

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: TWO PARTIES

Sara Burnett, Master of Fine Arts, 2014

Thesis Directed By: Professor Stanley Plumly
Department of English

Two Parties is an exploration of personal experience, history, and the coincidental as it pertains to the shaping of one's individual identity. This collection of poems is arranged into three sections. The first section focuses primarily on the inheritance of culture, language, and familial identity. The second section imagines what happens to this inheritance when it is interrupted by or is in proximity to a natural disaster, namely a volcano. Lastly, the final section delves into the individual need to make meaning from both what happened and what could have been.

TWO PARTIES

by

Sara Burnett

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts
2014

Advisory Committee:

Professor Stanley Plumly, Chair
Professor Elizabeth Arnold
Professor Michael Collier

©Copyright by
Sara Burnett
2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I

Mother Tongue 1

Two Parties 2

El Regreso 4

The Bard of Guao 5

Peso 6

Abuelo Mio 8

Found Poem 9

Amberwood Oaks 11

Her Body 12

Field, A Body 13

Descendants 14

II

A View of Etna 16

Woman Picking Olives 17

Sir William's Volcano 18

At the Mercato di Porto Nolana 19

Should She Erupt 21

The Atlantic Asks Readers, "When Will the World End?" 22

III

Hemingway's Homes 24

Mi Negrita 26

I Never Much Liked Dolls 27

Pupusas at St. Camillus Church, Maryland 28

Good Money 30

Ethnic Arithmetic 31

Dear Conscience 32

Retracting My Poem at IKEA 34

So I Tell Myself a Story 36

Taking the Ferry to Whidbey Island 37

Accept the Day Is Not Yours Alone 39

Cicadas 40

Not An Aubade 41

Poem Beginning With Two Lines From Paisley Rekdal 42

Tomorrow my bamboo plant is dead 44

Because Carol Asked, "Why Not Write About It?" 45

Praise for the Love Note 46

American Robin 47

Poem For the Undone 48

Mother Tongue

Lengua de mi madre, have you forgotten me
in greenness of your green
Havana palms, in your thousands of orchid
blooms, in woven shades
of your mango trees, flamboyant trees stretching
like a brocade or an aged fishing net?
When did I lose what I never received from you?
Some part I'm missing or some part
that missed me. Perder:
to lose or miss an object or a thing
like keys or time, but not the same, as to say
I miss you: te entrañajo.

Perhaps you haven't forgotten; perhaps,
you merely passed over me
as when saying los padres when la madre is there,
her singular identity erased
even if she's in a crowd of madres and there's one
padre among them: one father
or many parents. My anglo father learned to speak
with an accent, proof of how long
you've been here, vestige
of the power you wielded in mouths
of conquistadores. And the few who survived, los pocos
spoke a pastiche – a bastard tongue.

I can't know more than las historias: the histories
that are passed down to us,
the same as when you mean to say the stories—
a homonym I discern only
from context or pattern of where it states itself.
The lineage is everything.
I'm two steps away from holding you as if always
my own. I've listened to you, rhapsodic:
the way my mother speaks
at home, the way mi abuela spoke
in this world. And when I was confused, I fused
a flesh from your sounds.

Two Parties

- *Havana*, 1959

Here is a birthday party;
my tia, 15, stands behind her cake,
family flanked at her sides
as she holds the knife steady,
making a precise incision
like a surgeon into her patient
splayed on a glass table
with miniature white roses
and palm fronds as if the table
were an altar, and the cake,
a sacrificial offering;
my abuela and cousins beside
smile for what seems a likely
eternity or as long as it takes
a camera in those days to flash,
and Tio Pablo wears sunglasses
next to abuelo, who cracks a grin
like a ripped orange skin.
The party is dull; everyone
in business suits, the women
with short jackets, spotted, striped
or tweed, cinched with bows
across their ample chests or fringed
with ridiculously large lapels,
and the men wear dark suits
as if attending a church funeral.
Maybe it's the warm sepia tones
and heavy shadows saturating
this photograph that make
it somber or maybe it's the austere
formality here that draws attention
to the affair it almost was—
where there would've been silk
dresses and plush furs, sparkled
baubles and clinks of ice cubes
in tumblers emptied of their drinks,
lifting drifts of cigar smoke,
and a five-piece band playing sets
of salsa, merengue, or jazz lulling
guests late into a moonless night;
but not with a new prime minister
wearing olive-green army fatigues,
his trademark square cap,

saying tenemos gran planes
to a cheering crowd, who earlier
chanted paredón! “to the wall!”
death by firing squad.
In the photograph, this party
never starts or finishes;
everyone dreams of the other one
that never happened.
When earlier Tia blew her candles out
in the bleak day’s light, no one saw—
they drew in breath, then clapped.

El Regreso

Under the orange glow of the flamboyant tree,
they talk of el regreso
while sipping espresso from paper demitasses
and at a roundtable after dinner, after dominoes

they will talk of el regreso.
Of old Cuba, of old Havana, of all things old
at a roundtable after dinner, after dominoes
Do you remember the lechón? Do you remember tres leches cake?

Hombre, we never feasted better.
Nodding, the men agree, puff on cigars.
Do you remember how they sent our brothers to be slaughtered on Playa Girón?
They straighten the pleats of their guyaberas, lean into their chairs.

No one starts to leave.
Shall we have another round?
They straighten the pleats of their guyaberas, lean into their chairs.
Plumes of smoke rise from their cigars, resting in ashes.

And the china I hid in the ceiling before we left, do you remember?
Niña, it is there, it is yours -- all of it.
Plumes of smoke rise from cigars resting in ashes
under the orange glow of the flamboyant tree.

The Bard of Guao

translated from the poem by Angel M. Ferro

In the tree I leave you
a talcum powder box.
Even now, what I've come to,
how little it bridles you.

You've already acquired a promise
of the finest necklace I can buy
costing more than even teeth
but it's no matter of relief.

See anyway, everything's yours
even our dearest daughters.
So spent thus, this way, nothing
else could I ask of you.

I wish I were a true poet
then I could better express,
others may do worse yet
without ever finding rest.

Peso

What was promised when the first peso
of the new republic passed around the island
in 1960? The greenback, the bill, the frogskin
the spoondulick, the dough, the bacon,
the tender to render the moolah
the big one, the jackpot.

