

## Abstract

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The poems in this collection explore certain sacred and self-destructive threads in the twenty-first century experience of dailiness. Written in free verse, the poems shift between voices, characters, and registers, seeking unsettled and unsettling corners in ideas and experiences of profession, companionship, and kinship. Many of the poems are driven by exits and retreats, using the dramatic moment of departure to explore ambivalence and desire in the present and lost moment.

LIPS CLOSED FOR THE WAVE

by

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## DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Phyllis Smart Young, who knew and wrote and loved the poetry of the woods, of Maine, of the North, of all these, of more.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Prayer Against Useless.....	2
Impossible Men.....	3
Caught The Light .....	4
Reasons To Persevere .....	5
Distance.....	6
Solitary Desk.....	8
Comfort We're After.....	16
Music Scene .....	17
Christmas Eve .....	18
Water-Under .....	19
Linus .....	20
Gone The Great Dark.....	22
Fukuoka.....	24
Stalag.....	26
Wave To Earth .....	29
Another Way Out.....	30
Prolonging Of It .....	31
Valentine.....	32
Because She Couldn't See Herself Marrying Him .....	34
Reaching The Sea .....	36
All The Other Places.....	37
The Blanketing Noise .....	38
Next Country.....	39
This Yes, This .....	40
Supporting Role .....	42
Pittsburgh .....	44
Merewif.....	46
Belleoram, Newfoundland .....	48
No Trace Of Falling.....	50

88

## **A Prayer Against Useless**

Sometimes it is just the table  
and the morning  
and all dread coming  
like a lost cause.  
We sit down slowly  
to our next accumulation  
of counterbalance,  
lost emails, twists of numbness,  
faint skitterings in the jaw,  
broken condoms, chittering  
in the kitchen walls,  
counterbalance,  
like fat lodged in the gut,  
that will not out,  
so dreading it seems to be  
a useless emotion towards  
all the attendant falling.  
Be like the soft red flower  
in the plant-box barricade  
between my table  
and the Navy memorial.  
I do not think –  
I do not think it is worried  
by its slight edging curl,  
which would not change  
the next day's stealing over  
red furred sex song, come  
and get me coppers song, life  
singing into cold like a map  
of stars, haloed in distance.  
I will not dread it anymore  
because it's just the turn  
of things that come to us.  
I will not dread it.  
I will finish my coffee  
and begin.

## Impossible Men

Hamlet never got a break –  
even when he set sail from  
his troubles (some of his troubles).  
How far could he have gotten  
if he forswore himself to ghosts,  
or got himself a better therapist,  
or moved to the Maine woods;  
could he have stopped listening  
to the dead? The birch and hemlock  
there grow on the backs of their  
soft-spiked fathers, and the white oak  
shifts slowly in the light of August  
rain. Perhaps more feasible –  
a Wallander-esque Swedish haunt,  
forests more ancient than torques  
and songs of the ships made  
from dark, sleek wood.  
Perhaps more likely –  
walking the streets of Paris,  
the whore houses and ale houses  
of Paris, a prince like Hal ready  
to fall again. Could he have walked  
into the night and never sought  
the bright hands of the knife  
that he did or did not hold?  
I imagine white linen.  
I imagine leather sleeves,  
wine and flesh staining  
a tongue that would lament  
no more. And my small troubles –  
no unclean beds, no beloveds  
gathering lupine and myrtle  
and threading them through  
auburn hair – dark lady – no –  
still stalking like second players  
creeping a dread line onto every  
damn ship. Easier outs than death,  
but death the answer rising  
like smoke on the wood porch  
above the winter bank –  
the stopping of all madness  
and difficult men asking  
impossible questions.

## Caught The Light

This has been a terrible time,  
and there will be worse,  
but this winter, I finally saw  
how the low sparrows  
catch sunset under them.  
At first, I thought  
it was the halo of flawed  
specks that sometimes float  
into my vision that I pretend  
each time to be a one-time  
visitation, but I saw it again  
and again, as the sparrows swung  
in laps around the court yard,  
always at the height of the sixth  
floor, so that they almost  
broke into untouched sky.  
It's not a metaphor, just  
the orange and the rose  
on their vulnerable fletched bows  
of brown and their thin daubs  
of trunks. They moved like sprinters  
at the end of practice.  
They moved like we may have,  
hitting the curve of the 400 meter  
and not slowing down,  
and Coach White, sweet,  
soft spoken, dead now,  
hoarsely cheering,  
orange flecks on bleached  
t-shirts and iridescent  
skin of every shade.  
We might have touched  
the light this way, hurtling  
in a beat of limbs like a courtyard  
full of sparrows turning past  
my window as one, as one,  
and never known.

## Reasons To Persevere

I don't know what the end of March will bring,  
or even if the next month will be better.  
Last time we Skyped with K, she ended  
on the down swing of her humor, best  
yet daunted Mercutio, who will not ease  
into getting by – either the rush of seducing  
shy men into friendship or making intricate  
Matisse cut outs with light blades or walking  
till the blues beats back against the Albany  
snow drifts, or faltering, betrayed by a turn  
of the cloud bank, incandescent with despair,  
letting cold eek into quilt-stitched boots.  
K said to me then, “keep pushing.” She said,  
“I know I have to keep going,” and signed off.  
It's for whatever reason felt as cruel,  
this spring not spring, snow on the stagger  
bush like the pink fluting of pollen,  
each of us quartered indifferently on couches  
facing opposite directions, which Mecca,  
which Paris, and which Lake Champlain,  
the blue of upstate, all of us restless  
with unhappiness like damp at the toe,  
and no shock of warmth inside.

## **Distance**

When I go to look for my monster,  
she has laid her long hair

down in the corner of the room,  
jeans too low because too tight,

shirt rising and hitching. At first,  
she will not look at me or at her glass

or at her hands, trembling  
like an injured bird in the palm

of the curb. She is forever  
leaning on the wall, asking

that she not be asked to stand.  
She holds her body

like a thwarted getting out  
in a dark morning, her bag

still in the trunk. She is praying  
for a wrist to lie on hers.

