

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: WESTERN'S DREAM
Degree Candidate: Joanna Beth Osborne, Master of Fine Arts, 2004
Thesis Director: Stanley Plumly
Department of English

The majority of these poems were written in the last two years, yet they represent a range of experimentation which was implied in earlier writing. I have arranged them in three sections, each consistent in a variation of theme and form and while they vary within a section, patterns may be found throughout the thesis as a whole.

Ekphrastic poems create one thread, yet within each of these are other underlying themes about relationships, not just between people, but between people and objects and objects themselves. This concept often unfolds as a psychological landscape that induces a pastoral, as well as the narrative itself. The common shifts to surreal images imply a psyche in which the surreal may be disorienting but never insincere. Often the truth within these poems lies in these absurd shifts, revealing the poems' true subjects—their speakers, who attempt to narrate the landscapes I've created for their voices.

WESTERN'S DREAM

by

Joanna Beth Osborne

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate School of the
University of Maryland at College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts
2004

Advisory Committee:

Professor Stanley Plumly, Chair
Professor Elizabeth Arnold
Professor Michael Collier

Copyright by
Joanna Beth Osborne
2004

Dedication

For my inspiring parents and siblings

Acknowledgements

I am tirelessly grateful to my professors Stanley Plumly, Michael Collier and Liz Arnold for their invaluable assistance and to my friends and mentors Kate Singer, Camille D'Alonzo and Alex Booth for their patience and interest in understanding me as a writer and their rare and honest generosity as friends.

Table of Contents

I.	1
Western's Dream	2
Pastoral Still Life	3
My Pet Dead Mouse	4
Postcards From Home	6
Jackson Pollock's "Moby Dick" Digested Through Four Stomachs of a Cow	8
Drawing Maps	9
Analysis of the Book "The <i>Metamorphoses</i> of Ovid" Without Reading It	10
<i>Oriental Poppies</i> Hung Above the Bed	11
First Day	12
Cultural Confession	13
Reflections of Silver Spring	14
II.	15
Entertainment	16
The Largest Civil War Monument	17
Twenty Seventh Birthday	18
Your Fernande	19
Nocturnal Love Poem	20
Office Work	21
Morning Song	22
To All The Children I Will Never Have	23
Predictable Outcomes	24
Dead Rituals	25
Process of Elimination	26
Hopper's <i>The Lighthouse at Two Lights</i>	27
Impatient Variations	28
III.	29
Family Tree	30
The Way We Communicate	31
<i>The Tree</i> , A Sketch by William Kentridge	32
His Good Intentions	33
The Soon to be Slaughtered Hen Reflects Upon Herself	34
Soren Kirekegaard and His Statue	35
Consciousness	36
Still Life: Fish With Red Bowl	37
Self Looking at Portrait from Age Seven	38
Songbook	39
Turnips	40
December 25 th , 2003	42
Biography	43
Spring's Revisions	44

Western's Dream

In the beginning, God dropped the world and it fell on us
and we loved the scraps of his existence into furniture.

Then sparks leaked from the welder's hands:
lucid trajectories failing before reaching the ground

but not before first watching their own light hang,
for a moment, like instant honey in the air.

If they had fingers they'd capture their own existence.
If they stutter it's because they can't repeat themselves.

Each fragment excuses the old sky that cools its flame into a waif of fire:
tuneless instruments deflected off iron, piling invisibly on the ground.

What I watch are their reflections, inflated and reversed,
in the black Cadillac parked next to the work site.

Cavernous streets simplify meaning,
but I still say the sparks emanate, like worlds from a god.

Still the welder's grip appears easy, like ballet
and I believe the scorched metal, if not now, may someday be thirsty:

lightning bugs in a childhood August:
their predictable but unrehearsed flicker.

Winter air clears the sky and compresses heat into ash
until something, unlit, falls to the earth.

Pastoral Still Life

This landscape means nothing to me. Its tired pantomime
rolls down my skin like beaded ivy, follows me home
until the blossoms re-plant themselves back into the ground.

I always believed that the tree's sway was a long tempered dance
with the violence of harvest, a moderate gesture of grief
until I saw my mother break her back against my father's hand.

Her spine, stuffed with muscle and rye, retracted like a weeding
field as his knuckles traced the lining of the stable,
pressed against its edges searching for an alter for his prayers.

I stopped bleeding then, started reading Faulkner like grocery lists
and listening to barks like currents, alternating between on and on
until there was no longer any distinction between another life and my own.

