

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: SYNOPSIS OF DETAILS

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Most of the poems in the manuscript were completed during the second half of my Master's work at the University of Maryland. The clearest distinction between the earlier work and the work collected here is that these poems move away from the collage style and toward lyric and narrative structure. Many of the poems are preoccupied with themes and imagery from the body, sleep and dreams, food and family. Rather than gathering them together in sections, I have tried to put space between poems of like ideas by interspersing them with ekphrastic poems creating an arch of these topics through the manuscript. I have taken "Synopsis of Details" as the title because the poems attempt to create various realities for the speakers through providing a summary of details. While the details are different for each, many of the poems share an elegiac tone that further links them together.

SYNOPSIS OF DETAILS

by

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*Am I
To see in the Lake District, then,
Another bourgeois invention like the piano?*
—W.H. Auden

The word alone is just as general as the word bread.
—Maurice Blanchot

ONE

Morning is a Request for Compensation

As if I am miming the boxed-in
impulse to wake myself
from a nightmare all I recall
are whorled leaves blue and wrong
and motioning out I understand
a world without sound a stuck
epiphany a shapeless woman
among a forum of egg shells.

How it returns falling back asleep
or fighting the urge to pull myself from waking
means starting over in that world slowly
where cans turn to rust
against a sky of paper towel patterns.
In the nightmare I pull at what's familiar
with pincers like separating
the velvet skin from the leaves of an African Violet.

Orange Sequence

1.
He brought back
a bag of satsumas from Japan,
for the girl
 who always ate oranges.
They dozed in a blue bowl,
perfumed the kitchen.
It was the month of orange.

2.
Who writes letters anymore?
Someone must fold the envelope with bits of spit.
Somewhere
 in the distant past
a man might come home,
loosen his tie and read the mail. A letter from a lover
 savored with a slice of sun left in the window.

3.
Since I called your bluff a bluff,
you didn't smear the sliced oranges
 and I didn't lick the juice.

4.
The Orange Order and agent orange want us to think of fruit flesh.

5.
You are always the first
to see them naked. You eat them
not from hunger but
 compassion

6.
Because the damage was bad
your mouth presses itself into an
 O and holds it,
your eyes a prison
of gestures...
as if your hand was still in the flame.

7.

In *The Godfather*

blood oranges appear in each scene before someone dies.

8.

The hawkweed,

 spotted-touch-me-not and day lilies

you had wanted to blossom last year, blossomed late—

orange in the garden is instinctual now.

9.

We began a study of recycled nectar:

 orange vinaigrette with salad

reducing the juices

 with honey and coriander

 with tea and habañeros

poured over duck breast—

we ate the repetition.

Double Vision

after René Magritte, *La Condition Humaine*

If you thought the painting was surprisingly
simple, that the canvas is contiguous with the landscape

outside, that it could be the view
from your own living room, and the canvas

is there because the scene exists;
the paint represents the surface

and our eyes would show us otherwise,
then you looked as I had

for the puzzle, because the outside we see
is given to us,

and Magritte paints the image
to remind us that art has failed.

I needed for there to be a distinction.
The painting had to be real—

the easel something skewed—
deliberate. But he knew

that the difference is a figment
my imagination needs, and its absence

would make me look and then
look again for the answer he gave me early on.

Aubade

It's the books that break our pattern
of breath. Our scholarship lines the walls,
and dust's thin evidence encloses us,

feeds our allergies and opens
to a solid system—the anti-breath.
Our remedy—

excessive cleaning, herbal rubs
and tea with tilla starflower,
calendula, and hyssop herb.

At night, steam from a vaporizer billows.
Our breath is thick, and moisture
is caught in the folds of sheets. We believe

this cycle of damp swell might heal us,
and fulfill our sleeping wish: to awake clear-headed
as a routine gesture to morning.