The peso
which means also the weight
its pliant paper curve fitted from palm
to fingertip replacing the iron man
the plug, the sinker,
the wagon wheel, the coin.
Levantáte! Rise up!
Work yields freedom; work yields

this dollar
in my hand now wearing signs of use
was bent and folded once in front pockets
of men's pleated shirts and in their leather wallets
next to chrome-plated cigarette cases
and in finely-sequined purses
of their wives. And also creased
in stained palms
of tobacco workers, a relief engraved on its backside:
the farmer, the picker, the stem-stripper
sending the leaves on belts to dry. And not pictured
the shredder packing the long swaths
into barrels, stacking them in sheds to age.
Then the binding, the cutting, the wrapping
of rods with tightly-fitted paper
and packing them into cardboard cartons
on pallets shipped across a sea

to Lagos
or Singapore or Istanbul or 90 miles north
a straight-shot up the Florida coast
to where they were stowed underneath
double-breasted American tweed
smoking jackets or rolled up in sleeves
of flannel plaid shirts in the Conestoga, PA plant
where the word stogie begets its name
and the smell
of a fresh box is opened, its laminated cover
unwrapped and the manufacturer's seal broken. Inside
the vitolas lie flanked, puros unlit, their narrow
labels depicting high life: the vaudevillians, the gamblers,

the comic-strip characters, the ballplayers, the politicians
embossed and gilded, traced by an artist's hand
with colorful flags and eagles and naked
women immortalized. On the box's underside
the printed code
stamped signifying month and year of make
where it also reads "hecho in habana."
and before the embargo and before nationalization
this, at most, would set you back a few bucks.

Abuelo Mío

Abuelo, there are moments when you are in my head,
in evenings sometimes, my whole head, yours.
I wonder how far you travel on these nights between us
stacked like rows of sugar cane stalks wild, uneven
quietly ripening in their sheaths in fallow fields far
from your city, old Habana, your dream city and mine.
El ciudad, I have never been to but have scanned
with my black pelican eye. I trace the narrow arm
of Calle Obispo, a vein packed with peddlers hawking
wares and vendors selling papayas next to a polished slew
of Pontiacs, Buicks, and Fords still there, still parked
on the side. I've walked the long esplanade of the Malecón,
its generous wide-berth of roadway and sea-wall
and looked out onto the horizon for you there,
but heard instead whispering lenguas of wind sluicing
the sound of what you would tell me in green lapping tides
of lenguaje returning. What you must've heard a thousand times
while passing on your way home, the same birds: pelicans,
pigeons, and gulls. What you must've seen on facades
of the same buildings: escuelas, iglesias, cemetarios.
What you must've felt while standing in the same rain
in the same streets of your plaza, bloodied and sweet,
lighting your gray gaze. What made you flee from this city,
this dream city, and love it there from a distance?
Abuelo, I hear you and everywhere I try to read you
in faces of birds and your favorite gardenia blooms
and what I remember as your knuckle-wrinkles
and high-ridged thumbnails vaulting a half-moon shape
at their base. To touch your hand with my own same hand...
I think you must be one hundred now or more.
You must be so tired. Help me understand what I see
when I see you now. Let me not mistake you for shadow
or crow. Do not let me pass you on the street
and not know that I belong to you. Wear your face
and your body for me, hablame slow.

Found Poem

Where it's not until I reach the end
that the scene of the "mighty Sierras"
is all the more poignantly, unexpectedly
hushed and stilled, as if I'd read it alone
during a heavy snowfall where branches bend
low under weight of ice and all's stopped.
There tucked in an accordion folder loose
with years of family photos sticking together,
it survived, a vestige of the grandfather I never knew,
his hand a hand I never touched,
his voice a voice I never heard spoke.

But here his poem printed small
on a 4x6 strip of textured parchment paper
in black cursive font seems to hold resonance,
at least I think it must, why now
do I find it and why now do I read in silence,
in absolute fear that the paper
might dissolve within my fingers.
The words themselves written quickly, in one sitting,
never meant to leave the pages of a journal,
a meditation of a morning bike ride
viewing Tahoe at sunrise and feeling "a part of it all."

And I privy to read it, his thoughts,
his eyes, how strange they're here in front of me
describing the movement of bike pedals
ramping to low gear up a steep climb
his "heart and lungs" a team, his body "a machine."
The image resonating in my head differing
naturally from how he saw it, perspective
of forty years hence and altering the gaze
more on the viewer than the view,
laden with knowledge that he could never know
then of the tumor metastasizing in his skull.

"At times I am all but exhausted," he wrote.
But how happy and full of life he was
and how bitter the irony not lost on his descendants
or anyone who reads it — our knowing is deadly.
So when he asks in his poem, "What do I receive
from so unnecessary a venture which to most my age
would surely seem torture?" I think of him
young, 49, robust on his bike, and dying.

Though it's not at all the way he lived it,
it's the way I can't help but tell it. His memory
and my perception overlaid, compressed to the page.

But it's the next line that gives me pause
"perhaps a little because its there"—the apostrophe gone
so it's there truly wasn't,—or if it was once, missed,
disclosing the unreliability of thought, of affixing himself
with the mountaintops, the tall pines
and feeling that this gift was his alone
too enormous to perceive and too small to give,
how I know that feeling we share, or perhaps
I'd like to think so, holding the poem in my hand,
not much but a scrap, easily discarded,
overlooked and unmistakably there.

Amberwood Oaks

In her bedroom, the television pulses
on its stand and photos hung of her late

husband, children, grandchildren, me
smile back and when light hits the glass just right,

she feels us watching, other times not.
A stream of confusion from the hallway

flits back/forth, back/forth—all flying hands,
loud voices pushing carts with linens, grilled

cheese stacks, darting in/out of rooms erratically,
delivering colored capsules and popping hellos

—sometimes an onslaught of words incomprehensible,
words clumped in a cauldron of spit spilled distilled

to sound only... out there they grab at her
as if in a cold fog damp they call her name

as if the name were a warm blanket used
to smother her when she's tottering calmly

from one hall's end to the other—already all
she's forgotten floating in ether colorless

above her head, past ceiling tiles, multi-
syllabic heavens... Margaret, "Mok", Mom,

juggernauts rusting shut what once pried opened—
each time she looks at me askance, surprised

until she places me, I think I hear
the locking of pieces fitting together

as if it now should be this way,
impossible any other, balls tumbling

in a lotto machine on the screen before us,
and the sound it makes we have no word for.

Her Body

for Katie

And when somebody leaves a body as all
must leave some body some time,
we'll say we saw it coming, it happens
so naturally sometimes so we prepare

ourselves to let go of that body of hers
gone slack like our mouths, rubbery
and utterly spent: the utility of words used
and useless to us or anybody else, not useful

certainly for her or her husband or her children
who are sitting next to the space her body kept,
collecting themselves while recollecting her –
and beside them, the porcelain vases hold

their pink peonies, her favorite flower, fully
bloomed in mid-December, their fragrance faint,
extending far back to us in the pews, and where
now I remember the trace of her perfume.

