

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: TO WAKING

Jennifer L. Coleman, Master of Fine Arts, 2004

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The major concept tying this collection together is a sense of waking, or an awareness about ordinary aspects of life. In the collection, this usually occurs in the realm of relationships, both familial and romantic. The first third of the poems are focused on family and the interchanging roles and subsequent acceptance, especially when death occurs. In the final third of the collection, the poems shift to romantic relationships. Bridging these two subjects are poems that focus on the gap between leaving “home” and creating a new one and the unexpected discontent with that seemingly lost time.

TO WAKING

by

Jennifer L. Coleman

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To Waking

Waking, it's usually easiest for me to see you

in morning, without glasses or brushed teeth,
but you look your best in fall with the sun
slanting around you, much different

than in the interrupted grog of sleep,
the broken low-pulsed nightmares you force

me to retell in the dark, wanting to know
what it's like in places you haven't been.
Sometimes, I can't let you leave me

abandoned even with darkness around.
I know you actually hate the night.

You try to leave, but before you're gone
something pulls and asks for one more favor.
At times I think you must be tired of men

grabbing your tiny shape moments before
you disappear. And at times I just wanted you

gone, to stop giving me things to put away
or clean up, anything to keep a light on
when I wanted it all shut. Still you stayed

in the open, on the corner of my bed
as though I could be happy melding sidewalks

with power lines and the flashbacks
of earlier drives and last night's dreams
where I kept going straight but made it back.

You stay to see how much you can cross into,
push to find how much I can keep separate;

you laugh when you catch me sleepwalking.
Waking, I have lost you in daylight,
misplaced you in comfortable chairs

or worse, in sickness and medicine,
the things that you hate more than night.

I have lost you not in sleep, but in the midst
of thought, on long stretches of pitted highway,
forgetting the cracks in the concrete,

or when I turned onto this small road.
I trust you're quiet in the back seat

until I slow down to see where I am,
not knowing how I arrived at this place.
You come then, just to show me I'm here. Sometimes,

it happens like this for hours, sometimes for years.

The Flight

I was not built for air
with silky layers of hollow bone.

With every slip I fall
silent as a tourist asked for change

on a steamy city day.
The elderly women surrounding me

smell of clay and lipstick,
their mouths open, asleep before we left

the ground. They've been through
this before. The rules of this height keep me

disinterested
in the beginnings and the endings,

making a river a vein
on the angry forehead of flesh-toned farmlands.

Size no longer matters.
I feel smaller, as though I'm seeing my parents

fight through a crack
in a doorway. I should be asleep,

but I too feel,
quietly, the disturbance. My voice is a threat

that asks back the length
of grass, strips the snow-capped valleys to fog

in early morning,
and makes a child pick sides.

Somewhere
in the back, a baby starts to cry.

My Father's Scent

He may never have noticed,
or maybe he didn't care,
that with droplets dangling
on the pointed tips of his eyelashes,
his body dull from showering
and toweling off the shine,
his scent sifted through the house
as powder clouded the bathroom
and clung to the steamed walls.
Younger, I imagined it
sliding down in pockets of paste,
but my father walked in soft
skin, dry and soap-scented;
a smell that seeped into the corner
of the couch where he sat
to watch the evening news.
When he began to sweat
from the efforts of standing,
or sitting beyond the reach
of the fan, wafting air through
rooms and mixing scents
from the kitchen with the bedrooms,
the bathroom and the garage,
my father used what my mother left
lying on the counter or hanging
from the stove handle, sometimes
damp with dishwater. I never
saw him searching for the towel,
his hand just touched it, hovered
above it, took it, used it,
held it. It brushed grease
from calluses, mopped juice
and mistakes, wiped sauce
from his fingers and dew
from his forehead, his body,
though, stayed shiny, the powder
absorbed. Cooking became the way
he told time, the balls
of sweat were a balance

between herbs and anxiety,
pinches and sleep. Even filling
a glass with ice made him pull
the cloth slowly across
his smooth head, his attempt
to stay clean. The towel,
softly soured from soaking
up spills, was safe from my hands
when he slung it over
his shoulder, but sometimes
he abandoned it to the table
as thoughtlessly as he first
picked it up. If I mistakenly
grabbed the crumpled folds,
my fingers found that scent
and kept it, even if I left
the towel, disgusted,
upon touch. The smell
lingered even after
the initial washing,
the way my father's breath
clung for moments
before he died; sweet, unclean,
nothing like soap and powder.