Big Head Ted and the Early Modernists

If a truth exists—it's that I don't know exactly what they mean by early modern, and I probably never will because I thought it was the Renaissance, but there's a difference, subtle I'm sure, or it's a kind of code, something in-the-know, that I don't know—because I'm there as a tagalong. I meet them for dinner after they leave Ted's class, and discussion breaks briefly but returns over cheap burritos or noodle bowls at Jimmy's-house-of-something, like the weather here, when it rains, it's an all day event. Today it's print culture. The first recorded performance versus an appearance in print. I listen and watch their eyes live. Another truth, they plainly ruin the poetry of Shakespeare. I'm not interested in the politics behind the plays, or Annabel-book-a-year-Patterson's most recent publication, but in a story that repeats itself. It starts with a student who has a crush on big head Ted. "It's his hair" she mumbles "not his head." I agree there's something sexy about middle-aged men with thick gray curls. "He finds sex in every play" she says, "so I can't separate him from the text." In class she ruminates with her mouth open and her pen circling its surface. "Obvious" they say over dinner, as the conversation turns again. In the last class Ted discussed tension in *Othello*, and she gaped from the circled chairs. Juggling the codes of this discourse is like experiencing the double edge of speaking a foreign language: illiterate and being unable to think in it, so I refer back to my native one and know I've missed things. Somewhere within Norton's Shakespeare is a method for breaking their code, a way back to meaning without bulk. The group exists like two halves of the same fruit, sexual/ political, her/ them; who partakes and who trashes Bardology. I warn against obfuscation: maybe she's right, words mean things especially if spoken through her body.

Francis Bacon: *Study after Velásquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X, 1953*

What failure what regret
your obsession—forty variations.
The research addictive friends finding reproductions
Velásquez's *Pope Innocent X* in creased
bindings spread out over your studio floor.
You lived with him like a keepsake
some dead family member a possession.
Velásquez found him kind to Spain
you found his painting perfect
then made your own a screaming
mask fused with his features:
his hands become the chair as he becomes
the background the thick black lines
run through him the figure
distorted beyond identity. Mouth open
eyes, ears...—the grey
of an apparition. History
deformed into nothing
but performance.

How We Wasted Time or Tried to Beat It

From Japan you sent postdated letters so I could read them in real time. This method of keeping us current left me dizzy and left the present lost on you.

Now, years later, a check arrives also postdated. Enclosed a note apologizing for a load of ruined laundry, five years ago. I want to know what

made you think back to that now—why it needed to be settled. The note goes in a box with your other letters, and I think of the lost shift in time from which

we were always recovering. A strange forced jet lag: you were always trying to slow time. A mechanical optimism—that nothing would be missed.

Myth of Trees

If we understand the landscape
viewed from the car,
it's only because it smells like home—
a vast unbroken forest of pine,
oak, cedar, where on school
trips we were bussed to Batsto,
in the Pine Barrens, pushing
our sweaty faces and arms, swollen with
mosquito bites, out the small hole of a window,
in the background the teacher explaining
cranberry bogs, conifers and reminding us
we were about to see the location
of early bog iron industry.
We didn't care, of course,
were more interested in bugs,
and looking for the Pigmy forest
of trees as short as we were.

And under those trees then maybe in them,
you imagine the decayed body
of a boy in your class who went missing
an error of the buddy system,
and they never found him.
He's among the legends of others missing
or dumped there. How the night before
my father, after signing the permission
slip, promised me five dollars to wait
until the woman costumed in
colonial clothing finished explaining
the trees and pure water
and asked for questions.
Have they found Jimmy Hoffa
yet? It landed me
in the front seat of the bus to be lectured.

Now, the smell of trees like
Christmas has us comparing
childhoods: those bumpy bus rides
without seatbelts, hand sticky
with pine sap, and chigger bite
patterns up our legs, hands-on

New Jersey, were they'd try
to make a myth of trees—
like that boy who's rumored
to have been spotted,
but no one's sure.

Mme Cezanne

His model first, his mistress,
the mother of his son,
though I never understood him
and hated that he dragged me from Paris
to Provence, thick with the lavender he loved
and devoid of city lights.