She carves wrong turns like veins  
into whatever surface fits,

and we watch each other  
as if that were a distance.

88

## Solitary Desk

After John Koethe's *Falling Water*

Tonight, I'll come home to a broken latch,  
two sets of locks, dirt etching the inner door.  
Tonight, I'll come home after being gone  
for hours, visiting my parents' house,  
saying hello, sorting old clothes, walking the dog,  
who years ago I used to say was mine,  
and then tapping lightly at a few ideas  
at a strange desk that has the same plastic skein  
of bark that peeled off in strips from my office desk.  
My roommate likes to work at the kitchen table.  
She likes the window there, I think, even at night.  
She'll sit there for hours. I've gone upstairs  
to work in my bedroom, then come down again,  
her head in the same cradle against her forearm,  
her short dark hair cowlicked in a rill.  
She has a kind of Shepard boy loveliness, the face open,  
the eyes a Turner shade of afternoon.  
I like her even keel, her wit, her Yankee style.  
I like her. I worry she spends too much time alone.  
Though for someone who spends many hours  
a week juggling the expectations of my friendships,  
I feel in the end I'm mostly alone,  
with all the selfishness that life affords.  
I move from my peeling, solitary desk  
to my solitary lunch to my solitary bread,  
mayonnaise soft, and with strange vegetables  
and smoked meat, and then the afternoon  
goes on as I sort through my own hypocrisies  
and paranoias and don't think of anyone else  
that much at all. Solitary. Solitary.  
To spend so much time alone, spend so much  
time at all. I'm 26. How do I spend my time?  
How much of it in reckless wastefulness?  
How many years have I lived at desks,  
frequently facing a terrifying blank?  
I think of how a life is built from time.

I think of the kind of life my parents built  
around the security of my father's skills,  
children of academics, academics themselves,  
who did not, could not, choose academic careers.  
Their house is lovely, filled with Chinese scrolls  
and antiques my grandmother left my mother.

My mother was an orphan at 35.  
These days, that age seems impossibly young.  
My parents' dog hunts frogs, stalks on the flat rocks  
that loosely line the pond covered in bright green  
feathered plants and irises, lotus in summer.  
He always enjoys the hunt more if we watch.  
He's not a skillful hunter, but it doesn't take much skill  
to persist and persist if you're a dog.  
My sister dug the pond in the backyard  
the semester that she took off from school.  
I remember not wanting to help her dig,  
and the weekend my father drove up to take her home.  
She was so fragile, in this house they built.  
She is so fragile and still somehow sturdy,  
my brilliant sister, built of a life I cannot understand.  
She wants to go and live at home again.  
Who are any of us to each other?  
I want to lay down these thoughts for some deep feeling.  
I want to feel more than just my unreal anxiety  
that I have lived in for a year, for years,  
the bottom dropping out, the pressures mostly  
unreal, become my mother, father,  
mostly past their anxiousness, in their prime now,  
I think, living well, the long weekends,  
the bike rides, the democratic book club.  
I don't know. I want the life they have  
I think more than I think I should.

I see it built around so many silences,  
but they seem happy. Happy with Sunday  
night TV and researching trips to Istanbul.  
I wonder if we make them happy.  
I think they wish we were less fragile, less longing  
for ambitions they were forced to leave behind.  
They made friends with neighbors, friends with  
yoga students. My father teaches yoga on the side.  
He gave up drinking alone, then altogether.  
Writing this down, it seems unlike my life.  
All feeling being what it is, what it is not.  
I don't know them at all, except their shyness,  
their humor, my mother's odd aesthetic,  
my father's analytic heart, my mother's poetry  
she never shows to anyone. I stumbled on it once.  
I found it moving. You have talent she says  
but what of talent. Why do we build our lives around ideas?  
My sister is more fragile, and she has a better heart.

She loves and loves, loves strangely,  
drives for hours to say goodbye to a distant friend  
who moves to Spain with her new husband.  
She wants that life and to have someone to build  
a life around. How do we build our lives around  
each other? My grandfather died in January.  
My father's going to his service Saturday.  
My aunt will stay in the family house, the house  
he bought when my grandfather retired.  
My grandmother loved poetry. She died so young.  
So young, my grandfather living 20 years beyond,  
drinking too much. Falling down stairs.  
The ruins of a brilliant mind. Is this a family house  
if this is the house you spend so much time alone?  
My grandfather's house is full of grandmother's things.  
I never knew her but I remember her  
teaching us to make bread and knead and knead  
and how she walked me to the end of the dock.  
I remember, I think, dancing there with her.  
My father doesn't speak much of his loss.  
I wonder sometimes how much loss he feels.  
The average children of distant, brilliant minds.  
Average seems wrong. They both love ideas  
and reading and each other,  
and taught us of the world with books, stories,  
songs of the west. They have been great to us,  
if frustrated by our return to similar failures.  
They taught me much about a worthy life,  
even as I am spooked by its empty space.  
How much of my life did I build from them,  
though also much of it against their wishes?

My sister and I are spun out from each other.  
My sister rarely calls, and when she does,  
she rambles on about things that seem so distant  
to her, to me, to where we might intersect.  
My life is cluttered with people I know, I know,  
and vaguely care about, but so it goes.  
I sometimes wish I could step back  
from this life, these friendships and carry with me  
only the ones that seem to be alive.  
I carry so many dead things on my back.  
Why does it seem that caring is trying to care?  
How do you care for people you hardly see?  
How do you give them more time of yourself?  
Last night, this morning, I woke up, flung back covers

in the eerie orange gray of night in a city,  
covering the books that take up half my bed,  
and lived out both the dream and the end of the dream  
where I shouted at a poet, a somewhat friend,  
“I’m not concerned by permanence.  
I’m concerned about wasting time.”  
It seems so obvious, and yet it’s true.  
Last week, I signed up for another year  
at this job I said I’d leave after two.  
I was a kid, what did I know, but I told  
my coworker I would leave and live in a family  
cabin in backwoods Maine. I’ll be his supervisor soon.  
Then he leaves in July. It will be five years next May.  
With desperate budget cuts, there will be no time,  
and time is what I desperately want more of.  
And yet I could not bring myself to leave.  
I told myself I was doing the right thing,  
But I woke up feeling desperate and sunk  
like I’d lived through a thousand mornings of these.  
How many risks did I decide not to take?  
The hollowness creeps into everything.