Field, A Body

Flooded with purple chicory and foxgloves
in tall rows of burrstickling grasses

where rotten brambles of berries, cracked
shells stolen from hawk's nests

and bones from another creature's child
sink, as one day mine. But for now ablaze

in life, in late August, still budding, daring
to turn shades of dark crimson as grass tips yellow.

In death, St. Ceclia's body defied decay
her soft tortured flesh, a pressed calla lily petal.

Splotched inkdrops mar the page beneath my hand,
blossoms of blue lupine. One day you'll write me.

Descendants

If I ever have a chance to meet you, I'll tell
you how I don't know what we're meant for
in this world, because you'll ask without saying
a word, you'll ask me why. Then I not knowing
better and not knowing worse than what is instinct,
a gnarled sort of intellect, will take you
into a garden where snails hold winter
captive in their soon-to-be abandoned shells
and ivy vines wrap sprouts while ants weave a line
so long they could die right in the middle.

Because I think you'll also ask, I'll tell you
that I don't know why sometimes it's eighty degrees
in March or why beyond our fenced-in plot a boy
cries on a corner as his sister walks away.
I don't know if it's too soon for daffodils
to blossom. A frost will surely kill them.
I can't be sure exactly why this year the thyme
has grown back, but not the basil or cilantro.
If I hear my neighbor call my name, it could
just as well be the wind sluicing my ear.
You'll ask: are we like blackbirds above our heads--

or are we more like saplings grappling for sod
any cake of mud to stake our own to bury?
I'll say I think roots of oaks and dahlias
must hold their tongues in mouths of dead
surrounding them in order to grow again.
When they rise in spring, they send us a message.
I remember this: abuelo's favorite flowers
were gardenias, their waxy leaves, fragrant
blossoms -- unmistakable, unforgettable.
Abuela's favorite flowers were white roses
as her namesake, Blanca. My mother is named

for a red rose, Rosa, but she doesn't like them.
And my father's mother once painted a portrait
of purple-blue freesia; it hangs in a gilded
frame now in my bedroom, though she is still alive
and since forgotten she ever painted at all.
But every morning, I think of her...
I think of her every morning. And I rise.
I don't know why we choose favorite flowers
or if they choose us and what this says about us

or them for that matter. I'm partial to brilliant
red poppies, scorched embers flaring up a field.

But I think if I looked into the world's smallest
flower, the water-meal, the size of a sprinkle,
if I could see into its single pistil
and stamen that I would know more; I'd tell you
how it smells and how it blooms. But we know
it is all seed and fruit, finger and fist.
It is green and yellow and blue. It makes no sound;
it is all sound. Listen now to the dead whisper
grow grow grow into this earth-fold, a trough
so deep and we love so strong even after years
spent of picking through weeds and dandelions

we mistook in our youth for real flowers, the ones
we weaved into our make-believe crowns to last.
When we turn our faces to each other now,
we open our petals more slowly, and against
all hope we fall quickly, drawn to gravity
or impulsivity -- how should I know more than this?
I should've held him closer to me this morning
before he left wearing a coat he didn't need.
When we stand in a field where the sun slants
low and red, I'll remember, I've been meaning
to ask you for years, what your favorite flower is.

A View of Etna

Father, I can't tell you why fire burns
or how it smokes in plumes or smolders low
in waves—in some places, tufts of grass,
sand or soft rock, how can anything grow?

The beech tree writes above the pines what I
can't read. I couldn't decide which was better—
the view from Etna or Etna herself,
and what would happen if I did chose one.

I see why Empedocles fell into her.
How good it was to look into her fire,
viscous streams of yellow-red-and-blue,
and thinking I was safe in padded shoes,

though I could feel the heat beneath and knew
a single stone dislodged could slide the whole
mass down—what did I know? You'll say
it's not a question why fire burns or what

fire is as if it's different from her composition
and no more in control of which way the wind
blows, how it enters the lungs—
was made for fire, consuming it all.

Pietro Bembo, 1495

Woman Picking Olives

after Marie Howe's *Magdalene*

You know it was strange because the air was so calm, tepid
the night before we sat outside, drank wine, watched the sun press
its light into saffron threads across the valley—

standing in the olive grove
the next morning... my basket already filled too soon, I must've been thinking
I'd have time for a bath, lie down or something

when I saw in the distance
that heavy cloud, like a stone pine tree rising and spreading its branches,
dark and spotted—and then I was running down

the hill to tell you, olives
spilling, when I caught myself saying *this is the fire they sing about*,
and then I knew, we'd always known.

Sir William's Volcano

after Pietro Fabris, "View of Porto Pavine in the Isle of Nisida", 1776

The focus of the painting is on two men at some distance, backs turned, on the edge of a rock face between mountains, the bay of Naples, pristine, clean below, a nearly perfect round except for the point of entry or exit, one lone ship floating, but on the whole, the landscape is bare, untouched.

Sir William Hamilton dressed in his fine gentleman's attire, his tri-cornered hat and walking stick, stands over the artist, also hatted, sitting down with his portrait, his ear cocked to Sir William on his left, looking at the direction of his finger pointing past the isle of Nisida, isle of volcanic ash past our view.

The whole scene framed by mountains, dark and curved, as if we were looking from the aperture of a microscope or telescope, hard to say if a smaller or distant world; we see what Sir William *wants* us to see both in this painting and the one inside likely acquired: Greek amphorae,

a volcano, a wife—whom he dressed as a goddess in long gowns and cashmere shawls, her hair loose, flowing in waves posing with ancient props, even building her a black box with a gold leaf frame so she could imitate a Pompeian fresco or a statue brought to life, a slab of faultless marble sculpted, his.

He wrote his nephew once, "it is impossible for me to be without an object whilst I command a farthing" and even then, never enough just to own the rock or woman but to transform—place a mark on it, stage a scene, invite friends over to ogle demurely, say how pleasing it all is, say what it's worth.