*Sit in the red chair, wear the black cloak.
Put your hands in your lap.*

I never liked his paintings:
blotchy, stiff—his world was ugly.
I posed so many times,
each one worse than the one before.

I needed a break, would plead,
I'm your wife, your son is crying.
His only reply, *be still.*

.
He saw no difference in his models
than in his fruit; when he was done both wilted.

Inevitably when, after countless hours
countless sittings, I'd move, even slightly
Be like an apple, he'd yell
Be an apple!

A False Start

A box arrives in the mail mid-month and wrapped in yellow.
I watch as he holds it tightly
almost unwilling to open it.

His reluctance is tempered with hope—
this box, our bliss to fill. He knows
I have narrow vision and can only
think about opening it right away.

We share a desire to leave,
and expect that the mail will fulfill it,
offers of credit, reduced payments,
the ubiquitous free gift seduce us,

but we can only afford Ohio—a place
foreign to us and weighed with dullness.
So each day we check and recheck
the mail, waiting for something

beyond everyday bills and junk.
In the meantime, we occupy ourselves
by sorting the confusing catches buried
in the smaller print under the small print.

The Cancer

My grandmother calls it “the cancer.”
It seems more deadly that way,
more foreign.

I can’t help but think
she wants it to swallow her:
it conquers territory unknown

to any of her strategies against it.
The worst kind of enemy
is one that moves slowly

knows the victim is helpless,
waits while the skin on her elbow
bruises—holding her head up

for countless nights:
I wait for it to give out
or give in.

I am too aware of my own body,
feel each part separately,
each bone in my hand,

the inside of my hip socket,
as it begins the first
stage of betrayal: my body,

loosened in its skin, is nothing
if not determined,
busy with the kind of decay

that haunts the early morning
and late-night time-slots
usually reserved for quiet

moments outside the body—
a place
the mind goes.

Mine feels only
the weight of flesh
surely inherited.

Synopsis of Details

Because you have a Penry to match our Mensch,
you understand how excitement can derange a man.

Those Matts you met there are palpable and spicy, sassy
with idiosyncrasies. The Matts here are stiff stems of the tulip.

You are hungry for the late fourteenth century:
I need corsets, wool and long letters budding with innuendo.

Snow reminds me of the cat lapping milk.
She sings through her throat, but you're caution wincing with proper notice.

It was late winter, the snow concrete only dirtier, and I saw a tuft
of purple opening like a goblet in the sun.

"Look" I said, "It's a prom-dress-circa-1989."
"Crocus" you said, "It's crocus."

Silent Tribute

after Joseph Cornell

She captivated you too,
but you thanked her
with a constellation
and resisted the boxed
impulse to preserve Marilyn
as others had—over-sexed,
smeary lipped, come closer, chatty.
Because she held your mind,
you left her image out of the box.
In place of it, the red ball,
a childhood toy,
resting just below the cut cage,
bent and snagged to the side
of which she found herself
pressed against so often.
Driftwood to clutch
the stars?
A brassy ring and
chain, perhaps, to lead
you up there,
or so we might
remember her in the universe
of your creation,
star now among the stars.

Corner-Piece

The men lowered the body, which
her mother's friends spent all day preparing,
from the second story window

and dropped it in the alley.
She had been trapped in the apartment
for a month and this new

lifestyle went on. She grew bored of mourning
and returned to drinking tea from a bag used
many times already, among the rumor

of casualties, and the murmur of *Tito*
said lovingly as if they could summon
him from a shrine.

She'd press her face against the window,
try to discern a landscape
only slightly familiar:

a place she's seen before,
though the colors are wrong,
her body doesn't fit. But inside the small

apartment the landscape was war torn too,
her things covered in a new dust,
sweaty clothes, shut-in and fermenting,

this is how they missed the neighbor's death.
Days after her culpability draws her to the window
to peak at the body.

At thirteen her own body
was an event that betrayed her daily, which is how
she understood the man: a fallen branch

that wooed birds from the trees
or a puddle of sleep. Years later,
she remembers home

and speaks of the man

as something approximate.
An idle tenure that inked her memory.