Didn’t Flaubert say we should live like bourgeois?  
Stevens worked for Hartford most of his life.  
He wrote in his uncollected prose in an article on  
Surety and Fidelity Claims, “you see surprisingly few people.”  
“After twenty five years or more of that sort of thing,  
he finds it difficult to distinguish himself from the papers  
he handles and comes almost to believe that he  
and the papers constitute a single creature,  
consisting principally of hands and eyes.”  
None of us Stevens, but who says what a writer’s life  
must be if we are willing to put in the time?  
I suppose the tiredness eats at everything.  
I’ve seen it eat at my parents’ lives.  
I can build a temple to a life and live outside the door  
and wake at rain and tell others this too is a worthy life  
and inside there is only a windowless expanse  
but I refuse to look. How could I know?  
Sometimes, I feel home is simply where I sleep.  
All other hours are spent at desks  
and the years lived out traveling between them.  
It took me years to not call their house my home –  
the pond, the backyard, the feel of wood floors.  
The suburbs never seemed a trap to me.  
I’d go explore the nearby creek and watch the stream

and feel an open light slick through  
like the water's surface tracing the rocks' curves  
in sweet light ghosts of lines.  
Glory to be God for – well – these things.  
Dappled. The vastness there.  
Sometimes I'd sit so long right at the edge  
I'd slip off the bank as it crumbled beneath me,  
the shock and pleasure of slipping  
into water, flight of earth, the water gold and rock.  
My family loved these woods, and loves them still.  
Poetry, the woods, family, friends, ideas of love –  
are these the bodies of my truest faith?  
And if so, why do I keep such few sabbaths there?  
Do not fix the body of your God. He must be everywhere.  
Naming a vastness – it feels already gone.  
I spend hours and hours at my office job  
and then several hours reading and writing.  
I know I'm not alone in this kind of life.  
So many of us spend our lives online  
in the strange liminalities with which we touch.  
Yet so many of my friends seem flustered  
and afraid by how few people that they see,  
how they love each other, how full  
their lives are of drinks and friends,  
and yet how they find themselves sometimes  
alone when they do not wish to be.  
How can a life well lived be one alone?  
How much of a human life is solitary?  
My parents have spent much of their lives alone.  
They've lived their lives together, more than half,  
and yet how many hours did my mother spend  
in the emptiness of the shadows in that home?

There was a room I built from empty moments,  
but I turned down the sheets on the last bed  
and burrowed till my toes touched books,  
and all the strange uncommon tools became  
a world where I would go again  
and bury all my lost hopes in the wood  
against a tree that had echoes of birch  
or maple. All the names have left me.  
I don't know how to build a life from this.  
I don't know how to live without the limits  
of my addiction from bouncing hour to hour  
and trying to figure out ways to spend my time,  
ways that don't involve diving into anything.

Everything is covered in the plastic bark  
of desks and dinners and hours I push at  
with useless fingers burned by the moment.  
When did the practicalities taste of contempt?  
I mean that every day I don't know how  
I felt that this was enough. I write of desks  
and tiredness and then go out and live it.  
I miss a place where I could hold to the hope  
of time instead of making it through hours  
like our hands were made of plastic, to live forever.  
How does a busy person live at home?  
Rise early, rise early, mix water and bran,  
and eat over an updated New York Times,  
watch the women walk the dogs, the tiny  
mutt with the strange walk, the heavy ones  
shagging their way up the slanted walk.  
Wait for the news to update itself again.

I sometimes watch the people on the train.  
Those who are sleeping look the happiest,  
although at night there are the college kids,  
the happy drunks talking to strangers  
in the place of rest they call a train.  
I imagine a tavern where the drunks slip into  
the yard and sleep under trees and wake  
wet and cold and with a friend lying close along.  
Who knows, the stars are full of an ache  
that I can't hold off or express.  
Where do I sleep? Half my bed is full of books,  
and the books speak no sensual, thin-lined hopes.  
They're just inert, although sometimes I've woken  
with the page pressed against my right cheekbone.  
I wonder if my father views his life like this.  
I know he finds fulfillment in his work, being skilled,  
building systems of ideas on better ideas.  
I think he's happy with the life he's built.  
I don't know if that means he has no regrets.  
Look, there's much to be said for serving public good,  
with time to write in the mornings and afternoons.  
I just had hoped, I don't know what I hoped.  
But that's my day – the hours of the week  
seem stacked like paper, boxes filled with work  
that sometimes seems acceptable to me.  
It would be fine if I were not so tired.  
Sometimes I imagine working in a park.  
Maybe the woods would speak to me of summer

and I could share with others the love of that space,  
the way light traces out the contour of rock  
above rock so that we see a clarity moving above.

On my way to work, I see young women and young men  
in khakis, blue shirts, brown belts and dockers.  
It's not a suit as much as it's a shabby envelope  
we shuffle on to meet the standard needs.  
I hate the sensual pall of this downtown,  
where the sidewalks in the city smell of nothing.  
My office though is across from a garden,  
with its bronze fountains and strange metal archetypes  
and, in the spring, boughs of forsythia.  
I am lucky then to be so close,  
Lucky to work so close to a lovely place.  
We go to jazz concerts there starting in May.  
We drink sangria and talk of summer plans  
as if we lived our whole lives in the light.  
Don't think I am not grateful.  
I'm grateful for my roommate's loveliness  
and for her kindness and for her soft hand towels.  
I'm grateful for the garden close to me.  
I'm grateful for the dogwood across the street.  
It's just that I keep living a life I can't live in.