At the Mercato di Porto Nolana

The best view of chaos is from the corner
where the fish seller tosses his load,
fistful by fistful into shallow bins
on top of crates—down and up, up and down
he moves, as if aboard a shaky boat—in goes
the sailfishes, in goes sardines, silver
mackerels and glassy-eyed anchovies, hundreds
of them sprung from his hands and giant prawns
with their antennae lifted—all going
to separate containers, arranged in neat stacks,
their slinky mails shimmering, packed
with shaved ice or pooled in water—
the stench of salt brine and the start of rot rising.
Now enter the tourists with knapsacks strapped across their chests
or looped around waists, their pelican eyes perusing
but not buying fish, more interested in the twenty shapes
of pasta and the naked torso of David hung
on t-shirts, aprons, mugs. Here and there a nun
and a few Neapolitans, at least I think Neapolitans,
the way vaguely Italian pours from their lips—
I can't tell if they're angry or singing
to the vendors often singing or calling out across stalls.
I can hear the knife of one seller slicing the flesh
of a fish, the crick-crack breaking of bones splitting,
the white belly splayed under his sun-speckled hand
gutting the soft gills, pulling the fish apart
and then wrapping it in paper for the transaction.
Everyone has their role, even the crumbling buildings,
the Christian shrines cut in recesses of stone,
bundles of white poppies, violets tied in vases.
Everyday here could seem like the day before
or after, and in that way, less chaotic, more routine
if you figure this market has been occurring for centuries
and will be—nothing really changes, and also true
that everything changes. The whole place
could tumble, down tomorrow, already teetering
on its spent edge of accumulated years next to Vesuvius—
its heat brimming, spinning out from under itself,—
when all story, joke, and song is flattened to a barely audible hum.
I don't wish it—disaster; no one does
and no one thinks it's going to happen
while they're picking San Marzano tomatoes
from the stall, squeezing plump red skins
between their fingers, tasting a scant of ash

on their tongue, always the day after
while the fish stare still and stunned.

Should She Erupt

When it happens, you'll know what to do.
You'll finish supper, clear the plates,
give the leftovers to the dog
who doesn't leave your side.

When it happens, it'll seem quite ordinary.
You'll take a long look at the sky
from the window, it's dark
with a strange green glow.

Then the wind will wake you,
sea brine on your lips,
though the coast is miles from here,
you went there as a child.

When it happens, you won't panic.
You'll go into your mother's room
where she lies awake too.
Together you'll sit at the table,

the dog between, quietly watching
the morning light, faint
and doubtful at first, the buildings
all around tottering.

You'll gather what you can:
olives, bread, water in a jug,
at some distance, a cloud, rapid white flashes.
Your mother pulling at your arm.

The Atlantic Asks Readers “When Will the World End”?

So the familiar prophesies of time repeat, and it's not enough
to ask when without speculating on the spectacle. Maybe another

Tunguska meteor, the kind that leveled eighty million trees
in Siberia in 1908, only this time a few kilometers closer,

maybe the Yellowstone crater will finally blow its top off,
scatter its ash cloud over us like a cold blanket. Then again, think

how a killer asteroid is entertaining. However it is, it must
be spectacular. The earth just won't die from old age, at least not

in movies or sci-fi books, and if it came into being explosively,
it must go out with pomp and flash. How impossible to imagine

that we and it could peter out like a flame at the end
of its wick, quietly rising black smoke.

But in a sense, the world as we knew it, is over—we've heated
the earth, melted the Arctic, turned seawater into acid, and then there's this—

the song after the last song has played, when everyone crows more
from the dance floor, and barely standing upright, lifts their eyelids towards the sky.

Last night there was a supermoon, the whole earth lit blue from it
as I watched from a square patch of grass, my backyard, its halo

so blinding so blue, I couldn't look for more than a few seconds,
they said there's nothing particularly spectacular about a supermoon

in the news, it's just a little nearer, a little brighter than usual.
From this vantage point, I'm looking at my future

and it looks like tomorrow. We're listening at our own comfortably
blaring volumes from our white earbuds so how to hear the last call?

The song must go on like the show it's tracked to and the truth is
the world will be here with or without us. Maybe that's what gets us.

They'll be no one here to look back, no Orpheus
crooning to his Eurydice and them lamenting his loss.

She, a shimmering ending, retreating into dust,
immortalized by the lyre—we all want it to be us,

when we have to go, this is the way to do it, in a love song
so that one savage century from now,

someone will remember there's something worth saving.
It's a miracle everyday that there's a tragedy

averted and another done to someone, somebody's wife, son, sister-in-law.
Just five feet to the left and she would have been toast.

Dumb luck, God's way, always this push-and-pull, tug
of war. I want to be saved. I want someone to save.

At the end, I want someone to save something.
Point it at this world like a little flashlight I see by and by.

Hemingway's Homes

Hemingway lived nine years in the house in Key West now overrun with tourists and polydactyl cats. The last time I was there I was with my abuela and my mother, the only memory I have of the three of us. We drove from Miami. Abuela must've been in her late eighties and abuelo had died years before from a final stroke. She was alone much of the time and much more quiet, patiently waiting or distracted, I couldn't tell which. I remember her on the drive sitting on the passenger side, staring out the window, holding the cardboard flap from a giftbox above her head to block the darting sun, the view.

Hemingway lived with his second wife Pauline in that house though he spent much of the time away covering the Spanish Civil War which left Pauline alone to oversee the remodeling of the abandoned stately colonial. He is said to have told her when she built the flagstone patio and dug ten feet deep into solid coral for the pool, "Pauline, you've spent all but my last penny, so you might as well have that!" And no one knows for sure if he really said that, so much surrounding Papa is legend, but there's a penny embedded in cement at the northernmost end of the pool, a sort of proof, I saw, for the story.

It was for my sake we went to Papa's house. I must've been nineteen or twenty, had only read *A Moveable Feast* then, and was completely taken with the idea that you could live with all your closest writer friends in Paris. Magical that you could hobnob with Pound, Fitzgerald, and Stein at cocktail parties. For her part, Abuela hardly paid attention during the tour. She lagged behind the group, fingering the upholstered chairs, (which you could still touch then), and Pauline's seventeenth century Spanish Circassian walnut chest, and lifting glances upward at the many crystal chandeliers, enormous and catching the light – they could have been the same

chandeliers I'll never see, but she had in her home outside Havana where Hemingway also had a home, Finca Vigía, which he moved to in nineteen-forty with his third wife, Mary, using the place in Key West like a hotel on trips back and forth to Ketchum until he died there in nineteen sixty-one, a year after my family left Cuba, a year after it was clear the Revolution meant to evict the wealthy, the middle classes, suspend elections – the Finca, now a government museum.

Perhaps Papa would have chosen to stay in Cuba, like my family, if he hadn't left to get treatment for depression.