But the stiff air here still draws circles in the roads that were cut
from the unfertile parts of the land, by hands that pronounced
everything like it was sugar: grapevine, lamplight, black eye.

My Pet Dead Mouse

My pet dead mouse dead on the sidewalk
lies partially on its side
with both eyes shut.

Its tail is still flipped out,
about to say something,
like a dead erection.

I try to read its dead lips
that are far less subtle
than speech.

The fur looks like it's still soft
and even after a week,
it still moves in the wind,

which makes its dead body
seem deader.
I trust it—

its immobile faithfulness
makes me feel content
on my walks

when I pass by it each day.
Unlike the squirrels
whose chattering scares me.

I know it would still greet me
if it was still alive,
because I made it my pet.

The fact that it's dead
is inconsequential
to our friendship.

Some days I think about its sudden death:
caught beneath a car
or stonewall landslide.

The surrounding debris
implies a kind of violence,

if only for mice.

Other days I allow it to die
naturally from an acute case
of rodent indigestion.

Postcards From Home

If your name reminds me of something,
then it's the sound of car tires rotating
through snow: cyclical patterns that rise
and fall across a cadence of buried roads,
leading us to my backyard in Maine.

Your voice, like my home, is only a point,
on a map with other points, drawing
a coast of towns that scatter like blind spots
between the cliffs and ocean.

Today only words are defined
and everything else is a white shadow
casting white shadows over other
white shadows. I could send you
an entirely blank book.

You are a deferred green, mossy stains
left by seaweed that has uprooted
and floated away, or else the possibility
of spring here, the one that settles
on another beach where glass is lapped up
and dulled into finer things.
A beautiful victim of repetition.

If your name reminds me of anything
then it's the cupped sound of a fog horn:
the humid voice of nights in a town
that risks nothing but its own terminal
case of insomnia.

This postcard is too small for signs
or traffic lights but is the memory
of old war forts that were filled in
after a boy was lost exploring the tin-lined
staircase leading down.

Eventually, snow that turns
to rain, turns to ice and your voice
freezes on the branches of birch trees
arching over my backyard.

It's almost like you are here,
suspended between veins of bark,
preserved in fists of amber, waiting
for me to wake you in a parallel world
that presses winters between heavy
books like dried flowers leaving
only their distant scent.

Jackson Pollock's "Moby-Dick" Digested Through Four Stomachs of a Cow

I.

Blue goes down too easy, like warm syrup.
No time for taste or the muscles to flex.

Birds grinding into sand swim against the feeble
Currents of thirst towards a thin lining.

They stick against black ink, tumble through
The esophagus like circus acrobats.

II.

Inside mixes black and white into drafty figures.
Afraid of grey, they converse but never speak.

Ocean disappears beneath the acid surface, convulses
In the bottom corner searching for a shape to rub against.

Last to drop is flavor. Most deliberate of the senses
And always most denied. Tongue grips particles

III.

Until the taste returns. Hope taunts indifference
With a regurgitative eye, re-hunts the beaten

Path like a bulimic dog. A rush from outside
Makes the blue parts blush then grind

Into palpable things: salamanders by the fire
Sitting next to a concrete mountain range.

IV.

Stored too long, the images purge then break
Kaleidoscopically. Blue refuses a form

Like skin refusing bones. Nothing left
To absorb, consumption settles

Into the liver and spleen, but is remembered

By the tired mouth, stunted eyes, acrid nose.

Drawing Maps

In Ohio,
where I have
never been, three dogs
wag their guiltless tails
in its abused
moonlight and bury lightning
bugs with their
bones while a couple
lines up for
Heath-bar blizzards at the
paraphrase
of Dairy Queen. You are
nowhere
I can imagine.
The art of towing
cars is being
perfected within the medium
of Parking Lot G while
Mr. Brown warms his house
with the Daily Tribune, burning
its headlines
into godless days. Lamplight
worries over the oily
streets and the strangeness
of strangers' stares
while the front of the sun
shines on the weightless
side of the world. And
the earth neatly rotates
on its axis.