The Bracelet

She wants me to notice
the glint of sunlight,
the perfect curve
of metal, the way
they sound like little bells
ringing her wrists
as she raises them.
In the cold,
I shiver watching
her arms, left bare
because it's easier
to dress her that way,
with shirt sleeves
short and wide
at the mouth.
Days are made
into weeks, then
into seasons without
a clear view
of her skin,
without the shining
circles snaking
around her wrists.
I have asked for covers
in winter as though
the cold is what
made her ill,
and I am only as protective
as she was, demanding
lollipops at banks
and good Catholic
schools. She fingers
stones and knows
each scarab
has different cuts,
some deeper, some
longer and is proud.
The bracelets are uneven,

bent from the weight
her wrists once held
when she worked
to carry young children
on her hips. The clasps
have been replaced.
The rough movement
of her young arms rubbing
against children's coats,
dish towels and dog leashes
was too strong to keep
the circles clasped
around her skin.
Finally, she says
she won't need
to replace them,
the thinned cotton
of hospital sheets
and short sleeves
of the shirts she loves
are not enough
to pull the clasp,
the finished shape
of full uneven circles.

Cleaning

When I tug the hats out of the hat bag
hanging from the attic rafters
the hairs on the feathers break against

the hard cloth, stiff with dried mold. I pull
plastic bundles past my grandmother's
rocker, each time, the rhythmic sway

interrupted by my footsteps.
She stops to hear the weight of what
I carry, like the puzzles stacked deep

into the corners of her guest rooms.
They're ordered by picture; boat scenes
separated from kittens, flowers in a stack

next to corn fields, next to cars, the way
they were years ago when I'd find one
to finish every week. We watched game shows,

picked sides, filled gaps in the landscapes
stretching across the table. The same table
rusting below piles of chipped dishes

and the tiny glass mouse figurines I loved
to line up, never expecting to throw them out
or be too ashamed to give them away.

She sits with me humming for the first time
as I clean out her home. She tells me
the history of her spoon collection,

gathered on trips to Crazy Horse,
the Grand Canyon, some she found
in Mexico. She shines them now

and again, though I've never seen them
out of their glass case where they still
look tarnished. She asks me if I remember

dressing up in the hats, the oily feathers
and the fishnet veils, the one I wore
on my birthday. Finally, she stops

talking, and cries, and quietly knows.
I won't save her from losing what she has:
skeins of yarn, postcards from early trips,

neatly bagged strands of broken Christmas lights.

Balancing it Out

We had new carpet installed to balance out his disease. We quantified cancer and determined we needed ceramic tile. After our trip to the Gulf coast and the home of my mother's best friend, we bought blue wallpaper, its corresponding flower print and a border for adjacent rooms. We solved problems with light fixtures, kitchen hardware and crown molding, found answers in the measured expansion of the flower bed and its addition of a pond and ensuing aquatic life.

There was nothing beyond our revision. Even the air system managed an unfortunate upgrade to these vents that now rattle like a last breath—vents reminding me of my father waiting until I could move beyond the doorway to a place closer to his body, lower the bar next to the hospital bed the nurse placed in the dining room, look at the slant of mouth, slightly open, the stained white lips, listen to the cracked and gurgling breaths and tell him, okay, I'll be okay.

Getting There

This is my wilderness of rotting homes,
moldy siding that hides under the boughs
of trees, and tucked beneath them both, my mother
struggling to sweep clean the sidewalk and rake
blazing and brown leaves through the emerald grass.
She cleans, fights elements, invites her children
back to the failing buildings, the streets filled
with strollers, single mothers pushing laundry,
babies slung on each hip. Last night's beer cans
are smashed in backyards and plastic porch furniture
is melted from smoldering ash that fell from cigarettes
giving use to idle hands trying to move time.
Even the steady-paced cars slow-pulsing through town
seem bored by the small streets boxed in
by fields of wheat and corn. When I arrive,
in the slanted morning light of late fall
or the murky dusk of mid-summer, my mother
stands on her porch watching my approach
as though she predicted the exact hour I'd find
my way to her shining moss-free siding against
the unlined, tree-lined streets—the only place left
where it feels natural to drive slow,
where the speed limit always stays at twenty-five.