How do I live in a space of hopefulness?  
Do our obsessions leave such little room  
for what should be deeply felt and falls from us?  
How does one live so scarcely in a space?  
How does one say goodnight and go upstairs  
and find the bed and fall into a daze  
and think the day well spent if we spent so little time  
within the vastness where we have to live alone?  
I think that lives must be built with care  
for each other's tables by the window  
and the moments we pause and say hello  
and try to dwell in each moment with each other,  
knowing the bank slides out under our gaze.  
We must try again at vastness, know the luck  
of finding ourselves a place of rock and water,  
and figuring out the ways of time as we can.  
I hope I can. I hope we can hold in that half light  
that we can trap in whatever truths we find,  
something both solitary and full of each other's hopes,  
something with the vastness of an evening  
where we have a few more hours to speak of light.

88

## Comfort We're After

So that in the early afternoon  
the dog sits close by  
when we have only lately  
come to the backyard,  
and the wood pecker,  
red-topped, tint of pink  
on its shining stomach,  
heads to the high branches  
at the clank of the lawn chair  
splaying its gray metal bars  
in the current bank of sun.

The dog brings his dark head  
to my hand and presses for  
the right angle to use the scrape  
of nails and bones that shift  
as one might lull a fish in the creek,  
but then my upper arm gets tired  
from reaching sideways, and he is hot,  
and affection moves into the shade,  
not loving less (or only slightly less),  
just practicalities.

The birds ease back to the squat  
tank of a feeder on a finished square  
of trunk. We all grow easier  
with each other,  
not given to fear after first  
startling, or to stay close after  
the necessary ritual, which will resume  
when one of us goes back inside  
or out, and sometimes,  
I feel slightly ritualized.

Then, for no particular reason,  
he gets up and moves his back  
up to my hand. Perhaps the shade  
is right now or he, like I, senses  
the need to say hello,  
to put down the dark bound book,  
to give out our tenderness,  
or perhaps his back itches him again,  
as we need each other  
less and more and less.

## **Music Scene**

*For Kathleen*

You would sit at your desk, half turned away,  
while behind you I could see the city sky  
in riotous tropics of pink and gold,  
a sunset in Houston that made the weight  
of dust and air seem somehow, for the moment,  
justified. Grackles would click and whistle in the ash.  
Backlit by the haze and courtyard lights,  
you'd riff on what you'd read of Joan Baez,  
Yoko's postcards, Sara's canary yellow dress,  
or the men who went backstage to visit Joplin  
and who'd go home with her more lovely friends.

You would never play your songs for anyone  
who wouldn't come and sit and ask you to.  
But some of us would go and wait you out,  
like birders in Brazos Park at dawn,  
enjoying the hushed rising of the light,  
but hoping for some sort of glimpse or call.  
Sometimes you'd go chapters of Dylan's "Chronicles"  
before you'd reach across for your guitar,  
breathy, melancholy, of the city,  
of its dust, your hair dark across the upper frets.  
By then, the sky had turned some approximate of night,  
a kind of orange-gray, even at nine.

## Christmas Eve

The touch of childhood not really touching me as I reach  
on the mantelpiece for the traditional accoutrement –  
bent and ragged antlers, white felted crown, the Santa hat  
shared between my father and the dog, the same hat

our old dog had tried to kill in the back yard the year  
before he died, like some fuzzy cartel assassination,  
and in my mind, I'm already mostly back at work  
as I chant O Holy Night, O Holy, mostly for my parents,

and for the remnants of their last and their best belief,  
that the death of their parents could, in this one,  
this best loved time between them, briefly stop,  
that there was something hushed and red and touched

in gold wide drops, as we each sing, really try to sing,  
o always off-key chorus, the Holly and the Ivy,  
deer running, the rising of, the red as, the ritual  
of waiting, holding for the one thing, and for the merry,

and my sister knowing all the Latin and Coventry  
when we were young; we sing o holy, o silent, o still,  
o sweet, even in our missed strikes for tune.

## Water-Under

Koi the most muscular,  
koi the thick, square body  
rising and close to the push  
of its, push of its orange  
gold flickering brotherhood.  
Above the light lace wilt  
of parrot feather, the heron sits,  
and the koi cannot stop  
it watching, only flash  
depth-hidden, depth  
their priest hole, their bell  
tower, their sacristy,  
like the square of branches  
that I used to find a small  
enough place to be,  
my warren, my covert,  
folded under a holly  
and a tree whose bark  
powdered orange-brown  
in tiny points.  
It was the safest place.  
It was – I can't even know  
now really where it was –  
it was water-under, flush  
to the sky, half a white  
cedar branch away  
from the kitchen door,  
and therefore hidden by belief,  
which is not good enough  
for survival, I know,  
but not much is in any place,  
pads of luciana lilies flat  
as rain, bottom only muck  
and wasted flies, and golden  
bruisers rising, lifting  
their tapping jaws  
to the surface, then darting  
sideways as fast as bone  
as spear, we with our hiding  
and unhiding, no safety,  
pretending at stakes  
and knowing them without  
ever knowing what a heron is.

## Linus

How in the failing light we meet our end  
We come adrift of many special drifts of desks of bodies  
I found a crumpled yellow slice of paper  
stuck to the end of a drawer  
where the drawer catches the inner wall  
and then it plummets when you pull it out

but no one will, the drawer is locked  
Linus, I couldn't hold your head up in my hands  
they were too full of papers  
I had to carry from the backs of drawers  
my friend, my brother bodied,  
and where was the unanswerable woman  
they asked you to write a song for  
you didn't know her  
they told you she had a small mole on her right palm  
it could have been an answer  
for all you knew

virtuous woman – woman bathed in answers  
woman bathed in lintseed  
tell me, did you carry her body with your body  
did you know her in that way  
or maybe it was the trick of your body  
as it moved against a desk  
did you carry yourself to her unanswered

brother, I have held your body like a lantern  
like a letter  
I stuck to the back of a drawer, I shoved it hard  
it is a light yellow glint  
and tears in half  
Linus of the sea, the wooden floating bodies  
I will tell of your beauty,  
brother, like the fretting of a desk  
king of a world under your body

Linus, I am terrified  
I could lose it all I will lose it  
all I will lose it all, Linus,  
Linus, are you listening

I wish there was a better word for you

I have given you my kindness  
and then I will give no more of it  
It is finite  
It is barely breathing  
I think I smothered every better letter  
Linus, I implore you  
my brain is stuck in this gap space

and the key has been rotted out with elegance  
I wish the books didn't have so many drawings  
of better more sophisticated hats  
of better more sophisticated corners  
to bury all my better letters  
buried because I couldn't look at it  
the desk I kept

Linus, let me write to you

## **Gone The Great Dark**

Be a nice little monster, a good little monster,

a nice little good little thing.