Perhaps later, he wouldn't have shot himself. Either way, none of them would return. My mother was nine years old then, an equal span of time lapsed – in a childhood, a marriage, the same

that Hemingway lived in this house with Pauline who stayed on, raised their two boys.
I was in the giftshop, combing the bookshelves, delving into *A Farewell to Arms*,
oblivious
to where my mother and abuela were. The novel Papa finished writing there
I learned from the tour and I could say more about, but then I'd just be repeating the
pattern
of moving unexpectedly away. When my mother approached and said, "abuela met
him,"
that he came to a cocktail party hosted at their home I'll never visit with a pool and a
palm-lined terrace,
I searched abuela's face fixed on his photograph and said nothing. She told me she
remembered his face,
his moustache, remembered he drank, remembered that abuelo said he was a great
American writer.

But that was all she recalled and all I've remembered. Afterward we drove a half-mile to
the southernmost tip
of the continental US with its pot-bellied monument, a hulking concrete upside-down
thimble,
in actuality an old sewer junction that was too heavy to move so they painted as a buoy,
flocked to by visitors and gulls alike. On a clear day, you can see Cuba, just ninety miles
away,
a floating mirage in a humid haze, cresting and collapsing into vision with the waves.
I remember Abuela's eyes anchored on that horizon as she inched closer to the precipice,
as she said *this is the closest we'll get to home* to no one in particular,
as if the wind and the water had a face, had a name before they took her voice away.

Mi Negrita

It's summer—I'm a child again when abuela calls me inside,
pulls me close, and says these words I hear as another thing
she disproves of like my unkempt hair, my Indian friends outside.

She clicks her tongue as she strokes my arm and frets over
my darkening as if brushing it off. Her tone tender, endearing
even as it renders my voice small. I give in to her hip, her stale
saltine cracker breath as I receive her kiss on my cheek. I knew

enough—enough then to know that to be negro is not to be blanco
or Blanca Rosa, her name white rose, an apt depiction of her skin
she was so proud of. To me, it was a fishbelly white flesh turned out

on itself, a webbing of iridescent light blue veins. But the coddled,
miniature *-ita* of it threw me, drew me nearer to her sense but still.
This is long after I knew and long after she was a beauty queen
in Cuba, how then her skin was prized for its patent glow—how *then*

can stretch farther back, back farther than memory—yours or mine
or her own mother's mother's mother, all white Spanish landowners
from Asturias staying out of the sun while Yoruba-speaking Africans

forcibly arrived, cut and cured tobacco for them in long swaths.
Think of how *then* exists almost imperceptibly but palpably
in the present-perfect of speech: Abuela has splurged on skin creams.
She has walked with a red umbrella as a parasol again when it isn't raining.

We must've made quite a pair: her, decked out in high-heeled shoes
and always gold somewhere; me in flip-flops, shorts, how *then* she might've
imagined her tanned nieta mistaken for something other than, not quite white.

I Never Much Liked Dolls

But I remember one: she looked like me, or how I would look
if I wore makeup and a feathered cap, if I carried
a parasol and strung a garland of roses round my neck
and laced a pair of Victorian leather bootstraps.
She looked down on me from a shelf above my bed,
sealed in her original cardboard container
with its cellophane shield, my mother afraid
to let me touch her, afraid I'd rumple
the soft brown locks framing her cold porcelain face
or that perhaps I'd spoil her, somehow break
her little neck. Up close, her off-white cheeks
were rouged with pink blush and her hazel eyes rimmed
by thick, upturned lashes, but her pursed, perennially pouting lips,
her narrowly painted brows seemed to give serious consternation
to her predicament: her roughly 9 x 19 encasement,
made more terrifying because of the film
of dust collecting on her box top and on the inside
of the plastic sheet, making it harder and harder to see
the creases of her taffeta skirt, the gold embroidery
on her velvet coat, the silk ribbon tied
beneath her chin, its cleft. Sometimes I'd shake
her box to see if she'd wake, her eyelids sputtering
closed then opened over glass not because I'd wanted to play
but because I wanted to disrupt the perfection
displayed in her indifferently glazed face,
the one that looked almost like my own, as if by moving
a hair out of place, I'd have permission to ruin
the rest of her womanly body, her mocking stare.

Pupusas at St. Camillus Church, Maryland

| Some of us have been singing hymns this hour
while thumbing through the hymnal's worn pages
because we like its weightiness in our palms,
while others have been staring at colored
tracks of carpet threads worn thin and patches
| of light slanting in from tinted windows;
and while some of us have been bowing our heads
and bending down on the frayed kneelers,
| others have been mouthing the words by rote,
not missing a response or sign of the cross,
and still some of us have been distracted
by the squirming baby in the first pew,
whose timed screams in every silent space
| of Mass have been impeccably precise.

| We file out of the church into the rain,
where under a taut blue tarp, Salvadorean
women stand selling steaming pupusas
and sliced mangoes in plastic Ziploc bags
as they do every Sunday, even when
I'm not there, which is most Sundays
| as they carry out this ritual, having started
the night before, preparing thick maseca,
then mashing it to flatness and filling it
| with queso, frijoles, or chicharrón--
the five of them gathered in a kitchen,
| laughing, or each in their separate homes
because they are duty-bound to go
| to church this morning like the rest of us.

They seal pupusas in Tupperware containers,
portable tabernacles, and set aside extras
on dinner plates for children and husbands,
the same men I might pass during the week
| as I drive to work--men standing in parking
lot after parking lot waiting for jobs
| many of us haven't done, wouldn't do,
and may never, not for that money.
| And because they're up that early anyway,
they've helped load the van as their wives
| drink café con leche from Styrofoam cups,
getting ready for us to file out of church,
praying the cold rain will bring a generous
| crowd since we might have little else to do.

And as one of them deftly slices a mango
this morning, juice spilling onto her fingers,
another attends to the low blue flames
of Bunson burners, and another ties white
apron cords 'round her friend, and still another
raises a sign: "\$2 pupusas, \$1 mangoes."
Though I tell myself I'm not hungry, spiced
scents convince otherwise. And as I pretend
I can't wait, I know that really I'm afraid
of the moment I reach the front of the line,
if I speak Spanish, will she stare in disbelief
at my accent, my paler skin, wonder why I'm here,
though we share this tongue, though we both came
to church unsure we'd get what we came for.

Good Money

My student rises from bed before dawn
having just laid his body down four hours ago.
I imagine him sitting at the foot of a bed
to pull on his boots, his feeble fingers feeding
the laces into eyelets in the soft gray light
while his older brother calls from the kitchen,
apurate! and tosses toast on a paper plate.