Hunting a Father

My mother drove me through Tennessee searching for her father's grave
and found it, tilted and simple in the dusty afternoon air,
after too few lefts caused her to turn around again and again
in untouched southern towns that she, finally, couldn't remember.
She knelt, and for the first time since his funeral, let her fingers trace his name
as I picked at the simmered earth surrounding the single plot
and scratched at the pattern the grass had pushed into my legs.
Her hands moved over the words as though she had never known them.
Slow and smooth, she paced her way across the stone. She was quiet.
I was hot and the dirt was clinging to the sweat on my palms
the way it would later cover them as I knelt, lingering
before the glossy square of granite, breathing in the smell
of new-tilled earth, and read my own father's name.

Killing the Heroine

Today, I'm going to watch her,
a hospital bed indentation,
grey against the stark of white sheets,
dull against the cold silver bars
that steam up when I wrap my wet fingers
around them, waiting for something
to happen—something more than this.
I'm waiting for her hair to grow back
and the green that has been creeping
across her skin, bursting from her eyes,
to recede and pool in her hazel iris,
again. I am waiting for her to stop
trying to cut her wrists just enough,
to stop calling me with blade in hand
and ask me to be there for all of it.
It wasn't until her refusal to eat,
to keep any, if she has eaten,
that she landed a spot here, in this,
a bright room with rounded edges
that makes her skin look transparent,
thin against her blood and tendons.
She called me to tell me she fell in love
here, with a boy who weighed ninety pounds,
and refused to speak to anyone, but her.
She called to tell me they threatened force,
and would I mind being here if it happens.
Today, I'm sitting on a vinyl stool
the nurse retrieved from behind a locked door
with quiet hinges, my legs falling asleep
as I wait for her unceremonial first meal
in months to meander through a tube.
Her eyes are on the window, my eyes
are on her arm, counting the purple lines,
the thickest skin on her body. Scars
wrapping up the limbs of the director,
the organizer of neighborhood games,
the girl who chose which friend she wanted
to play the victim that she would save
from created creatures and getting bored.

The rest of us, covered in playground dirt,
had watched from the swing set, the jungle gym,
waiting for our chance at a bit part.
She wanted the demons provoked,
imagined a leader she called Zeul,
convinced us to do the same. Believing
we could invoke them, we hung upside down,
the blue bars of her swing set wedged
in our kneepits, dusting our hair with dirt.
When we misplaced endless grade school summers
in the midst of making our film debut,
she was the clever detective
in a trench coat and her stepfather's shoes.
The murder scene was filmed at her house,
in her parent's bedroom, and she made us
all try to play death's part, each dying in turn,
though none of us could make death real.

Back Home

It used to be the smell
of too much
lime reminded me
of her. The way
we sprayed it

into her car seats
after we drove
around smoking
pot, or how it
would fall off

her as she walked
into class a little
later each day.
We were looking
for new roads, places

that broke
between corn and
cut a strip wide
enough. We didn't
talk, she banged

on the steering wheel,
her thumbs becoming
her conduit.
In the front seat
I found myself

above the heads
of friends, sitting
straight and watching
the windshield,
the sides blurred

with road salt kicked
up by passing trucks.
The music was
never loud, and
made me feel

I was part
of someone's
game, laughing at
reasoning a right
turn, then forgetting

it was ever made.
And the headlights
cut holes with
shadows and
underbrush crept closer

to the steel ribs
of the car, pushing
us through its
cleft as though
we were its children,

offering us the chance
to stay in homes
built square, black
eyes, broken jaws,
longing to leave

the folds of the
mountain where it never
seemed to matter
if we went to the right
or we went to the left.

On the Pier at Santa Rosa

As I sit on the edge
of the sun-scorched
wooden planks, below
the seagull specked sky,
the crests of waves move
in sweeping arcs, stretching
as they get below my feet,
as if in their thinning
they want to take
me in, bring me back
in their retreat. In semi-circles
the sea seems spilling
over. The glittering
water, forward pressing
on the empty shore
is earth expanding
in its edgeless reach,
and I am always still
when they slide past me,
pooling in ponds behind me,
surrounding me, daring
me to plunge, not to drown.
Become single, solid,
a rock, a duck that dives
for secrets that can't be caught,
be too loud and swim alone,
know only my noise, the muffled
sounds of the sea, take
cotton from my ears, beyond
the breaking waves heartbeating
the beaches to where
even the seagulls stay
silent, their glassy eyes
having lost the shores,
having lost their boundaries.