Drive Volvos. Wear compact tampons.

Carry enough for your friends.

Keep to old kingdoms.

Keep the bleeding to yourself.

You are always hungry.

Even the last barrow is lit

by construction of a new Trader Joe's.

A sensitive monster.

clean little monster.

Repair the hole in your cape.

Bury your each beloved

with ceremony.

Haunt birches to the north.

Kitten boots are in, black

as the barrow.

Groundling,

believe in your happiness,

and blend your foundation.

Be of good cheer.

An amiable monster.

It was your kingdom once.  
They looked for you on the roofs.  
Sleep well.  
Sleep well.  
Keep the blood to yourself.  
A good monster.  
good little monster.  
Sleep with one sex at a time.  
Haunt lightly. Wear it well.  
Always the hunger.  
The bleeding stops after a time.  
Bend only saplings. Accessorize.  
Good little monster.  
A well-tempered monster.  
Keep your blonde  
as blonde as sable.  
Don't mourn too loudly.  
Don't go to the roof.

## **Fukuoka**

On the man-made beach  
built from sand entirely  
flown in from Hawaii,  
where we could sit and look  
across the bay to another  
island, dredged from the earth,  
plain as Nebraska  
in this country of mountains  
like stage backdrops against  
the city, gray and blue,  
ghostly as wading birds, vivid  
as wading birds in rows along  
the marshes, white picket lines  
and one rising like a new king  
to red pine, in that inlet  
where I saw a small ray  
ghosting beneath a concrete  
bridge, the bridge gray as plaque,  
but the ray, sinister, grayish black,  
and the morning in its turn,  
that inlet next to the amusement park,  
red, dulled structures mountain-close  
in old-playground neglect, seemingly  
empty, but sometimes there were  
self-conscious screams, a woman's  
with a hint of laughter in it, on that beach,  
a man would brush his light-sand dog  
every morning, a tiny shiba inu,  
her body poised on the rocks,  
perfectly happy. We might all meditate  
on this image as we would  
on the last master of the temple,  
orange and red-shining, new wood  
to keep impurity at bay, to begin  
again, although we can't, no sanctity  
of salt and sun, imported sand,  
calling a spade a spade,  
jellyfish stamped with patterns  
like the crests of lords  
but dying just the same.  
On that beach, staring at an empty  
Starbucks cup, brackets of lit  
windows a quarter mile across  
the bay, I decided not to walk

into my end, not yet,  
threw out the cup, and drank there  
many nights after, and before,  
pissing crouched down  
against a gully tracing black  
and smooth, listening for fireworks.

## **Stalag**

*Colditz, 1942*

As I went into the tunnel, I could taste the heat  
of all our bodies, salty as silt,  
salty with fear, and the ceiling  
shook above me.

My hands trembled. I wanted  
to reach for your hand,  
but that is not a man's friendship.

The tiny yellow lights swayed  
in shallow loops beside us.  
In a way, with the light,  
it was more eerie.

The walls shuddered,  
and sand slipped into my shoes.  
You were in front. I could see  
you running your hands along  
the boards of the walls,  
roughened and splintering,  
but maybe that reminded you  
of trunk, the wood that you knew  
like a chisel and a cross-cut saw, catty-man,  
man of the woods north of Terrebonne.

Sweat ran down my back and into my belt.  
I knew your back in front of me  
as I had known its rock-heat squareness  
beside me the nights we spoke  
in the colder dark. Those nights, all of those  
nights, with flood-light echoes  
sifting into the bunks, I could always  
only see part of your face.

In the nights we didn't have to dig,  
you told me of the maples  
and the strange keen of the sled,  
the dogs' stink, but their cleanness  
of line, you said, and spirit.  
Sometimes you would ruffle my head  
like a dog's.

The nights we dug, we dug in silence  
because you hated being underground.  
My hands broke open  
from the weight of wood and dirt.  
We dug so hard I forgot where we were,  
and I would almost break my neck,  
I straightened so fast at the sound

of men coming to relieve us.  
“Doucement, idiot,” you’d say,  
with your gargle of Quebecois,  
“doucement,” and you would shake me  
till my bones grated,  
and then you’d shove me forward.  
You told me how, the last time,  
you think your partner got out.  
You thought he made it because  
you never saw his body on the wall.  
You had gotten trapped – your boot stuck  
like a dog wrapped in loose leads.  
You told him to go on without you,  
but he was already gone.  
They would shoot you this time,  
you’d say, like the leads were on again.  
The night we tried to escape, the night  
we all were in it, twenty men snaking  
their way along and breathing like  
each breath could bring a tunnel down,  
perhaps it could,  
the lights gave out, but I think  
the dark was better.  
We pressed forward still,  
the scrape of leather and knees  
and trying to hold the walls up  
with the force of our desire to just  
meet the end of it, but not this end.  
Not this end, but I could taste it.  
I think someone took my hand.

