about girls
who ran away from home twenty years ago.

Relying on rides from truckers traveling
through the area, they slept in the backs

of trailers with shipments of mattresses,
boxes of Miller Light, sets of gently used

electronics. They sat up front during the day
and listened to Springsteen and watched

I-95 unspool like a ribbon.
They said the road was home

and from my bed I can hear the sound
of the mid-day traffic on Georgia Avenue.

The white noise reminds me of the time
before my father came home from work,

the automatic lights in the driveway
not yet illuminating the yard, the garage door

not yet opening beneath the house,
the floor boards not yet shivering.

When he came in with winter still
on his jacket, I would press my face

to the cold leather. The apartment is quiet

this time of the day, when the neighbors
are at work and their children are at school.
If there weren't ice on the sidewalks, I would go
for a run down 16th towards the White House
where the politicians are taking their lunch
and the sidewalks are always full of tourists.
Because Hades kidnapped Persephone
to the Underworld, her mother
traveled the earth and froze the ground
killing all of the trees and green shoots
to create winter. Eventually Persephone grew
to love Hades, despite missing her mother
and her old life. When Hades tried
to have other lovers, Persphone turned
the women into mint plants and poplar trees.
I can't stop Googling the names of Mason's
ex-girlfriends to find their photos and see
what came before me. When we talk
about the future we do it like children—
with more imagination than promise.
In the kitchen I play a game with the roaches,
like a fucked-up version of a tarot reading.
If I see one in the trash—happiness.
If I see one in the dishwasher—eternal
sadness. When I turn the lights on,
I find nothing but the fluorescent numbers
on the microwave stuck and blinking 0:01.

In the District This Summer

I can't seem to escape this stillness,
these ninety-degree days offering nothing

but white heat. I took the metro south
into the city, where all I saw were bodies

burning beneath the sun—there was no
promise of a storm in the seamless sky.

A stranger asked me if I knew Jesus
loved me, her shirt said BITE ME,

she shouted the Glory Be to the crowded
streets. I want to believe in something.

I want these explosions outside my window
to be more than fireworks, more than willows

of light that burn out after they detonate,
fizz to atmosphere before they can damage.

Last summer when he was staying in the house
on 34th Street, I pretended it was ours,

the glass sconces, oil-painted battle scene,
feather duvet—how fragile everything seemed.

Some nights, the clouds cracked from the heat
and we sat on the porch listening to Coltrane,

smoking cheap cherry flavored cigars, watching
green lacewings shake their rain-heavy wings

while somewhere in the District, the wail
of sirens ignoring red lights. I wanted

to put all of my faith in the puddles
rising in steam from the patio,

his fingers holding the scent of cherry smoke.
How sweet they were against the stale July dark.

Here In The Future

I'm writing this in a Starbucks downtown
where the men look nothing like you. I hate these men
waiting in line for their Caramel Macchiatos—
or whatever it is that men who wear boat shoes
and khakis in the dead of winter order.
Outside, there are men everywhere—
waiting for the Metrobus, waving
their hands in the air while they speak into phones,
men carrying briefcases—but none of them are you.
Last night in a dream, you told me you had to move
to Colorado because the air in the District
always smelled of exhaust. You said you love living
where the tree line is as thick as a fence
and every breath of air is so fresh it feels like swallowing
swords made of ice. You begged me to come out
to the mountains and live with you
because the only thing missing from the perfect landscape
was me. This is how I knew it was a dream.
These days, I only see you in the windows
behind the glass of my laptop, your new life out west greener
than anything I've ever seen. These days
when I wake at 7am to a sky changing
from purple to yellow to blue,
you are two hours behind me in a darkness
that I've already passed through.
Here in the future, nothing is as shiny
as the movies have promised.
Those movies always leave out the part
where the main character is so full of nostalgia
that they must drive to their ex-lovers old house and sit
across the street in their car until the neighbors
become suspicious and stand out in the yard.
Those movies always leave out the part
where the main character drives home and remembers
how you used to look at that time of night
in the little light that was left on the street
outside the windows to your bedroom.
I'd watch your eyes become lidded with sleep,
flicker like a flame on a low wick when the night
trains passed by carrying cargo through the darkness.
A friend of mine says the most difficult part of breaking up
is seeing that person when they're not
really there. She says she used to see her ex-lover
in the homeless men in the park in DuPont Circle,