Finding Gauguin in Texas

The rooms are tall and windowless,
broken only by bowls of apples,
violins with cases, and things
decidedly finished. I don't know
if this needs such quiet. The distant
click of heels on concrete is the only sound
circling through, but outside the gate
there are six lanes slowed to a throb-
like hum by lights timed to change.
A grey man asks for money or food,
his pale palm open. People pass him
with heads down, trying to get somewhere
quicker, but everything is still inside these
rooms, with their centers unlit. Here, women
wear ruffled skirts, hold woven baskets
of harvested fruits in the purple sun,
with cold trees far off. Their hair is dark
and their bodies thickly outlined, layered
against each other. They look as though
they've finally been able to finish
something. And every time I see orange
used a new way, I forget the ordinary
things I wanted to do with that color,
knowing I can't make this—the earth
here flatter than in a painting.

Cultivating

Even with my attention, the select
sunlight in early morning, the quiet
and missing mid-day tucked away
on the awninged porch, the calculated
return in the early afternoon, water-filled,
but not to saturation, the hibiscus blooms

fall when night comes. The crumpled, damp patches
are fresh enough to fill to their almost-full
shape as I squeeze the bulbous centers
searching for a forming pod. My fingers,
dusted golden by pollen, move smoothly
in the dark as I pick the blossoms

from the frayed rug, the styles limp,
the fertile dust unused, touched only
as a dead thing. Above the floor, the edges
of leaves are yellowed from the stress of being
maintained, the spray of light liquid detergent
to smother bugs on shiny leaves, the mixture

of fertilizers, organic combinations
in small movable pots. In the late hours
I shift through details by adding more,
readjusting the amount my fingertips will dip
into the soil to judge if the next blooms will fall
on the dark floor, seedless, paper-thin and torn.

A Graveside Performance

Sweat slips from my hairline and collects
between my breasts and on my lower back,
making my shirt skin, my movements
a slow ripening as I sink down in this open
space, trees tall at the perimeter, roots
resurfacing from under the grass. The edge
of the stone's base cuts into my knees
and the pain draws my focus from sliding
the stick into the chiseled curves
of my grandmother's headstone, to the car
where my boyfriend sits in the shade
reading photocopies he carried home
from work. It's how he seems interested
and used. I know even with his head down,
he watches, his eyelashes blurring
his angle, curtaining the seduction
of my arms as they grip the weeds
around the granite square, the gentleness
of my fingers. Behind the windows
he believes I softly mourn the woman
I once hid from in the china closet,
afraid of her pointy fingers, her hard voice,
the venom of her eyes. As I narrow
my eyes in the sun, silent and by her,
he will think I'm distinctly feminine,
putting away the nights spent crying
from the top of the stairs while she stood
quiet and strait at the bottom, blaming
my child's mistake. Sitting in the heat,
with my hair down, my cleaning paced
and my look distant, I know how it seems
I only remember she loved my friends
and sang while she cooked; a child in love
with her own story of smooth relations
cradled in the crook of an arm. Pushed
through years of backseats and birthday cards,
I know how to curtsey, and when to cover
my eyes. And these years later, I should forget
the feel of lying in cold water hating

her tall figure and finding how to ignore
the chill of the fan on my skin as he throws
single answers, offering only the jagged circle
of his back and certain pieces of what lie below.

Positions

It takes great effort to stand
my spine up straight, create
the stiff line from shoulder
to shoulder, like a presketch
of an early drawing class
where the women stretch
shamelessly nude. In comfort
I curl forward, the way
I once held lightning bugs,
shielding them in the curve
of my body as I stood
on the back porch of midsummer,
coated in dusk and heat.
This was before I learned
that bugs weren't beautiful,
especially those with light
that breaks up the smooth-draped
dark in search of pleasure,
instinctive and thoughtless
in their nightly hunger hunts—
before I learned to spend
my evenings moving slowly
through dinner and streets
with men I could make love me
by the time they woke up.
I sleep on my side
curling around the lost
gathering of speckled lights,
the thick skin of my back
arcing into the pocket
of my pelvis, barring
my breasts from their hands, keeping
fingers from touching the folds
of my skin, containing
the glow of my own instinct,
secretly searching, hidden
and unforgivably thoughtless.