Everyday he's late to class, which is how I learn
he has a good job. Makes good money, he tells me.
It's enough to buy his black jeans, black pullover,
enough to buy a drink (though he's one year too young),
or to take a girl on a date. "Miss, you should come
see me work sometime. You would like it."
And I nod my head because I would like to,

I think, see him work, but then he tells me
that at the fancy Chinese restaurant on 7th St.
where water runs down a colorful backlit glass wall
and black bar stools perch around two bars
on either end of the room, and you can order dim sum
at any hour of the night (I know because I have),
that he works in the back— and I imagine him

there scrubbing the dishes, floors, hefting
economy-size containers of rice and oils,
stacking the cans of sauces, placing
the cheap silverware at waiter stations—
tasks I didn't see when I ate last Saturday,
when I didn't know he worked there,
when I didn't know why he was late to class.

Ethnic Arithmetic

Again I check ethnicity boxes, write fractions
half and half next to squares

as if I could measure with a stick, figure
an equation, devise an algorithm

to derive the crude dimensions
of my identity—those parts

I'd wanted to keep separate like black beans and rice
never touching, moros y cristianos

never congri, but my mother sighing, heaping spoonfuls from silver pots,
“a true Cuban eats them together.”

Maybe it's easier to view things a part from instead of
apart of, as in that was then—this is now,

as in how I remember my mother quickly smiling whenever someone asked,
“but you don't have any accent?”

while some part of me felt betrayed by her assent and another confused
and still another thought who am I

to know where she speaks from: she who came carrying a doll and a suitcase
or she who's spent most of her life here.

My mother rubs the white of her forearm with two fingers as she looks at me,
sliding back and forth over again

in a gesture I've learned conveys superiority—and because
of this, and maybe only this,

I've never had to ponder which particular feature to cover or show
as if I'd a distinctive mark,

a curl of tongue, a darker jaundiced eye that says, look at me I belong
there, not here. Check what's fair,

what's not. Check guilt. Shame. Denial. Check every cliché
I know exists to erase me.

Dear Conscience,

Without you, I'm a pear in syrup
in utero, my limbs akimbo—

your gelatin congealing to my gelatin.
I have compulsion to move, but when I think

I think for myself, I'm stuck with you
maligning me for the good I have

misplaced. Sometimes I've missed you,
messed up entirely—how I've struggled

to know you better than myself and I wonder
if to you this is a game we're playing

like chess and this is what's called a zugzwang
when I'd rather zigzag, hem haw, pass.

No good moves; you've left me
with scraps, cinquefoil—the world amuck,

morally corrupt as a whole
and it doesn't matter much

to anyone in charge. I'm calling
your bluff as if you might

respond—chuck me an ace,
throw me a stone, darling, your lack

of conversation is hardly feckless,
but do you care? I beg of you,

keep your distance—no, come closer.
My promiscuity with mediocrity

is by no means reflexive of you,
subject and object of myself,

I could never be unfaithful—though
no doubt I've tried flirting with disaster,

even her husband once—so I've transgressed
a few or thought to, so what? So sue me

I never did what you didn't think to do too,
but did you hear how I asked for you then

beneath my sloughed speech?
So many tulips in the shed—

humble mumble, hurly-burly, surely
all I've done, I've covered over as a palimpsest,

you know how I never mean
what I say—let's start again,

tabula rasa, my medulla
oblongata unattached,

machina automata unplugged,
all's unconscious now,

save your scraping
on the frosted window glass.

Retracting My Poem at an IKEA

Whereupon at the second floor cafe, one son flicks
straw wrappers at his sister, as his father watches and eats.
The mother, meanwhile, complains she stuck a fork
into the roof of her mouth — and strange,
she says she's never done that before. It's early evening, a faint
pink glow just now peels through the dark
clouds, the large windows.
Say what's happened at this table matters.
Say it proves a point you've been meaning
to bring up about parents or kids or quick cheap meals.
Say you feel lucky you're not in this family. And then
leave it like that, since you don't know their lives;
it's not for you to write about. So look instead at the rain
cascading on the galvanized roof, on blue and yellow carts
in the parking lot, on people running back and forth to their cars.
And remember when you heard the woman
tell her friend she wanted a slice of chocolate cake,
after seeing an oversized poster of it showcased
in the bedroom section among the plush pillows,
comforters and stock photo frames—the poster, so large
it blocked your white linoleum path. You were on your way
to get votive candles, maybe some kitchen utensils
things you don't need but want anyway
like eco-friendly plastic bins, a lampshade and a particleboard bookcase.
Remember also the mom and her brood of five
standing at the elevator licking ice creams cones.
You confessed then you wanted one too.
And the Korean couple fighting among upholstered chairs
each squatting into one chair and then another and back to the first.
Until they stacked their trays loudly, you'd forgotten
about the family in front of you. Consider what happens next:
as they rise to leave, how the father grabs
the elbow of his other son, the one who sat
with his red-shirted back to you the whole time.
Notice how he gently guides this son
who looks older but whose hands wobble his tray.
Though you can't make out his face, you see the father's
concern creased in his forehead; hear it in his soft measured voice,
barely a whisper when it reaches you.
And you think he says it's raining outside, and he tells his son
to wear his red jacket, and maybe also he says
something about the thunder and the cold indifference
of rain which falls on everything, everyone.
And this is what seems to matter as you watch them

file out in a line. You want to create something beautiful.
But when the son turns around, you see stitched
on his baseball cap the Confederate flag.
And if you could take back
that blotched petal, you think then you might have a poem?
But I can't do it. I'm too far in to stop, turn away
or in the end, if there's an option,
maybe I'd rather wonder than know. All I can do is keep looking
until I'm in that line with them,
until I don't give a damn where we're going.

So I Tell Myself A Story

As in one version my mother pulls from the bottom
of her dresser—a silver ring, which is three thin hoops twined
as she tells me her mother gave it to her and now she's giving it to me
so I can pass it to my youngest *when the time comes*. Plain though
in comparison to the rest of the gems she unwraps from tissue:
her deep amethyst pendant, a pair of amber topaz earrings, four watermelon
tourmalines, an opal surrounded by colored stones set on gold spokes.
All these she's laid out in front of me, nearly a lifetime she's collected.

In another version, she finds the band at a stranger's yard sale
she's plundered and I've polished it to shine. It's similar to one she had
but since lost, she says, but this is close to how it might've looked,
close to how it might've felt in her palm, the weight of it not even an ounce in mine.
Lastly in a more obscure telling, the ring is passed as in the first account,
but between us this time no words are spoken, no other stones visible.
Despite whatever recountal I hear, I wear it for over twenty years,
until a link breaks and though it pinches my skin,

snags on sweaters, scarves, gloves, anything that'll catch
I keep it on for a few years longer, longer than what's sensible,
unwilling to take it off for a second, clearly a checked case
for obsessive-compulsive, well over the limits of anyone's reasonable
level of superstition, until I convince myself finally to have it soldered,
but not before telling my mother over the phone the story
of what's happened – that somehow I broke it, her gift, and that's when I learn
she doesn't remember ever having such a ring much less giving it.