Watching the body blue
then rot until soldiers took it away,
she claimed him.

TWO

Torture

Scattered along the sidewalk what looked like miniature,
perfectly oval painted fingernails in the red of a waxed

apple—children's nails, daughters stealing their mother's
polish. The color too adult, an invitation, but what do girls know?

Though it's the red they see behind the lids, face up, on a sunny
day. Here I am standing in them, hundreds of fingernails,

thinking of torture—each nail one by one extracted with pliers;
holding them up to the sunlight, then against the concrete

to brighten the gray. And the girls...I don't know where they are,
or if they found some cartoon Band-aid to heal each finger.

The wind blew and rescattered the nails, just-past
blossoms that bloomed too early, before it got cold again.

Past Mary

As a side effect of her age, things get done to her
and she is only partially there. Her daughter
now her translator, negotiates

between the doctor's words and her suffering.
She knows, though, that she's missing something
and this makes her worse.

Gone is the mother my brother and I heard stories about:
the woman who scraped together fearless power
despite powerful fears, who could yell you

into submission. Now, she's tangled in her illness.
How an epic or tragedy,
starts in the middle, she's thrown *there*.

Things not Surrendered

I was studying my portrait from the mirror:
round face awkward under my hair, glasses glaring,

thinking it cost us ninety dollars to sleep, and at dawn
you were out on the patio, but your book still laid open

on your half of the bed. The night before you told me
that the author called the martyrs Christian overachievers and we laughed—

what seemed funny is bitter to me in the morning—
I think of what little we'd part with as the sunlight

comes in the smeary windows. You wanted an early start
so we walked along the inlet by the men waiting

for the bobber to go under. Along the water's edge, my face
reflected back at me, and the cars floated by upside-down in the bay;

the water played tricks on my eyes, your eyes met mine.
We said nothing just kept our pace, you watched passersby,

and I thought about the night before, how I could almost hear your breath now,
what I could never sacrifice, rolling over with the waves.

Awake

Your glance an opportunity in flames, I'm decked
by the slowness of our speech and the shrug of your shoulder.
The repeating patterns of schedules,
and tired look you give as you exit the room.
Nothing becomes
of me and nothing is so becoming. You reply
with sleep that plagues me—my half of the bed
narrows. So I hide out. Because I've lost
any effect on you, this occupancy
is as loose as baitless fish line
after a struggle. Or a family holiday:
where I make small talk, then to get away,
offer to do the dishes—anything for the distance
I can't have, hearing them testify against me,
as if I left a stain on the new chaise lounge
or forgot to feed the pet. Nothing becomes of me and
nothing is so becoming. I play this
inside my head, your breathing keeping me awake,
and dare myself to touch you, turned away
reaching for air instead.

When Killing Time Kills Sensation

You begin with a strained monologue
describing me to me as various self-portraits:
a bundle of drying hyssop, a duck plucked and prepped,
and paint chips patterned on the floor after flaking off a wall,

and I think you know me as something outside because you ask
only the straight questions: what will I do with myself,
and I bring, always, too much to this exercise
where you're in a rush, and for once, I 'm not.

It might please you to have me green, budding purple,
medicinal, or chewed as a breast in tamarind reduction,
maybe *foie gras* with figs and shallots, even a fleck
you can run your thumb over and ruminate about the wall.

This lag in perception would be better in a sallow light
that highlights only an arch or endpoint, but less
the distance of the curve, so we know where
you're going, but not how I get there.

Dad Interrupting

Because he's divorced from all your appetites,
you press your mouth to the phone

and give,
give again the tiny fragments of your life

now, without him.
He never liked getting his disappointment

done with from the start—it lingers
in each of his sentences, so small—sometimes

you realize it only afterwards.
This is how he stays with you:

comments made systematically
delivered as after-thoughts settle

until the voice of the father
disrupts your work.

Although you are far away,
you recoil from him

as if he's a god
with the superpower to undermine.