Love Poem

*It just amazes me that no one had thought of this before,
the relationship between the violins, the trees that they
were made from, the climate that existed when the tree
grew and how it affected the wood density to create a
superior tonal quality.*

-Dr. Henri Grirsino-Meyer, U of TN tree dating expert

I never managed a conversation.
Growing up, I never spoke.
In daylight, I stayed outside
walking through underbrush
or rows of wheat that wrapped
around me like the rings
on a cross section of tree trunk.
In the long winters and cooler summers
of being young I stretched
these rings and went deeper,
farther from the streets
and the steel of playgrounds,
not yet knowing that years
gave violins their width
of music. On quiet nights,
behind the clinched curtains
of my house, my breath smelled
of earth and decaying wood
while I learned the shape
of my body before I passed it on.
The first time I fell in love
I felt pressed to keep speaking.
I told him about willow trees
in the yard; the thick bases
and curled branches. The thin leaves
on the grass, like fingertips
to the hair of his nipples.
The sounds of moaning
in the wind, trunks close
to falling, deep in sway
like slow dancing alone
or fighting. He couldn't answer
with more than new subjects,
and we began our relationship

as a series of observations;
only single lines piled
together, never touching.
The precision followed me
through a pattern of men,
and I then found out
I didn't love speaking
in only statements anymore.
The next time I fell in love
was in a tiny room near Broadway,
deep in concrete and square.
My head was on his chest
and his voice was muffled
by his lungs, by his bones
and flesh, the body wrapped
around him, so I never had to listen.
And when I knew, I never
forced my breaths even.
It was not the claims I'd expected
from love. My hands
were never too clammy
to touch his skin. So I stayed.
And was silent. It was easier
to just be satisfied knowing,
than to get to the center
and figure out why.

Coming Back to You in NYC

I always forget what it's like here,
but still feel something close to wanting;
the quiet pull of flesh on fingertips,
every time I'm away, because things
can still go on. In the crossroads, the squares
where avenues and streets share space,
are the overlooked wind tunnels,
like the angry combination of the hot
and cold air converging on the weather map
I studied in my parent's dining room,
food cold on the table. Garbage is blowing,
swirling in the streets, grey and grotesque.
Within days it will seem the color of average
and early daylight where you and I drink
coffee in silence to forget the day before;
the man yelling *fuck* in the subway corner,
losing you in the record store as you searched
for something new, the line where you clenched
your teeth and stopped speaking. (The line grew
when you had to take the time to find me.)
Within seconds a freshly poured square
of cement can be covered in half-shaped
circles of grease, fallen food, newspapers
in their prerin transient state, waiting
to be plucked up or grabbed by a needy
finger. In pictures, the tall towers curtain
the ground, so the neighborhood gossips
can't see each of us in our own rooms,
arranging books, changing the tv, getting ready
to walk outside with scissor-like strides
even though it's not cold and the trash
was picked up this morning. It's easier
with buildings blocking the light, no one
needs to know about the cross winds,
the avenues and streets stay famous
for staging elaborate plays, and you and I
can pretend we believe the tourists

and leave and then come back for the beauty,
flashing images of thin-boned lives,
and not because we know that without this place
things will still go on and we need somewhere
to come back to.

How to Taste Napa

Each time he leaves
the tasting bar to come back
to where I stand, a thin-lipped
smile touches on his mouth
as though he's hiding
his excitement at tasting,
and the rush of new things.
He stays at the bartender's side
to hear the year of each wine
and the how the weather
affected growing. Each time
it takes longer. He rests
the rounded bulb
in the palm of his hand
as if he might move
with it, absorb the shock
each step could send up
the frail stem, afraid
his half glass of wine
will spill over and leave
a stain of uneven
apple-red. Before he sips,
a slight nod of head
almost seems an invitation
to share in the deep-colored
taste but he moves quickly
and leans into the swirl of thick
warm liquid, watches it stick
to the sculpted curves
of the glass. He buries
his nose in the scent
as though it were his mother's
perfume, his first love,
blessed with wide hips.
With the smell of oak,
it seems solid; heavy, opaque,
as though it could only
serpentine leisurely around
the rim of the glass,

a sticky film that lingers
on the edges. It feels
that way in my throat, rich
and spicy, hot against
my insides, a sleepy-paced
burning. But the bartender,
who knows the intimate
details, can pour it fast.
She tips her bottle
gently as though it were a silk-skinned
extension of her lean arm,
leaving behind a rich
center that thins smoothly
against the sides, wrapped
in the shine of a well-suited
glass shaped to his body.
Each time he circles back
he balances the wine
between savoring and speeding
through, the dark-colored taste
and the bright-hued spill,
making the decision to buy here
before going to the next vineyard
only miles down the road.