Analysis of the Book “The *Metamorphoses* of Ovid” Without Reading It

The sullen foamy blue cover reflects the solemn
And melancholic mood of a story that has been carried
By the gentle fingertips of time. Published by the John Hopkins
University Press makes it sternly obvious that this is a story of academic
Caliber. The thick crimson lettering foreshadows the torrential
Blood that will be shed as one thumbs through the manila pages that resurrect
The mythical stories of vengeance and death or may split the reader’s
Fingers if he too fastidiously flips through the compelling language
That David R. Slavitt “translated freely into verse.” The hidden implications
Of this phrase also reveal glimpses of the original author’s history: translated
Means that Ovid wrote in a foreign tongue and from a mysterious and exotic
Land. Turning now to even deeper levels, I refer to the picture depicted
And strategically centered on the cover of this masterpiece, which exposes
The philosophically and artistically nestled soul of this story. This two
By four inch reproduction of “The Feast of Achelous” lets us know
That what we are going to read is as important and aesthetic
as art from the Metropolitan Museum. Further, it implies mythological
Feasts. As we, ourselves, “feast” our eyes on this picture we imagine Achelous
In Ovid’s story and the levels food and wine portray within the constraints
Of this 331 page “odyssey.” We can interpret the naked gluttony enacted
In the bowels of this nature scene as the primordial humanness and godliness
Of the victims and themes that enthrall us as we read. Lastly, if we refer
To the prose, eloquently written on the back, it is obvious that I’m not
The only one intrigued and fell-swept by the integral dynamics of this piece. Excerpts
Extracted from the Washington Post and Newsweek concur with and conclude
My original thesis: “This is great stuff.”

Oriental Poppies Hung Above the Bed

The picture wastes his waking hours.

Time, procrastinating on the wall, hoards daylight to make the poppies' shadows darker.

He barely touches the doorknob before turning back.

Then paces the carpet like a ruminating wound: the soles of his shoes bruising the floor
where the carpet bleeds.

Each brush stroke.

A deliberate refusal.

The flowers' centers shift after the phone rings and her voice circles the living room for
the last time.

Good-bye: no's delay.

An infection in the soil that feeds the blossom before its petals close.

Blood clots or the thickest part of pain.

He always drew his eyes away from the hemorrhaging middles, toward the slivers that
divide like white splinters.

Now he notices how the bodies bend instead of overlap.

One petal pressing against the other builds a muscular wall.

The scentless trace is everywhere.

First Day

My brother spends a week in the newborn baby ward:
The only sunny corner of a local public hospital

That sinks lower into the earth with each removed
Spleen. He calls them little nuggets after wrapping them

In blankets then makes sure they're ok—strokes
The left side of their spine looking for their left-hip-wiggle

Then drops them into their plastic basin beds to watch
Them writhe and cry. How strange is their welcome

But just as strange is it for my brother examining
Their faces crying in Spanish and their medical history

That reads: Birth.

Cultural Confession

This would sound better
in an exotic place
where I could comment
on the stillness of the trees.
But here I only say *Sycamore*:
a clattering of emptiness,
and you, an inversion of the landscape,
lifeless soil
beneath my fingernails.
You remind me of the feeling of ice.
And now I know I'm older than
that vacant lot; my progression
measured in absence.
What was the name of that tree?
Beneath clouds, sky's obscene disappearing—
the memory of blue, or an implication
of place as if we were all just complacent:
eager things with heart beats.

Reflections of Silver Spring

This town is a victim of foreshadows, a post-dated history
where the old Canada Dry factory sits on the other side of the tracks
like a disarmed tank left spinning in circles until it's buried
in a self-inflicted grave. All that's left is its unlit sign,
a postureless gesture that stands in its unplugged back-lit frame.

Once buried beneath high-rise apartment buildings
that bragged about deluxe duplexes and in-house hair salons
(the housewives voices still volley through the hallways,
hiding still in the carpeted corners between flights of steps)
all of it just overlooked now, as if transparent against

lit street signs that erase the moon at night and illuminate
the steps of phantom commuters. Its retro body is untraceable
behind new row houses that map the patterns of urban
sprawl and hover over the town like blackbirds waiting
for the farmland to rotate. They house people

we need to apologize to with signs like "pardon our mess"
and "coming soon." And yet sometimes, I can still see
the Canada Dry plant, reflected across the tracks,
in the mirrored walls of the new Discovery headquarters that rises
from a plot of land I never knew existed until it was filled.