On the Ninth Anniversary of Greg's Death

no one calls and the day passes like a conversation
eavesdropped on—indecipherable. I might have forgotten the day
altogether had the newspaper not covered a story

of a teenager's death —drugs, an overdose
with the question of suicide, and years ago
when my mother asked *how*, huffing

then, *what's that*—I couldn't answer. It wasn't
that I didn't know, but wanted the questions over.
She found out anyway and promptly joined the parent side:

you'd only do that if you wanted to die.
His friends argued reckless, yes, and immature
but not suicide. Now I see her point,

and I did what I was told, I moved on.
He exists like a photo from a party,
where three friends smile with beers in hand

and a piece of someone is caught in the background.
Later, when the photos are developed someone asks
who's that guy. Nobody knows.

Poets' Blues

1. Louise Glück Blue

The body blues with each failure,
as if the hollow stomach is infused
with only blue, the skin reflecting
its surroundings.
With each gesture,
every labor of creation,
blue becomes us.

Even language grows blue,
words pushed through
the reticent lips.
Silence is a spectrum of blue.
And when the body dies,
both it and those living
turn blue.

2.

Robert Hass Blue

Spring is a variation in blue.
I used to pick the flowers—
hounds tongue, blue dick, forget-me-not,
to bring blue inside. Now
that the new blue resembles the old
I look for hints, subtle grasses, creeping sage,
blue I can rest my toes in and remember
a woman I loved, who seemed always
moderately blue. In her presence
I longed for blue beyond the Pacific,
something elemental, pale skin,
blue map of veins that lead me
to close the distance between us,
enigmatic how everything became blue
for her, blue dress, blue light, blue bells,
blue fleshed-fish and the blueberries she'd
feed me, yes, the blueberries.

3.

Frank Bidart Blue

The need for the past is blue,
dispersed through lamplight as I read

the myth of Sisyphus.

A MAN WHO KNEW THE BLUE OF PAST

(more than I know blue,
my blues; the deep blue of the California sky, the dusty blue suit
my father wore in his casket, and the blue eyes of a character I write.)

BUT SISYPHUS WAS STEEPED DEEP IN BLUE

With the task of rolling the blue-gray boulder uphill,
knowing he'd lose his grip and have his hands blued, bruised.

To repeat the past is surely blue.

SO I MOVED EAST, ESCAPED SOME BLUE, AT LEAST SOME BLUE PAST

Sisyphus' curse to roll the boulder up again.

Each time

the blue sky swallowed another mouthful of his hope.

4.

Mark Strand Blue

Blue can be all things: light, deep,
sometimes an illusion. To stare at blue
is to question. The pool water is not blue

but fools us every time. Blue can signal
freshness, something crisp and clean
also age, mold, even gray hair like steel gunmetal

hints at blue. How much of a blue thing
is a blue thing? What we desire more than
not being blue is to know blue;

this is the core of matter. We wait for blue
because there is no end to it—though sometimes
it seems—it was not meant for us at all.

THREE

Variable Cloudiness

1.

I will have a futureless future, where space accumulates
in the absence of something: a den without a couch, or the breaks
the body gives, the gap between thighs or a thumb's width between the breasts.

There are small hints of an exterior world: branch outlines visible
on the linoleum from light breaking through the opaque
curtains shifting as air sifts through the cracked window.

Then something in me bends from touch as my adulthood reopens into an escarpment,
and I wander through a room of my own history, where what is at stake
is weighed and uprooted if not flung far from the family tree,

then I'm pulled back again as family disrupts the aftermath of stillness:
where space is mother and father is exterior, a frame to remake
the discrete vanishing of shared history, propelling me away, then further away.

2.

Abject, when it mingled with nostalgia I knew it intimately
the desire for home, where my family's silhouettes are obscured by the opacity
of the current moment—the scenery has changed so what was once familiar is removed.