Agenda

I take a long look at my fingers,
soft and pink-palmed with the wrinkles
of an old woman's eyes, clean,
except my nails are distracting,
short and dirty, the edges bleeding
from working or worrying, I've lost which.
I hide them in my pockets
the way you hide your movies,
stacks of porn, behind the thick
wooden doors and want to believe
I can't see them. Even on business trips,
you've found ways to keep them
unseen, as though the hotel maid
will be searching for reasons to leave
your dirty towels in the corner, afraid
of what she might see in the garbage can.
Slipped behind a sleeve of plastic,
zipped in a case and placed in your bag,
buckled shut, you worry who will know
you didn't get to change your suit this morning,
like the way I touch only your back
this time. I keep my fingers hidden
behind shoulders and hair, rubbing
the smooth tips along biceps and chin.
For now, I want only for you to notice
the slope of my breasts, the tiny hairs
on my stomach, the crease along
my thigh, moments to take the next
woman who finds you kiss plainly.

History's Lover

Lying beneath him, feeling the flex
of his back, I wonder if this time
when it's over, I will feel like the woman
in the only picture in his room; dark,

secret and sensual, searched for.
Their bodies are framed by a doorway
somewhere in Italy, cradled by an arch,
with the sun filtering through narrow rooftops,

only days after they met. His arms
wrap around her the way I fall asleep
in them at night. Everything is beige
and dirty, the color of my skin

in dull light, but their lips are ripe
and she is round and smooth, shining.
He fucked her once, he said, years ago
while deciding on where to go next,

what monument to history could he see
beyond the books? As his hands travel
my body, I feel him looking for her
in the curve of my inner thigh

and the hollow of my pelvis, the way
he must have wanted her the next day
in Venice. He followed her through city streets,
over the brick bridges of graceful arcs,

the corners crumbling from decades
of rain and wandering feet, over water
that seemed to lull between deep and grotesque.
He talked of art and America, complained

of his continent's shortened history,
and tried not to seem a foreigner,
but lost her. He says the picture reminds him
of the dark places of Italy; the feeling

of being somewhere ancient; for a moment,
knowing something unknown. Different
from the way I feel when it really is over,
when looking in the mirror I find the same

as last night and the night before;
nothing hidden, no ancient scars. My bare skin
is still unflushed, my body angular
and shifting, my soft lips barely pale.

Animal Instinct

Sometime after I left,
my legs began to feel
smooth against the sheets,
clean for the first time
in months, the odor
of lemon and white
powder in the air,
colder than the bodiless
corners of the bed,
the places I thought
sharp-teethed rabbits
hid when I was young.
It sounds like birds
pulled from the blink
of morning before being
fed have landed
in the air conditioner
I've left on all winter,
air humming through
the frozen pipes
thick with sheeted ice.
After cold nights,
there's more noise
than usual. In Manhattan
we fought over going home
because I was coatless
and coughing outside
the Armory. The cab
driver took us for tourists
and we jerked our way
through the streets
with your window down.
You yelled. Above
the hollow of the wind
I didn't hear you.
The driver, though, brought
us home, but not before
you fell asleep, full
of the day. In early dawn

my toes touched the bottom
of the bed, found
the flat of your foot,
froze from the morning air
walking up the bedside,
your body beside me
like a stone in sunlight,
hot flesh ready
for the snake to coil
on your skin, muscles
warming for the full
stretch to swallow me whole.