II

Entertainment

It's understood that we're under-evolved
in this camping site that would otherwise be abstract

if not for the two camouflaged out-houses sitting
like exposed spies on stilts just before the trees

turn thick enough to call forest. Our tent stakes
are loose in the grass that's burnt three parts sun,

one part wind and unmistakably brown but still
moving like a pastoral rigor mortis. We divide

the newspaper you brought. You get the front page
of Entertainment and decide whether it's better

to sit on Nicole Kidman's face or have her face
to the ground, absorbing the deer shits that have dried

into pellets. We force ourselves into the scenery,
discuss our time on trains, our love of departures

as the surf shows off in the last hours of daylight.
It's suiting that she's here. Her fibered complexion

muted beneath us, the thin recycled barrier between
our bodies and the dirt, protecting us from the soil,

reminding us of where we are, and where we are not,
how far away every place is. How eighty years ago

families waited out the Depression—built fires
in these grass huts while the deer, imported and confused,

grazed the hills outside. Everything tasting salty
and dry. Here we are surrounded by distance,

aware that we're interrupting a history that grows
around us and has nothing to do with us. But we stay,

sit with the ocean like a new years resolution,
pitch our tents like a tentative commitment.

The Largest Civil War Monument

His forty years as a physician's son prepared him for the Union soldiers
he was commissioned to mold, knowing the size of a human knuckle,
even when it swelled and rose around the metal trigger

or a slender waist. He only flinched once in the twenty years
spent with Grant, six of those days recovering the nick he left
on one of the equestrian knee caps. Because horses are difficult

to sculpt, and he wanted to be certain each shoeless split
hoof showed the simple pain of pebbles and broken muskets beneath
ankles twisted in the proper angles and the men, disguised

as soldiers, clenching arms around the horse's necks,
burrowing fingers into the skin as if they were their mothers
or wives, he would drag horse corpses across

the living room floor. Their slack jaws snagging on the carpet,
bloated stomachs rippling over furniture.
With handfuls of flesh, he would pose

the limp figures into battle, draping one carcass upon another
until the scene came alive. And there he would sculpt his monument,
through the formaldehyde and bronze. Each tail length measured

like a ration of bread, sweeping fear across the soldiers' chiseled faces and
every chipped incisor tailored finer than uniforms whose buttons refracted
bullets and light when hit at faithful angles. It was the horses

that took him so long, their phantom breathes through rotted nostrils
and flared curious forms beneath men who would be nowhere.
So that now, when we gaze up at Grant and his soldiers,

high upon their platforms and mounts, our necks may twitch once.
And when we turn to look behind our pride and shoulders
we will find the horses' faces in front of us, nuzzled to the ground.

Twenty Seventh Birthday

What he gives me is a French dinner we both hate.
Inside the themed restaurant a ceiling fan: our only
witness to the silence both of us think we want as
each blade makes its perfect circle around imported
wood furniture from Denmark, pacing flashes of
shadows that surround our table, which is otherwise
stark and begging for ornament: a bottle of wine
to clutter the space that is tripling every moment, or
a dish of sorbet that could wipe our palates clean.

Your Fernande

A compensation for the body,
your art exaggerates the way it fails
until it's profane enough to worship.

Fernande fills the museum
like a suspect in the line-up, unsure
of where she is or who put her there.

Circling her like a buffet, we shop
with our appetites, find our way
around with tongues.

You sit in a kind of geometry
while we count the ways the angles
of her faces don't add up

then call it a miracle and build walls
for you to cover, bear children
for you to paint.

Infinite variations of the self,
they say you abstracted her out of existence,
the obsessive-compulsive object

one breath away from a dinner plate.
But surrounded by this exhibit,
I call it a dissection—when

Narcissus finds the inside of his face,
or doctors call the accident a beautiful
wound, a perfect break.

In Spain, her whole body
is a philosophy collaged into shapes.
I imagine you there in summer: your palette of brown

carbon-dating into coffee stains.
They cling to the permanence of blue.
You never gave her eyes

because the body is only a place
of departure, each curve a breaking

point listening for your brushstroke.

Nocturnal Love Poem

Your dream was filled with action
and entailed tall bridges and spies.
I dreamt of Lynden Johnson baking
bundt cake, but it's ok, because
we had to eat, didn't we? And before we fall
asleep again, I'll lick your knives to make sure
that they're not dull and tie them to the
bedpost so you'll be armed and I can cut the cake.
Then in the morning, if my tongue still bleeds
you'll wet a cloth and place it in my mouth
and thank me, knowing how much it hurts
when I say love. The next night you will dream
of me in a short blue skirt, my wedding gown,
and save me from the finches who press their beaks
against my skin. Then you'll wake me up
to check my scarring tongue and tell me
that we can let the faucet run all night.

Office Work

This computer screen darkens when I close my eyes
and is only New Testament-Compatible, only types
in Times New Roman print. It gives itself background checks
and references, a chronic case of history while I ask it to perform
simple tasks: divide the world by itself to make it whole again.