My mother was not the radicchio in the baby spring mix, nor my father the tiny
coil in each light bulb, but my brother—he is still the red pimento in each green olive.
It's always food I return for, like remembering a younger version of me

doing word problems at the kitchen table under the supervision of my partial mother
making dinner (she's barely discernable from the ingredients she adds). It wasn't
the smell of rosemary and lemon lifting from the browning bird

that drew me to the kitchen in the first place, but some other kind of need
that moves so snugly with the grain. And if *home*
is just a word, can't all things be so reduced, unneeded?

3.

Negotiating the self in a unit of like-selves makes me the most obdurate
weed in the garden, and since I am always suffering with clean hunger
I make a beeline from the family gathering but find myself caught in it

like a moth between a closed window and a screen in the damp suburban light.
Still, I make a strange progress, where in their presence I am no longer
false with hope or marked by what I've carried, our shared traits,

but by the memories I've shrugged away that move to an unexpected comfort.
They're balanced now in an internal diorama of a repeated scene: my tiny mother stirs
a pot and checks the oven, my father bouncing from a silent laugh pours drinks

while my brother watches TV. I'm there chewing and talking in time,
a cloth layer in the scene like a patch pinned to a jacket but also nestled in that futureless
future viewing this through an aperture with a premise on certainty and home.

Morning Oratory in Laurel, Maryland

What is there to do if you pity yourself each morning
for waking up because it discontinues your
dream life where you'd prefer to reside?
Were it not for my option of decent

breakfast variety, eggs, waffles, a banana, for time,
or the clove-scented shampoo, I might not get out
of bed at all. I'd even suspend the shower
or straightening up, if the news

would provide something new, it doesn't—
so my mind wanders watching
the local anchor,
who is like

every local (big hair, too much makeup, pressed
and over announcing), laying out
the day. I get the sense that
the city could be substituted

for another. As if each city had a fire the night
before, started by an out-of-date appliance.
A particular neighborhood is upset
by the benefit of a new

urban plan, or (one step worse) two groups argue
over the historic relevance of a condemned
building, and in case I'd forgotten
weather on the 7s.

Satisfaction, at best, comes from remembering my dreams—
I do it for the reverse inertia, then
begin my morning oratory:
eat simply, exercise,

let the day be what it wants to be, and acknowledge
its agenda. So I avoid
feeling like a bug pinned to the felt
of an entomologist's pride.

Doing this is like imagining what
a heart looks like if viewed

from inside its own
ventricle.

Rothko: *Earth and Green*

My mother has a print of it behind the couch.
I thought it was such an easy painting,

blocks of color—red dropping to green framed by blue.
Maybe you didn't like landscapes or portraits,

just colors, or you couldn't really paint.
But I looked again and saw more—red

dizzy strokes flooding that pour into a green
slightly bigger and backwashed in blue.

It was browsing through your bio in a coffee-
table book that I understood paint is sadness too,

like words:
a heavy silence loaded with space.

Your suicide was that way,
like your name, astonishingly acoustic

as if you were born with parts already in the grave, still
your runny colors fought that and won.

Little Flares

In Cape Jervis, Australia, a tourist looking for excitement
can paddle out to a dead whale and stand on its carcass.
Its insides show slow signs of rot and spill into the clear water.
For this chance, he overlooks the sour smell
too strong for the salt to eliminate, and finds
a spot on the whale not yet decomposed, he steps there.
While on the whale, he looks at the tour guide, who is pointing
to Great Whites lurching on the carcass.
Because he paid for this and wants to see what might happen,
he extends his hand and pets the shark like a puppy.
It was only after that that he could piece it together.
He was standing there bait on bait, looking past the scene,
past the shark eating his footing, lost in the instant forgetting
that occurs in the middle of a moment. Gazing on the click and shutter of the lens,
the many little flares of flash almost too excited to be scared.

Palpable Tension

In this house we exist as
 the side effect of absence
where light cancels sound,
 where the absence of curtains
provides no more light
 than before. Where the light
enters but is only seen
 through dust settling on the green
rug that's too small for
 the room, so the hardwood lines
stretch out from under. Half on carpet
 half on wood, the bed sits dozing,
but we're awake
 side by side as if canceled until
the alarm sounds again
 no sleep left to turn to—we drag
ourselves, moving mugs,
 books, chairs, papers
in this house we live in
 but don't own, where more
is hand-me-down
 than not, where we arrange
and rearrange this space
 our only hope to fill it.