in the men on the metro in their work-day suits.
Here in the future, it seems they've done away with ghosts
entirely. Here, the breakfast rush is almost over
and the men are filing out like altar boys
in an unholy procession, coffees pressed between hands
like rosaries. You're probably just waking
to an unpolluted sun, to the sky peeling back the dark
and revealing a bright country underneath,
like it did here hours ago.

Elegy

I almost forgot about death until I saw the red body
on my father's lawn, legs and head bent into the road,

drivers drifting to the other lane. My father wraps hooves and neck
and blown-open belly in a blue tarp. He lets the head drop and hang

by his side as he moves her to the empty lot beside the house.
I almost forgot about death until I saw my father carry the deer

the same way he carried his mother down the stairs years ago. Summer.
We spent hot months in her kitchen watching fruit flies fly into traps we set—

coffee mugs full of apple cider vinegar on the window's ledge.
Across a baby monitor, we listened to her breathe, took stairs two at a time

to her bedroom when we thought we heard silence over the radio waves.
Sometimes at night, moths would enter through back door's

ripped screen and stumble upwards towards the light over the table.
My father caught the slower ones in his hands, released them into the dark

where they became shadows against some other light. Death was still
only a blessing my Catholic school teachers promised would someday

come to me. My father was still immortal, his footsteps under his mother's
weight and down her stairs were heavy and sure, his hands were still

steady changing light bulbs in her kitchen. Now, my father uses
all of his strength to lift the deer over the fence. Exposed skin

on the underside of his arm catches on the untreated wood and rips
as easily as those moth wings. Florets of blood in the snow.

A grey moon already in position above the house, my father stands
in darkness dusting the yard and becomes a shadow against some other light.

Snow since Friday in Baltimore

& when I walk to the supermarket in the blizzard
everyone on the street looks like shadows
moving behind a white screen. Nothing else
in the city is open so I sleep the entire day

which only makes me more tired.
Every time I sleep my mother goes missing.
I tell her about the recurrence & she laughs—
says she has nowhere to go. She keeps a daily journal

where she writes down things that make her happy.
It says *Jerry at the post office. Ripe avocados*
on sale at Safeway. Mason says the last time he felt happy
was when he took me to the casino & we played blackjack

on those green tables until the sun came up
behind the storage facility across the street.
We walked home on Sunday morning & church bells
were ringing all down North Avenue.

I'm still Catholic enough to believe someone is listening
to my prayers. Lately I've been praying
for my parents in New England who are nearing
their sixtieth birthdays. As a kid I used to close my eyes

when I saw someone I loved leaving, as if I could save
their image inside my body. I tell Mason
about losing my hat to a gust of wind
on my tenth birthday in Martha's Vineyard

& he says I need to stop worrying about the coming
& goings of things, but I still feel sad
when I think of that hat with its elephants marching
across the brim, or maybe I'm only mourning

the memory of standing at the railing with my father
& watching the small white sails waving
like handkerchiefs on the water.
From the couch I can hear the sound

of heavy-load freight trains, still running
despite the weather. If he were awake I'd ask Mason
to go with me to the park down the street so we could see
if the snow is deep enough to cover the benches.

Since taking the new job, he sleeps late most weekends.
He talks about quitting and moving away
to somewhere with better jobs & warmer weather
but if he left this city, I wouldn't want to stay.

This time of day there isn't anything
on the television except for the local news
predicting that the end of the world is coming
sooner than we thought. Too many storm systems

converging too quickly. Once, the roof caved
in on my childhood bedroom, but it was only thunder
rolling low over the house. When I woke,
everything was still in a way it hasn't been since.

My father stood beneath the big maple in the yard,
the bees hiving in circles over his head.
My mother spun clouds of wool into yarn
& nothing moved except the light across the floor.