I should've been relieved from guilt, but I was horrified
that maybe at the age of six or seven, I couldn't resist the metaphor
even then, the chance to make meaning from a symbol or weave some measure
of importance to what amounts to in the end some very expensive baubles
I could crush into a dust. Perhaps I'd always had a generous imagination
to want otherwise, or felt I'd be left out from a place that would bind me to her,
to what came before her, and some time from now when she'll remember.
For what reason the ring remains on my third right finger.

Taking the Ferry to Whidbey Island

In the photograph, we're standing on the deck,
backs turned to the camera flash, your arm

on my waist, my hand at your shoulder —
the gray-green bay and darker gray crags

in the distance undulating rolls, they could be
waves themselves crumbling in surf and the way

the afternoon sun slants clouds purple-gray
has the feel of sfumato, the smoky blur of lines

and mellow colors that allow one form to merge
with another and leave something for imagination.

The air then heavy, damp though the rain wasn't
falling yet on Puget Sound, as it might be falling

now, making it difficult to see the horizon,
border where water meets rock and erodes it —

our sense of that line, an illusion framed
by where we're looking from, not where I was

standing then or how I remember now, which is
to say perspective changes with us, moving

from inside to outside a gaze, and given the sun, the rain —
who's to say we can be sure of really anything?

But on that day in June whatever storm might've been
staved off a little longer as a stranger took this shot

without asking, as if she couldn't help herself
she said we looked so in love and I thought

it was some sort of providence that she divined,
surely a sign of something I believed certain too

as if love or any feeling, grief or despair
shared between us couldn't help but spill

over a frame, but maybe she just wanted to be moved
by something and isn't that what we want out of art

to be moved? — and does it matter if she was right
or wrong? In that certain kind of light and shade

it felt hers, the landscape and us with it,
meshed and stilled, conjuring a picture

in her mind that might've been there already
or perhaps only when we arrived, I can't be sure

but I know that feeling of wanting to hold
whatever it was longer than its moment due,

it happens every time you're near me
so when she gave it to us, I felt stunned

then humbled as I always do when I don't mean
to find art or receive it, but there it was.

Accept the Day Is Not Yours Alone

When I sit down to write, all my family and friends
and all my former lovers come too—they stay over,
spread themselves among my bedsheets lavishly,
as if they had all night, and then, demand breakfast.
They are talking all at the same time at me, they want:
coddled eggs, toast and blackberry jam, baked beans
from a can and grits...also, the clotted cream from a cow
who recently birthed in a pasture—*if it's not much trouble*,
the blonde dairymaid can milk her swiftly. I think I'll let her.
I figure I'm not going to leave this rut today anyhow—
though there is ruminant ground underneath, if only
I could place it. Name it. I'm digging in the bone-vault,
the coffered chest of centuries, praying it yields something
or at least shuts up. I'm polishing the suet-stone, rubbing
my fingers across a line of contoured sedge on the sunken
fosse of spine. I've stared into it and heard back earth-bowels
emptied of their vowel sounds. Barehanded, I scratched
the horny toad—smelled the sweet humus she sits in.
Also, I slogged through a bog where I eyed the eye
of a newt and stirred it into the weird ones' pot.
I've pickled a persimmon and eaten a ripened pomegranate—
I haven't died yet. I cocooned with the caterpillar
and listened to the lark,—and it keeps me up...Most nights
I sleep in a seed-bed and make a mess of the marsh.
I'm making now a love-nest for when finches return in spring.
Who said chivalry is dead? Who told me you are your own
best companion and that no one reads a novel anymore?
I don't know about novels. Who can stand their long, languid
sentences romancing us in the enlightened dawn of dating?
I chew on the quickened cud of memory, but most
of what I remember I misheard or dislodged from the crook
of my brain, where there was once ample roof space
and slower days. Still, in quiet passing moments, I feel weight
pressing my lithe tongue and it moves me closer to you.

Cicadas

Every seventeen years we forget how they sing
obnoxiously by rubbing their legs
after lying dormant in underground cells.

Love songs to their lifelong mates sway in the trees—
flutter, then fall pell-mell down with the shedding brown
exoskeletons, papery husks crunchy as potato chips.

After a while, I no longer hear them
even when they crash, wings pumping against their soft
shimmering bodies, against the asphalt, grass, beating
the hard surface of their fate. I know that feeling—

it's not denial, but resistance to an end
and the realization that its seed was planted with you
from the beginning. It isn't even heartbreak
until it is, until an empty shell stares back.

Not an Aubade

Changed: not even walls
blue-bare or doors lacking latches,
not even the table buckling under

the weight of your toolbox unloaded
so there's not room to eat amid your hammers
and wrenches for things that need fixing.

Changed: not even your voice
saying hello after a year has passed
since I've been in this house, and changed:

not even your hands that skim my shoulders
awkwardly. When you say, *we need twenty cloves exactly*,
I mince nineteen. We don't speak of leaving or staying.

Changed: not even the butter soft
on the counter or the knives you keep
in the warped drawer beside the gas stove that clicks

three times as it lights. Outside dusk falls quickly and quiet waits.
The scorched grass from August's heat smolders ochre to pink haze
and the deck stain we painted last summer is peeling. That day,

the dog died and when we came home,
we worked side by side in silence until
the sun lowered and startled us with its nearness.

Poem Beginning With Two Lines By Paisley Rekdal

Dear X, I won't be what you think of me.
I am so embarrassingly alive now.
Even the peonies in the garden agree, nod
their fluffy heads as I pass, and yes
even the rain gathered in potholes, ripples
iridescently when I slosh in them, barefoot.
You would never do this; be impetuous, impulsive.

*

Dear X, Remember that story of when you
were young and angry at your parents?
You wore a paper bag over your head and cut holes
for your mouth and nose so you could sit
at the table, eat dinner, but remain hidden,
soaking in resentment to make a point.
I always thought that was a kind of metaphor.

*

Dear X, I no longer remember your face,
only a vague sketch and daubs of blue
for your eyes. I fill the gaps by tracing pictures
in sand. You move predictably; I shake
and the whole image washes away with a wave.