Letter to Mueller in Reference to *Two Gypsy Women with a Cat*

Dear Otto: I've been haunted by gypsies too. Once in Bosnia, I threw my apple core into a trashcan and two gypsy women jumped out and grabbed it. One focused her dark eyes into mine and laughed at me, a six year old, pigtailed and holding her mother's old purse, playing adult. I reached out my hand to touch them. They held the same intrigue as a new doll. My mother yelled *BJEŽI* from the apartment window—they were gone. Years later, I remember that their black olive eyes, dirty bare feet, and that the mysterious density of the Romani language was terrifying, but you befriended them. A refuge from middle class German life, they'd posed for you in a polka-dot skirt, an open red shirt. You caught the warm colors of their hut: yellow curtains, red table cloth, green walls and a cat in a window sill, made it glow and put the bare chested women at ease. Something about them remains different. These are not the women my mother would invite for tea, nor are they like any other women you've laid next to. They became all gypsies to me. You also saw them as a scheme: lozenge-shaped heads, dark, narrow eyes, thick brows, angles, bone. They welcomed you to leave your conventions, your hidebound values, become an outcast "come in" they said and "would you like a drink?"

Headless Stem

There is a list she keeps, things
not to buy in the grocery store because
she loses control, afraid she might forget
a problem item or worse
eat the whole container of peanut butter.

Each session the doctor asks what item she braved. Is she in control?
“Do you feel ok about having ¼ cup of Chunky Monkey before bed?”

She does it though, one item per week,
makes the cereal last, scoops a cup
brushes off the pieces that might
push the serving over, pours ½ cup
skim milk and eats, sometimes.

Each session she tells the doctor. *“This week went ok.
There is still cereal left in the box, a lot of it.”*

What she knows better than to say is, she'd
eat her hair or fingernails if it could sustain her.
Anything to skip the grocery store; that horrible
concoction of barely controlled urges,
and all of the math in paper or plastic.

Each session the doctor weighs her, shakes her head.
“Why do you buy food if you know you won't eat it?”

And she grows tiny, a body that fits through
netting like a minnow. Under her head, her body
looks like a lollipop until her head shrinks too.
She's a stem shorn from its flower,
a branch on a tree in winter.

A Self Set in Void

*In the world's structure dream
loosens individuality like a bad tooth
–Walter Benjamin*

I push myself though darkness
as if parting still air is work

muted somewhere between
awake and sleepwalking

until I am standing on the side of
the Ben Franklin Bridge

appearing as a bump
on its blue iron structure

through onyx air
I take in the Delaware's stench

then lean out as far as possible
my frame effacing stars I

jump (but know
I am not going to die)

there is no possibility of
breaking myself over water

I lose time float back slowly
when I resurface

everyone I know holds up
signs of 5s and 4s and 8s

Wrapped in Gloom, 1934
after Paul Klee

It could be anything or any
faint landscape.
A view from above shows
green and blue bits,

red dashes, lines
dark and angular,
but the center is backlit
protruding. There's

grit, the red,
dark and *sinking*
into the light.
Panic, as it's overwhelmed; the dislocated

sucking sound a vacuum makes
when it gulps paper
pieces or Ailanthus
ensnaring a city. How a species

of tree can maraud.
Knuckles protruding, its disregard
of structure and concrete, grows,
comes closer, suffocates.

Birthing

The spinal was insufficient; she felt the cut
long and arched across the moon of her, felt
herself open, flayed, and although she could see,
it felt strange viewing the baby through her layers.

Instead, she concentrates on the blips and beeps,
her heart and its beating separately in time,
and how mothers on TV compel sympathy
by cursing at their husbands *you did this to me*.