I try to fantasize in the future tense to dodge the obstacles
that remind me I'm still at my desk but every phone call is for me,
every draft is an Excel sheet running amongst the current
of other graphs. I find a misspelled note the reads
"I gave him her murder and he will call her today."

Waking to my surroundings, I sell myself as a product
of my environment then imagine a world in which my name is
Vasna. My accent has no origin and I need a clear plastic
awning hung over the entrance to my kitchen.

Nobody listens to the boss's hymns, he sings in cyber space.
I've performed an illegal operation. My program shuts
down. The mind widens in front of a blank screen and I think
of the boy who convinces me to go for a swim in the ocean
we used to have a name for but is only water now.

We walk out past the braking waves and I float with him.
As my legs wrap around his waist I realize this fantasy
is a misdiagnosed memory—my lust of the past
where hindsight isn't just 20/20 but erotic.

Vasna returns my call. I realize her accent is German
and she no longer needs our services. She's solved the problem
herself. I close negotiations with the clock and follow
its stretching arms around in circles until it feels like.....

Morning Song

The sound of a sleepless night next to you
begs for countable minutes, solace from a repetition
I measure against the record player's residue.
You merely call it a chronic condition,
the way there is no hour late enough for us
to listen to the framework bend in a house too thin
for whole bodies to rest beneath a solid cumulous—
not malleable enough for the stairs to soften.
But in the morning, if we wake belly-up and clean,
attempt to wash the whiteness from our eyes
to make the walls appear less dirty, almost pristine,
you will pull out your confessions like supplies,
like the song that's still skipping, and I'll split the clock in two.
Keep one half for myself, forced to give the other to you.

To All The Children I Will Never Have

I count your fingers and toes on my palm
ordering you to misinterpret the world and to behave.

Your compulsion of nature will be pure biology
so you can blame any fondness for the spray of skunk
or your fascination with tree bark on me.

And I'm sorry for all the dolls you will never hold
and the confusion you will never have
of pristine stories only dirtied when they're told.

It isn't because I don't love you or won't miss
your mouths crying and crying for me
but because the physical world is something I can't dismiss.

I would sculpt you a beach out of sand and roll your shy
fat bodies to the shoreline, toss you into the water
like melons and kiss your faces to taste for the rot inside.

And when I'm finished not having you
I will place you where your cradles should be
and wait for the weather to change in your rooms.

Predictable Outcomes

It's the common wish, the usual desires;
to make you a stranger again and live
in the constant presence of almost
knowing, still wondering about your middle
name or the shape of the moons on your
thumbnails, because I only think of you now

in the context of other things: I love you
because you're not a fish or a room. Your lack
of canine instincts turns me on, unlike my dog
who scratches at the door only to find it's
cold and wet outside, and forgets it's raining
each time he goes back in, indifferent to anything

absent. I follow what I think is your shape
and how often is it never you.
When the phone rings I answer it twice
hoping for a different outcome
the second time but realize that it's only you
in every scenario. So now it's a still-life

study, you're a back-lit peach,
a Tuscan landscape that continues to fall
off the page and extend to places I've never
seen. But my dog still scratches at the door
because each time it's closed,
there's the hope that it's stopped raining.

Dead Rituals

Watching a mock-documentary on TV
The subject suddenly becomes too serious

Makes me believe this lamp is merely a gesture for light
Like the stars—how their deaths don't reach us for years

Because he embalmed her with arsenic so soon after death and only at age two
The solution kept in her blonde curled hair, cemented her face like a fossil of history

Now my own greedy eyes shovel beneath her sewn lids shown on the screen
And I cram into her soft fists to hold myself inside

She contorts the idea there are no simple ways to say good-bye
Because the chemical formula must have been just as complex

To preserve the girl for eighty years
She's only mentioned in the show's endnote, has only made a tabloid's blurb

Reporters use the word "beautiful" to describe the doctor's technique
I notice how little the needle holes show

Think of the way they define a good healthy wound:
Clean and freely bleeding

Afraid of black, I imagine everyone at the wake in grey
The rain: just a formality

Process of Elimination

If no moon tonight then what?
Artificial heavens breathing
over the suburban sound of nothing

which would sound like crying
if we listened for it: your whole body
the compulsive ticking clock.

In your bed, no difference between me and no one
and both of us trying to erase ourselves against
the other so when we wake there's nothing

but the shapes between the window and your pillow,
shadows insisting we're still here,
caricatures of disconnected parts.

In an hour devoted only to crickets,
we imitate another creature's busywork:
noises knowing the difference between bog and pond,

pollen and dust, the fluctuation of butterflies
and summer fungus. Our knowledge feels dirty
like secrets swept from the bathroom floor.