88

## Wave to Earth

This might not work,  
because many things do not –  
fumbling at the end of a wrist  
of someone sleeker, tan lines  
on both your feet, loose hair,  
the salt of it flinging into your mouth,  
salt and the wet sand hard,  
sand pipers startled by your first kicking  
moan, and then just the speaking  
of green-gray waves to earth, waves  
to earth, the sun a silence upon  
what always gave you over until  
you forgot how to lie back,  
remembered how she could not  
remember your last name;  
it could have been a new bitterness.  
You thought the ocean,  
when you were younger, had the right,  
the sacred right, to take you, and so  
you'd bargain, skin curling and taken,  
but only so far as you remembered  
the shore. It might not work,  
because even in your hands  
you pose a difficulty, because  
she is impatient though she is kind,  
because your shot of rum  
ran down your shirt and you think,  
even the sublime needs some  
fucking help, needs some for a better  
day that will not come  
to you, just this one, her hand  
forgetting your first name,  
and your lips closed for the wave.

## **Another Way Out**

I think you must have fixed the Delorean,  
found your leather jacket, and taken off.  
There was no time for notes or late-night calls,  
no way to make dumb history understand.

Or maybe Tallblondia has need of you,  
and you must take the throne and destiny.  
You'll watch Roman Holiday and think of me,  
the lost beloved on the common streets.

I wanted this to work out, but I see  
how silence comes to balance everything.  
I couldn't make you call, and I can't blame you  
for undoing us the way you found you could.

So I won't think of you attacked by squirrels  
or fleeing the KGB, your cover blown,  
crouched in a safe house deep in the Yukon,  
watching the leaves rot and the snow come in.

## **Prolonging Of It**

The woman at the bar,  
nut brown, slightly laminated hair,  
short, steady, slightly stocky  
body, slowly pulls herself  
from an arched back into the man  
in front of her. She leans over  
and speaks into the bare curve  
of his ear without changing  
her volume in the slightest.  
You forget how people can pull  
that way, casual and coiled,  
bright-toned, her standing  
between his legs, a seduction  
inevitable and not, his legs  
as he perches on the barstool  
moving in half-conscious loops  
around hers. It's beautifully  
on the table. His hands  
lightly finger the stitching  
of two shallow vs sewn  
on her back-jean pockets,  
and her tiny, rough hands  
are sure as she leans over  
once again and sniffs his neck.  
You forget seeing how people  
get what the body wants,  
or that you could want it (lord,  
now she's sucking the air  
back through her teeth).  
Fuck all the getting,  
and the getting; they keep  
talking of going upstairs,  
but no one's leaving,  
and why should they, poised  
as they are on the prolonging  
of it, and going only getting  
them, getting you, getting any  
single one of us, the stairs,  
and the cold walk home.

## Valentine

I am fighting my desire  
to eavesdrop on your cards,  
which is really not the same  
as reading them, shooting  
the shit as they are, rowdy,  
like best friends sitting  
on a couch in an intolerably  
loud bar, yelling, is he coming  
back? or I think she meant well,  
which is good as fuck you  
to the absent, and isn't

a valentine a gaudy shot  
across the pleather, especially  
one as sweetly crafted  
as an inside joke of two  
hand-sketched whiskies,  
one saying, "I think you're neat,"  
and all I would have to do  
to catch the rest is to lean  
over a little to my left  
as I wait for another friend  
who has gone for another  
rum-diet, and I pretend towards  
no oblivion being sought.

Myrth told me once I wanted  
to possess, and although  
I never knew it to myself,  
I knew then when she said it  
she was right, even those  
who I love without any nerve  
struck vibrato of desire,  
even my kindest quiet. I want  
to possess you mine  
and mine, for you to have  
thick swaths of valentines,  
but them all to be mine

and ours, like letting  
a lover go, and wanting  
them then to be unhappy,  
an impulse impossible,  
unkind, but there like mildew

in the cabinet, there like  
abscess, there like wanting,  
and the valentines shouting  
fascinating things I cannot,  
will not, and want to  
listen to.

## Because She Couldn't See Herself Marrying Him

I remember her Simon –  
blonde as anything.

I think a famous writer  
said she ended a relationship  
because of the way  
he ate a hard-boiled egg.

If this is true, I suppose  
his lack of staying power,  
Simon's I mean,  
more or less came  
down to the same thing –

lips moving weirdly  
over and around  
a vulnerable rondure,  
silky and decadent,  
but bland –

and his laughter in the garden  
in June, underneath forsythia  
yellow as sun on metal  
fretwork, sangria in his hand,  
her small basket of food  
as offerings between them,

and his stated desire to be loved  
only as long as she would  
want him and no longer

come to me now  
as glimpses of the end.

I'll delete the pictures  
of them in that garden,  
and New Year's Eve,  
both of them drunk,

her smile broad against  
the shine of his blue shirt,  
his paper crown sweetly  
correct.

I liked him sometimes,  
but he is gone to me  
as any half-met friend

who moves to Carbondale  
and stops answering the notes  
I might not have written.

Inappropriate to mourn the loss  
of him, because it implies desire

and really I have none, or not  
for him, his antlers at Christmas,  
and his drunken adjusting  
of the orange of our TV,

more that I've never  
said goodbye,  
no, not even that,

just the softness of his  
blondeness in the garden  
and her smile in his lap,  
the music breathy,  
fireflung with sunset,

and all undoing  
hidden like a challenge,  
or an egg in the basket  
between them.

## Reaching The Sea

When I remember my head between your legs,  
I remember that you tasted like tequila  
and salt because everything tasted like tequila  
and the rush of you was salt and moving, was  
the way of air through the marshes driving towards

the ocean, not there, and yet given promise on  
my tongue. What I remember was the joy of it,  
even as I faltered and you were closer, and closer,  
but we never reached the sea. I remember  
afterwards your saying, "I felt nothing,"

which I recall as something more than speaking  
to my thrilled, bewildered tongue, of what I could not  
give you with my body, and when you kissed him,  
today, today, as promise, and as rite, I saw  
that I cannot understand, but also the joy of him,

and him, and nothing distanced. I know I have no  
wholeness for you, no claim, no cause, no final vision  
of the sea, but I can't help wanting to taste you  
one more time, so I could remember what was there,  
and bring you, if not this, than something more  
than what I gave to you, whatever it was.