I still hate diving in deep water
since we went last, can't stand the rubber
suit fitted head to toe, the gauges
to measure oxygen, depth, can't feel my green
sponge lung, bronchioles, areoles,
all the places you'd never go fill up with salt.

Maybe it was that young woman too
who we met that morning with her boyfriend
at breakfast and who died suddenly
that afternoon, arterial embolism, rising
fast under pressure. I wondered
then how much longer before I'd panic too.

*

Dear X, I'm convinced you've never finished

replacing the doors or windows in the house
as you said you wanted to for years,
as you said you wanted to leave too.
Stacks of new doors are propped facing a wall,
the paint on the deck peeling again,
but your lawn is perfect, except for that sandy,
burnt patch which gets too much sun,
how it irritates you, gets under your skin.

*

Dear X, I have forgotten how your skin tastes,
your bitter pith between teeth.
I have forgotten fruit. You won't be what I
think of you. Cherry tart, peach pit...
Like a bough laden with harvest, I am bound
to the burden of you. Remember how I wrote
you that letter, gave it to you in person,
but didn't stay to watch you read it?
Even then I wasn't asking for forgiveness.

Tomorrow my bamboo plant is dead

I know because of its yellowed stem, slack bend, leaves limp, how it tilts to one side—jaundiced appendages limply hung like your wrist slumped over the rung of the hospital bed you occupied for months, your dark hair matted under the gauze wrapped, your hand half a hand it was. Back home, I wedged the bamboo plant between the lamp and your family photos, as if something new could grow in that corner where hardly any light shone. And I bought a mottled blue bowl for it that looked like a flattened stone like one you might find in a river, when you could walk again, and when I looked at it, maybe I even thought we would. You did not notice it when you came home, except to say once you did, and did not like it. I always seemed to kill green things in that house like the herb garden I started on the windowsill and the tomato plants outside, too short to fill their cages and hang fruit. When I moved, I carried my bamboo plant between my thighs in the U-haul to my new apartment, where it grew until it yellowed again, and even when I changed its water, pulled loose its tangled tract of mangled roots from the hole it wound itself into, I knew what had happened, what was happening.

Because Carol asked, *why not write about it?*

And that summer I took to painting,
watched the pigments bleed into the paper,
spent hours on the red-orange blur
of a petal, ruined the whole picture
with dampness, my unsteady hand.

In every object I saw a stilllife,
though even then I knew the stuttering bee
of association doesn't work as we do:
if we see red in the amaryllis, it sees black,
lily-white tulips, blue-green heads,

the field in summer
is a field already dead.
Time again, we prove we fail
our logic, attracted to meanness and sex
like any insect colorblind in the sieve.

I should have, I could have, why didn't I?
Painting with water you have to see
the blue tinge of the grass, the purple fleck
in the leaf. With each wet brush stroke,
I know I'm an amateur.

Painting with water you have to live
with mistakes or start again. I'll have to
forget to remember him, I tell her.
What color were his eyes? The inside of his arm?
And let's face it, I never asked.

Praise For the Love Note

Especially the little ones on receipts, napkins, left on the car dash,
the kitchen table, folded then tucked in paper lunch sacks,
stuck on refrigerator doors: clothes on a line waving back—

what my grandfather wrote nearly every morning to my grandmother
which might have read: *Margaret, I love you more than all the daffodils
lining our driveway. Need Milk. Bill.* Where do they go after reading?

I refuse to believe in the reliquary of the terrestrial dump,
preferring the alternative: if ancients held the sun rode on a chariot
and rode back like a tide, I'd like to think those letters find a way to her now.

Let it be my myth then. Maybe because the other day I felt a rock
in my shoe but not worth mentioning. Maybe because when I read Jane Kenyon:
the other day I got up on two strong legs, it could have been otherwise,

I wanted to think she was writing a kind of love note.
My grandmother's legs are swollen and purple, they ache, though she barely walks—
and this morning when her room flooded with pink light, only she saw it.

Maybe because at that moment, I was probably checking email
and though it's not worth mentioning, I tried to write.
My grandmother mentions Bill some days as if he's alive,

as if I'd ever met him. Praise then for this man I never met.
Praise for daffodils, milk, and legs. Praise for the incidental
gesture made for another in the light now receding.

American Robin

At first I didn't know it had a name
except to say *bird* and to know the difference

from *human*. Mostly, it's that I can't fly—
can't make a nest with my mouth

from twigs, feathers, paper—
dead leaves, coarse grasses are just that to me.

I can't even begin to smear it all with mud to shape
an oval, or to lay blue nameless eggs, then wait.

Above, she's perched on a telephone wire,
some worm or grub squirming from her beak,

her young balanced in a nest resting on the cornice
of my porch—three little necks stretch up,

three heads bob down then up,
soft beaks open—such trust, unshakeable

belief in a world reduced to a blur
of orange breast coming and going

where only one song carries a melody
worth listening for and to think of anything more

than this sensation and shade is inconceivable,
the broken light refracted through the leaves,

and the leaves breaking with the wind
touching them without touch,

everything's of purpose, divine,
as in the middle of a bud

where a name is called and blooms,
destined to bring forth the flower

or the bird, and I can't even explain why
I'm watching her feed her young—

her offering, their taking, again and again
from one open mouth to another.

Poem for the Undone

I'm sorry—I got tired of waiting,
of seeing things through, a bad habit
I've meant to purge among my others
like stopping my double-dipping
into peanut butter jars with the same spoon,
but I'm only human—I know, it's not
a good excuse. So close to the end
I've been with some of you, I might've
feared the ending, knowing you'd vanish
from my dutiful attentions—how I loved
to fix your face against the white space.
Still, some of you never had a chance
since your initiation into this world
began on the backs
of crumpled grocery receipts
or the Wendy's napkin stash
in the glove compartment of my car.
Even if I managed to get you out
of my jean's pocket before washing,
you meant nothing to me
when I read you over nothing glinted
recognition of what you were destined.
You were flawed in some way
I couldn't put my finger on
and just as easily as I summoned
you into existence, I tossed you—
a memory flitting away before you
could crystallize into a hexagon
before you could even draw
your first breath of repetition—
I erased you. I could do that.
Spare you from the world, its inconsistencies
incongruences, drive you mad
from one who dotes obsessively, then
forgets you like that first month
of love together...done or thinking
we're done enough when I cast you
out to be rejected in someone else's hands.
That's when your absence becomes present
not for what you are, but for all the ways
you could be—you. And the ones that didn't
get done gather round, flicker in the room
as fireflies, cluster in the corners
like wind-spun snow—how quick

they change from being
nothing into everything.