I dismember your last sentence, label the compartments
for your words until what's severed and what's left
sift into what's remembered.

Only then do I become my pasted future:
a collage of what I didn't know
being watched by another you—

Hopper's *The Lighthouse at Two Lights*

What's missing is its sound moving through fog like sifted flour.
Slow rather than delayed, its even calibrations tune my memories of Maine:
rain, condensed into fine mist, the entire sky surrounding me. I feel
my way around the bending roads after submitting to a whole grey night.

Ocean's only trace is smell on these evenings when the lighthouse
rotates its bulb in predictable revolutions. Its beam grazes my head
as I sleep, watches over Cape Elizabeth parentally. He paints it
on a useless day, poses the lighthouse in the off-hours of sunlight.

I notice the autumn shadows looming over his autumnal lawns,
but would have chosen Oakhurst Road for a clear afternoon. Its long
narrow hills cut through the woods and shelter the homes like soft shoulders.
Leaves, glued with rain, pave the street—October's alibi.

Hopper stays at the coast even when his attention moves across the bottom
of the field, hovers in the feathery grass and aged shrubs: a perspective that cuts
the ocean—writes the protagonist for a story with no hero and exposes
how he was only another tourist passing through my town.

Impatient Variations

It's my boss' quote of the day that he sends
when the office is too hot to comment on and
the sales are abstract in two ways: we don't know
what we're selling and we haven't sold any.

It's the stage actor bleeding out of character
in a scene that was supposed to be toned down
for the matinee but ended up drifting into another
script: this one less tragic, more comical.

Or what my aunt wanted tattooed to the rump of her pet
after seeing it on a bumper sticker at the church
that closed down last year due to a mislead congregation
who kneeled when they were supposed to bow.

There is no context to take this from or else
this is the context from which it's taken
and either way reminds me of child labor
or sweat shops: places where mistakes loiter.

My sister guts carnations with a carving
knife trying to create the violence
she can't find inside, then realizes
that she's only left with a sarcastic thirst for dirt.

It's all those working distractions fracturing
into film documentaries and foreign news articles
or else that Pollock on your wall—the blue we ignore
until it's the only thing we see.

III

Family Tree

It's the foreground to an argument that goes unnoticed beneath the wheat.
My parents go through the motions of feelings but someone's decomposing
in the grass. It may not be a body, yet the implication of marrow feeding

the harvest slowly shapes these fields into trenches to catch the fence's flaking
paint. What's buried, buried itself: ignored deaths or unconscious beggars:
enriched earth fertilized by our family's spoiled laundry. My brother sticks

to wearing dirty clothes believing that he's already there: a reliable prop.
While I edit the photo album until it reads like a biography.
Sometimes I think I hear the backyard shift and I imagine our family history

unspooling onto film, like a gangster flick. Then my parents would mutate
into parents and harvest this weeding yard, replant this hungry dirt until
the earth thickens again—grows barley scars over its shoveled wounds.

The Way We Communicate

Your body is a graveyard of good intentions

Because you confuse our bodies with words, everything you confess is too loud

Your moving lips look like prayers, then I realize you're signing a Dylan song

Here, I mispronounce everything and even my name, like your voice, sounds foreign,
abused

When we play Hangman on the train, I spell dysfictional, but you know I mean
dysfunctional

You say I'm too ugly for the dark or else the darkness is too ugly for my face

I'm flattered because you're not really all that impressed by people in general

We argue over where to have breakfast because neither of us care and all the cafes are the
same

The tea that started out as just tea is now a disinfectant for our conversations

We watch the fires collapse over houses on TV after joking that we hate nature

I say, from the top of the cliff, that the beach is a painting of a photograph

You write stories about the poems I write about you

Words are merely an excuse to hear each other's voices

Our communication morphs into something passable between mouths

The Tree, A Sketch by William Kentridge

Angle-sensitive twigs,
Heaven wrecked in the branches.
Your tree compensates for a window
So when we look through the glass
The interior breaks into back-story.
Implied nooses, unseen weight
On the lowest limb, collect dust
Between the canvas and frame—
Unravel then re-weave themselves
Into burlap blankets to warm
Bodies in winter at night because
In your picture, you never allow it to be day
Or else never tell us when it is.

His Good Intentions

Father sits just outside the virtues
of a scattered brain and picks his morals
from the moral tree, then scatters
them across the kitchen floor
and flattens them with a rolling pin.