## All The Other Places

I can't keep living this life, but I keep  
on living it, living this here that is nowhere  
near a tiny bar in a tiny hotel  
in New Mexico, sarape rugs, faded neon,  
a March-abandoned courtyard with black  
metal flourishes, sea-twisted, unlit  
table lamps, a decent local band,  
an incompetent bassist, and incoherent  
vocals, but the bar beautiful  
in its not here, not here, not here  
which is this black pleather chair,  
stomach hanging over the board  
of the laptop, green felt hat absurdly  
ringed and dotted, but warm,  
and the snow blur of my roommate's  
idling lap top. I could be back there,  
wearing boots and sipping Shiner  
and walking back to a tiny studio,  
past a dirt patched with the silhouettes  
of horse stalls and tree stumps and sage  
smoking in cold, Wheeler Peak gone  
to nothing in a starless 1 am, a dream  
which doesn't even work because she  
would be there, not there, but her town,  
her solace, 10 miles away in a half-adobe,  
curled in a chicken-blood-stained purple  
jacket, her husband on the way  
back from the pee pee tee pee, I still  
hear her half-laugh it, and I cannot  
give up wanting to have her, and so,  
and so – I am here, somehow,  
and all the other places here with me.

## The Blanketing Noise

With the white noise on my headphones,  
I can now hear the snow outside,  
or at least what it sounds like in my visions  
of Russian exile or defeat,  
or as it whipped through birches  
near my grandmother as she  
went hunting in the depths of winter.

I'm trying to write three poems at the same time  
and lying not too badly in most of them  
as I sit with my large cup of coffee  
and the remnants of a carrot cupcake  
on my ring finger and coating my left gum.  
No pretense of life being hard today  
for me – not even the bags of laundry undone

and the lies and my lack of desire  
for anyone but the fictional,  
and one sleazy Canadian army officer,  
and the woman who took me up  
the backside of Alta in the Sierras,  
the ice splotched orange with life, no crampons,  
just mountain brush blooming late blushes

of summer one hell of an imminent slide below.  
She's getting married in Taos in a week.  
But even, even that I can't regret,  
happy with my coffee and the snow.  
Dumb, fucking contentment.

## **Next Country**

*For Myrth and Kevin*

When I imagine your love,  
I think of the marmot  
lumping its agile way  
up to the tent for your shoes  
and one of you half-in, half-out  
the tent flap with a bedroll, laughing  
and cursing or just cursing while  
the other grabs the dark thick boot  
back from the wilderness  
while sunset pours out its steepness  
around you and the mountains cast out  
into evening, and then you are ten miles  
or twenty miles into the back country  
and the prints of deer fall off  
as the sugar pine and the foxtail  
overtake the Jeffery pine, and the air sifts  
itself closer to nothing as you near  
the next peak, your hands steady  
on the rock as the valley is suddenly  
green before you on the other side  
of this certain height, and then later,  
back towards Lodgepole, lupine  
and yarrow slip into your breath  
while mariposa and iris dot  
like succulents for the deer  
who are not bothered by the sound  
of you moving swift and quiet  
towards another trail head.  
Perhaps this year Sangre de Cristo,  
the sage brush and the raven  
and the snow on these new mountains  
visible as you lay out glass and mud  
to be the body of your new home  
and pray for an earlier spring. Perhaps  
this year the next country. But always  
the silence and the mischievous, the sweet  
and sweet sorrow and the great honest  
moving with you, and the open country  
and what it could mean as you give  
each other the wilderness and the mystery  
and the ways you carry,  
only the two of you, between.

## **This Yes, This**

The taxi's already left or leaving  
or turning the radio off while  
you swipe at your phone, checking  
your coat for every crucial article,  
the taxi angling like a punt,  
all city lovely, brute yellow,  
brute chrome, and you  
are leaning your cornered face  
into the glass where everyone  
pretends there are no mirrors  
and no one catching a stray  
smudge of pink and graying brown  
as you flip by, as you lace the flower-  
scored lining of your coat, shirt  
buttoned two askew, bra itching,  
and you humming towards an imitation  
of last night's mixed thrum, the feeling  
falling fast, lost, the leather creaking  
happiness to the cold of the window,  
this yes, this yes, oh brief glorious,  
brief belt twisted, tired two-day  
pants, vague, smoke of sweat  
in your boots. It is unrepeatable.  
It is the moment the cab  
keeps turning up the hill.

§

## **Supporting Role**

*Palace Theatre 1933*

You can exit singing  
above the flats  
to the left of center stage,  
your hat held lightly  
in your right hand and away  
as if you were shaking  
its hand goodbye.  
In rehearsal, Cole coached you  
“lighter, lighter, lighter,”  
his hands a merry palsy  
on the upright’s wooden cover.  
He laughed, delighted,  
when you tried to hold  
some taut, leaning stance  
with the intensity of vibrato  
and defeat. “Darling boy,  
you’re the failed suitor,  
never to return, so this  
is yours, your moment, dear,  
but no one is supposed  
to notice it too much,”  
and when he stood  
to shake your hand,  
it looked to you  
in profile  
that he would have had  
a dancer’s perfect line.  
He had told you  
“some of us are supposed to go  
without regret – heroic, dear.  
so take it graciously,”  
back at the piano calling  
“lighter, lighter, lighter”:  
sweat seducing his collar down,  
his forehead vulnerable  
in blonde retreat.  
So now you exit –  
the chorus silent,  
the piano silent,  
his face a grave mask  
at the baby grand.  
You are measuring out  
a disappearance

in the closing dark,  
feeling your way  
by the cracks  
in the floor clotted  
from repair, and then,  
as you're halfway  
through the wings,  
Porter picks up  
the next opening bars.