Sundays

When I've been asleep too long,
I feel taller, as though there's more
length to my legs, more skin
for my eyes, more movement
to notice; the way my feet turn

slightly in when I'm done stretching,
the shape of my fingers scratching
my stomach, the curve of my hip,
bare beneath blankets, against
your body on Sunday mornings,

borne in the heavy silence
of not mentioning. With my breasts
feeling the unlabored breaths
in your lungs and my body wanting
the touch of your hands, lying softly at your sides,

we will talk of food, as you think
of some reason to wake beyond
feeding the animals. My legs
draw closer to the trunk of my body
as you mention dry cleaning;

my chest closes at the mumbled
reasons. As you think with unfocused
eyes, my skin grows gritty and ashen
and I can make out the unevenness
of my freckles, the veins crawling

below the surface as if figuring
some way out to this broken
early afternoon where you pull
yourself up to grab the lights
and darks that, we agree,

dully smell too much like us.

Unbending

The purple hyacinths are a darker shade
than I expect and spent these winter weeks
watching. The heat from office vents have made
the thick smooth stalks begin to shift and creep
up straight, no longer pushed down with the weight
of smelling clean or open petals. The sweetened scent
of dying flowers floats through the air and stays.
It seems that longer days, the touch, the stretch
of hour pushed to hour under the sun
has made the stem unburdened by blooms,
the thick-leaved living. The bending is done.
The stock can stand without the beauty. You
and I can smell the heavy scent of our love
and know the pretty things we must give up.

The Beauty of Water

I am interrupted by a phone call
Just to hear you say
A glass of water reminds you of me.

Water is smooth to swallow like my skin,
Kills your burning thirst,
Later, finds you begging more.

I mumble a response resembling one
That quiets your need;
Agrees: *You too remind me of water,*

But means: *as the master of erosion.*

Reunion

I didn't know why people were always
reuniting years later in a shower of new shirts

suited to their professions, the upswept hair
of women, smooth pearls in so many ears,

and the effort to make it all seem effortless.
You, wearing something old, but equally chosen,

just brought me, and didn't seem alone. In the dim,
distant from the emerging faces you tried

to think of a different reason so I would laugh
without coughing. To help, you told me to think

in the abstract. It's compelling. It could be
my poetry. People yelling across rooms

and hallways, embracing, bracing for ten years
slipped into a single glass of wine.

And, yes, I was struck, by the shape
of your body hunched in the metal chair

and your mouth close enough to move
my hair, by the delivery and the way

you believed this place had mystery,
by the way you later talked

about your life, openly, to a stranger,
and didn't know what to say

about mine. Because then, I saw it all
as down comforters and drowning, the flicking

cat tails of my writing. It was only pretty,
the opening sequence to a movie.

So many start in airports, the coming,
the going, the black and white where it is so easy

to pick one or the other, but the story
never works. I wanted color and left you

there because it was strange
how much I thought you didn't know.

And years later, I still dream of the tall necks
of those women, the broad, sweeping handshakes

of the men, their shirts untucked, and you
in the corner, looking like you, the arc of your back

curling in towards me, your breath against
my cheek as you work to find me some reason

to stay. And I'm moved to want everything
as the revision I found to reuniting.

To Anxiety

Anxiety, I can't remember what it was like
without you, when going to bed meant sleeping,
not listening to the reasons you've come.

You're the loudest of anyone I've slept with,
and were there with them all. The first time,
in the hours leading up, you tried

to make me stop, made me feel sick
to be in my bare skin. When it was over,
you were the one holding my hand

as I wondered if it was always going to be
like this; him asleep, me awake
with you, talking about whether he knew

the smell weighing in the air was the scent
of his own sweat spread across my chest.
I can't remember much about that time

beyond the smell and you making me
scrub the blood before there was a stain,
before he could see. Do you remember

when you moved in? I had just decided to live
with a man and you showed up, *a vacation
without luggage*, I think you said.

And you stayed away, worked in other rooms,
making pictures, a montage of beautiful women,
lying naked in my bed, my love's hands

touching everything that seemed soft.
You never cleaned up and left your art
uncovered. Eventually, the only clean space

was my bedroom, and I had to let you in.
I watched you work and spent more time with you
after the man in our bed fell asleep without

a mention of want, without a graze
of hip, or brush of thigh. You said
it was my fault, but I'm not sure

we ever discussed the reasons. He hated us
together, couldn't figure out why
we wouldn't let each other go

and left us. *We're better without him,*
you said, then, you left me too, stopped
painting, stopped gluing the pieces together,

stopped talking about how grotesque
it all was and just disappeared.
Anxiety, I thought it was over

for a few days, but then discovered
you always come back the moment I notice
I have nothing else in my bed.