Underneath his pillow, father's bible
sleeps. Its frayed spine pulled in tight,
the cover pressing his fingerprints
between the pages. He believes
that presence is everything. Father lies

down next to mother, memorizing
memories like a book of psalms
sung through a lazy, impatient
tongue. He dreams, in grey,
of streets that turn to fog and roll

like bulging bellies beneath
wrinkled sheets. Father lines his gods up
on the sidewalk, they chatter in the rain
with lamp posts marking nothing
in the night. In morning,

father interrogates the sun with all
the wrong questions, asks for toast
and coffee as if the pages of his scripture
weren't washed away, the ink
not smudged, just travelling.

The Soon to be Slaughtered Hen Reflects Upon Herself

Golden-beaked lullaby.

Scent of mother's feathery milk

burrows into creases I left folded.

The time I pecked

into my sister's skin—

bored down through grains of wood

thatched beneath our nests.

Heaven is the time in the cornmeal,

barn days spent in the Maple tree's shadow.

Had my marrow not grown so round.

Had I the inkling of a wild life:

forest caught in my feathers:

my own mouth clucking

in my body's wake:

the green I see behind closed lids

when my eyes squeeze out the black.

Soren Kierkegaard and His Statue

They froze you in Copenhagen
at the most prominent intersection in town,
facing North, as if waiting for something besides
the predictable winter. They chose the streets

you walked the most, where young boys threw stones
at you: the tired mule trying not to slip
in the cracks on the sidewalk. Where children would run
home and draft colorful pictures

of limbs and crooked spines. It must have been one of them
who grew up to become an artist and backed by his countrymen,
sculpted your monument. Perhaps he knew your name, studied
the subtle importance of your work the way a child searches

for his mother's leg by the color of her shoe.
And his intentions were to be objective and fair, the beauty
of reality, so he captured the roundness of the tip of your nose
and squared the glasses like he was performing

surgery. But had he known you, beyond just physical
places, he would have built a bust or an etching out of gold,
to focus on the parts of you that were eloquent and smooth.
Then visitors would have come to measure

the circumference of your brain and seen Johannes the Seducer
through your concentrated eyes. Had you not survived
your family, they would have rescued you,
shamed the city and mayor, fired the artist boy.

Consciousness

The cool metal wire bending unassumingly,
so that it's not so much a bend as a reaching
for its form, stands in a fixed if not perfect coil
beneath the box spring of your bed.

Simple missions: to sit inert as we sleep
and follow the nightly temper of our movements
so that we dream furiously but feel nothing.

Rain outside has nothing to do with us
but as it falls through the gutters the pattern
changes, turning to just water now—from the song
of nature to the voice of science—now waking us
from the sleep we dream of as the forgiving coil,
through the morning, restrains, holds its form
against our own so that nothing is sustained.

Still Life: Fish With Red Bowl

It only reminds me that no one
is here. Paint spools into a face
then into a face again. And while
they aren't fully human, their sound
would be something like our
conversations on the phone.

The way the interruptions come
too late so my delayed response
to your story about salmon
only refers to the distance—
a commentary on silence
against the continuum of your voice.

I try to stare until it makes me
feel but I'm too impatient
for speech. Even when
the mouths don't fully close,
I feel your lips orienting
the taste of salt with a sudden
rain storm in June.

Red exaggerates blue's absence
and crosses planes like an inconsistent
breeze. Our road trip
along the cusp of a sunset:
I look for the shadow's source
but only find the sun
and moon trading shifts
on the horizon.

Self Looking at Portrait from Age Seven

This glass frame is a pretty coffin for my eyes.
Mother called them God's final risk in blue.
I was her revision of hope when the tintinnabulation
of St. Paul's didn't measure the depth of her faith
as accurately as Dreschel's pub. She always believed
she could have been inside either one at conception,
that is, when the *idea* of me was formed. 80 years later
I can see the artist's reflection in my knitted shirt
and that my smooth face was only a clearing for disaster—
how blisters are most tender right before the grip.
Now, the finished mold of a soldier, I surface
in this museum with the stench of history on my coat.
1923: I am the final front before winter
and only another version of blue.

Songbook

The reflection of my mother's family shines perfectly inverted
through the polished bagel and lox serving trays: a mob

of my personal history that greets me almost annually and without
a written text. We play pin-the-name-on-the-relative until the ice sculpture

melts. At Aunt Toby's, my brother, going through his metaphysical stage,
limps around the living room explaining that his right leg is purely symbolic.