## Pittsburgh

Driving over the bridge into Pittsburgh,  
the bridge yellow as autumn, can you imagine,

the Monogahela tasting its branches  
like a dog licking at burs on its hindquarters

below steel mills brick and mouth blown glass,  
only the edges of their windows broken

like ice as it crashes into the rust earth bank  
and back into itself, the mills looking

like they could stand forever. I was surprised  
to make it, to be honest, to not finish somewhere

gravel on the stopping point of a green-tinted cliff,  
my first road trip alone and to you, back

when I only feared the wrong right turn into  
the small cramped lane of disappointing you

with its locked grates, chained posts, and the dead  
husks of steel-heavy fuck ups. The yellow metal

arced in spokes against a ragged crawl as I drove,  
oak leaves rotten-cherry brown on the mountain

where we rode the trolley nowhere, sliding  
over a stadium and roads against the break

of shore like joints, and I watched you  
and did not think too much of what I knew.

It's really only upon looking back that  
the chattering of girders break into undone,

and it seems improbable that the one-way streets  
could have brought me anywhere close

to a brick step where we talked in a worn-denim-  
colored dusk and drank Lone Star

in your small stretch of block that would just miss  
survival, watched your close coal brow fade

into curl and your curl tilt against the ragged knocking  
of crumbling stoops, and it's all desolation now;

the windows leak thick, broken leads of ice,  
and I didn't know the end, then,

but I feared it, like the slow moving  
disappearance of a block.

## Merewif

When I swam up to you,  
your small floating round,  
half cockle, a flash of weight  
on the surface, the limbs of it  
crashing in a song  
reaching even to the bottom  
of my canyon, singing,  
*a troubled one approaches,*

all you could see perhaps  
if you were looking  
was a surfacing  
of dulst, shining  
and dark bodied.

I saw the crest of your hair,  
creature of strange floating  
coral, lashing, relashing  
the body of it back  
together with your hands.

I know what man is.

I know the white, strange  
yellow-white of the arcs  
of you when you  
fall off your corals  
and fall apart.

I know what land is.

I have seen the black heat  
of the bottom breathe  
into rocks that will  
not be overtaken,  
not for generations  
and generations  
of great singing ones,  
mouths tufted with teeth.

I keep losing the songs.

Sometimes, the men sing,  
but you are not singing.

I know what I am.

I have eaten men  
in my time.

It was convenient,  
and I was hungry,  
and the men  
were already dead.

I know drowning.  
It is what happens  
when your nature  
becomes wrong.

All of my family  
drowned high on  
the rocks, too old,  
too broken-scaled  
to reach the next wave,  
as if hunger had an end  
that could be reached.

I am stronger for now,  
but you are not.

Your hair catches light  
and shatters it.

I know what light is.  
I have watched  
for a long time.

I used to try to help men,  
as I would an old singer  
menaced by blank-eyed  
bone mouths.  
Fanciful of me, really.

The bottom of my canyon  
is silt and stopped ones,  
some to white, some  
to nothing.

I will know what your end  
tastes of.

I do not think  
that I will sing of it.

## **Belleoram, Newfoundland**

You ran the mail sleigh to the bank  
at Gander, runners bone shining,  
the black, floating, furred creatures  
thick at your heels, your felted  
cap stuck with cotton against the cold,  
having to piss but too afraid to ask  
to stop. You would not leave this country,  
you would die of it girl, a year, two years  
later, 13, old enough in those days  
to have to be woman and indoors,  
where you still froze, and the smoke  
ran into your eyes, and you never  
outran any answers; you just stopped.  
You just stopped. The runners  
caught your heels in the thick lung  
red burn of gone, runners whale bone,  
bent rib, amazing what man makes  
of his hungers, bones left for the scraping  
of labs and half-red wolves.  
You rode with your father on his two-day  
mail runs, this run, skirt thick with snow  
edging, warped wool, and watched  
the Lewis Hills flicker like your brother's  
black seeking as he watched your father  
raise his hand to you, to you both,  
but you still rode behind him, father,  
to the edge of the long bay because  
he was still fast to the cold of somewhere  
beyond the thickened walls, uncontained;  
perhaps you loved him, then,  
until you died.

## No Trace Of Falling

When you take to the woods,  
put on the snow shoes bracketed  
in ash; leave no trace  
of falling bare knee, bare crotch  
to the cold. Take no one  
with you – not even she  
who watched you lift the baffled  
vole from the porch step  
and carry it gently on the edge  
of your glove to the cold  
break in maple bare as red.  
When you leave us  
for a silence slightly sinned  
against by your grasping  
the long low branches  
for the shake song of their fall,  
do not watch for him,  
light brown lank lines and a cheek  
brushed with soft, forbidding bone  
buried. You are the unreturn.  
It is easier than knowing stone  
and the bed bruised by knees  
who will not sit folded, tasting  
the space before fully waking.  
You are now the last among  
the catbirds calling stranger,  
the voles sliding unknown  
in tiny berths of soil.  
You capture it so lovely –  
the sought gone going that wants  
only to never sink again. All hurt.  
All wanting to hold the best of her  
strange hips, her uncanny knowing  
of the right time to look out into  
the afternoon, to come back in.  
You abandon beautifully.  
You keep the points turned eastward.  
You believe you can keep going, keep  
his gloves working at dead thistles,  
keep her running up the hill  
beside the dog, matched rocking gaits.  
You are heartless. You are radiant.  
You hear only the breaks of sifting  
pack and then the shudder of your breath,

which you would have left, have kept him  
or her and never leaving and never being  
here and never gone. Listen for it, and when  
the last touch of what it catches the skin  
at your throat, let it itch there; keep east;  
keep the newly numbered coyotes  
brown at the edge of this day  
and watching, ever listening  
for a real silence, deep as January,  
caught in no body, no vision,  
only perhaps her shoulder curving  
into throat foot close, as she watched  
the branch beat against the frame  
of a silence distinct, a silence  
unimaginable. When you go  
into the woods, lift your vision  
above the smallest glimpse  
of the thin antlering of tree line,  
and bless her when you remember  
the time when you could bless,  
before the thick frozen shelves  
of morel and the start of hunger  
and the bear stalking the surprised  
buck. It is a peace, knowing both  
the blessing and the end of it.  
You do not look for him or her  
or her or him or anyone  
on the edge of the stands of pines.  
You know them there, and count  
the silences as shifts of earth.