But they return breathless, and their last
bit of energy is spent smiling at the doctor,
who confirms the only hope: *ten fingers
and ten toes, it's a healthy boy*.

Exhausted they hold the child against their chest
and muster a coo as they press their sweaty faces
against their husbands' faces, who are also tired
and want their wives back to normal.

My brother was born underdeveloped.
My mother confesses that once they closed her
and handed her the blue, shriveled bundle she just wanted
my father to take it—the ugliest baby she'd ever seen.

Bluefish Fishing

I would've thought it a dream, but the smell of chum
surrounded us in the wind, bloodying the rough
water, was too real; the oily residue
smeared on the deck, too strong for the salt to ease it.
I would have thought it a memory,
but the place could be any boat
with fish being thrown onboard, the hooks removed,
silver-blue masses flopping on deck
while crewmembers slap the fish down
killing them, then icing.
My father's face was there,
instructing me on ways to bend:
how to move with the fish then startle it
further onto the hook.
He said, there was no point in holding my breath.
If I suffered enough, I'd get used to the smell.
I don't remember how many we caught.
I do remember the rough water. People
panicked at the thought of a storm,
the empty isolation miles from shore
and how the ocean's only desire was to get into the boat.

Still-life

It's our sadness—
not to remember her another way.

But because I had imagined it first, her death was slight
a final exhalation then the body slackening

or of course, a more sympathetic end—
simply she doesn't awaken;

though her death was clinical,
a risk of surgery performed to relieve pain.

I should say
she suffered. Her sickness became our prison

filled with that which the eye loathes to see.
Each of her needs dutifully fulfilled by her children,

and their children hear the history
of an old body: brittle boned,

missing organs, hovering
inconsolably like an animal provoked

beyond measure, where efforts to alleviate pain
result in a more intricate agony:

where she's unable to recognize herself
yet insists upon our sincerest humanity.

Simulacrum

I explain to my father
how the sculpture was supposed to be
in the fetal position,
but the model couldn't hold it: his thick limbs
weren't flexible enough, his belly in the way,
and when Mueck asked for a break
the model sat in the corner
elbows on knees, face in hand and waited.
It's similar to the face my father makes
when he takes me shopping and I go back
in again to try on "just one more thing"
and "I'll only be a minute" so he sits somewhere
out of the way, patiently
though bothered by his thoughts.

When we see the sculpture it's flesh-like,
confusingly immense, we search for pores and veins,
they're everywhere.
I watch my father eye the sculpture.
"Why is it hairless," he asks?
By which he means it looks so real
otherwise and, maybe, why am I
squirming? This is the trick of the big man,
he is not nearly as naked as
we are in his presence.
Part freak, part worst-case-scenario
he shows us our discomfort.
My father sees it too, how it could be
his belly, his sun spots, his uncomfortable certainty.

This Place is Better than Fine

There is a density to the air.

Though it might be the same elsewhere,
everywhere suffering from airport stuffiness
stale and dry—a wanting for home.

But isn't that how love works, first you wait...

I see your body as a place
though I could not draw it

—the way we know summer coming
by the hint of a longer night,
impending dampness, the drone of cicadas,

their long et cetera.

I find photos of your new destination.
So later, when you tell me about life there,
I can picture your daily Anglofication

by way of ale and long days
at the Bodleian where a librarian
becomes your closest confidant.

I can't be,
can't keep a secret.

Then you're home
to this place, my body,
and like anything so wanted
so anticipated

it's inadequate.

What Becomes of Us

The day is heavy, and the future is insufficiently
funded with impetus, flatware too dull to cut a vein, so
we respond to problems by overworking them
fitting the pieces together like a parody
of a perfectly normal life until your hand grasps mine
looking for stability as if we could wring it from the air.
None of the risks seem worthy enough like an uneven
foundation or faulty masonry—that can't harbor
this crapshoot. We're waiting for something to push through,
like a weed in the sidewalk crack, something familiar and expected—
the days where the mind suspends all but the coming season:
a birdsong hinting of what is not fully formed,
and even the night is new, lapis instead of dark.