Grandma laughs like a grandmother and throws dollar bills into the space
where his knee should be. No one else wants an encore but he continues

to collate his limbs into metaphors. The rehearsal dinner is only a premise
so when we arrive at the wedding tomorrow, we're prepared

to get our rocks drinks early and if not specifically, we at least know
the extended family relatively. I sit at the "cousins" table where we catch up

on each other's lives: *so what have you been doing since you were
born? Do you enjoy weather?* We regress into the cousins of ten years ago

and find a common denominator to pass the time: eat our favors before dinner
and dance an incestuous Havah Nagilah around the receding Pergo floor.

After the bride throws her bouquet, the girls de-thorn their shawls.
All my aunts and uncles whose names begin with "M" leave

at the same time: their significance lies in their vowels, their vowels drop,
after they've left the room, like forgotten lyrics to a familiar song.

Turnips

In time they soften into a more respectable shade
but think: at least
we're not blue—

unnatural in this edible garden
and fight the vertigo of earth—
its pitiless soil gurgling

when fallen rain patiently
sits in puddles—water's waiting room—
before settling

into its dirty lattice.
They nest in a patch of garden
dug just right

for their stout squat,
their waxy body,
indigo lure

to the farmer's callused fingers—
so delicate and numb
against their stems.

They think of the way wrists feel
in the dark,
how subtle taste is without tongues,

simultaneously.
Sunlight sharpens the turnips' obtuse
smiles and makes them feel

aerodynamic
beneath the canopy
of leaves.

Hungry dogs
wrestle over
their unslender bodies

while they rehearse
scenarios of accountability,
then hide their faces

beneath the tomato vines'
feathery tendrils, ashamed of their
robust lack of flavor and wait for summer—

December 25th, 2003

Everyone was upset about the clear night.
Rain tried hard to rain but the full moon entered instead,
exposing the black sky for what it was: just dark blue,
just a different shade of what we know.

It was Christmas and all the Christian families
wanted snow—anything light and consistent,
so they sent their children to play in the asbestos
in the attic. They tried to build asbestosmen.

My brother called from work because his girlfriend
dumped him over the phone. We all knew
he was cheating on her but tried to show we were sorry
by mailing him a piece of apple pie.

Still, the immodest sky wouldn't cover itself
so we watched the neighbor's Christmas tree glow
through their front door and drew trees of our own
in fogged windows condensed with breath.

Biography

The solid moon hides under daylight while Grandma smokes
the wallpaper into questionable shades of beige.
Stains permeate through the walls, paint my childhood a jaundiced house.

I think of yellow's other similes: the instilled mannerisms
of prairie dogs that sleep in shallow holes and only rise
to check the wheat's length after rain (their repetition is perfect, like a tide)

or leaves that paste the side of the barn in an October protest.
They hold themselves against the wood as if trying to listen
for the decay. Then the less familiar shades—

when barley grows instead of corn in an unplanned square of field.
I spend all day trying to remember the word *saffron*.
And if this was really my home

I'd name the blades of grass like pets or dolls,
instead it only grows to be mowed, only calls itself flaxen in the gloaming
while inside, the predictable utensils tarnish, plea for their practical use

as I trim her cuticles with paring knives and pile her dead skin
in patterns on the nightstand: smoke signals no one can smell.
This isn't what I imagined in the picture, only what I found.

Spring's Revisions

Cool spring,
Cool rain,
Cold,

Metal accessories in my car:
Their icy touch a seasonal disease.
Warmth nowhere,

Unless:
Someplace else.

Jet engines wake in a groggy dawn,
Counter the stillness of this air
And voice DC's kinetic skyline.

Their aluminum barrels
Leave nothing but Doplar screams
To hover over

What's already dead,
What's beyond saving,
What lingers with thirst.

Thirsty afternoon,
Dehydrated walls lined
With linoleum's impersonal glare.

All of this:
images I imagine from the runway.

In my car,
My speed-bumped interrupted road,
Airport exit through chilled air.

My parking spot in front of "Departures."

The back of your face watches my side:
The angle not right or acute
But a curved space in a revolving door.

Your mouth, the bored horizon
Testing the temperature.

Burnt winter,
Late Snow Drops,
Spring itself shivers.

The circular highway embracing my small blue car:
Its tinny litter and chirp of a lost bird,
Motion without distance:

We stay in a lane between passing
and break-down.

Dry-heave of spring.
The sound of flight caught in its throat—
I want to extend your stay.

I want to extend the curve of your back
beyond this receding car frame.
Its curdling interior that wraps us.

I wanted to say this winter didn't matter.

