Most of the subject matter in my poetry overtly or covertly pertains to sexuality. My work strives to represent and explore the many facets of human desire and its consequences. In many of my poems, desire is portrayed as a difficult, on-going process locked in a state of potentiality.

In the course of my graduate study, I have learned that representing the negative capability of desire demands an acute attention to the everydayness of the experience a poem represents. I have developed this attention, which authenticates experience and makes elements of artifice invisible or transparent. The development of a poetic voice has assisted me in this task. In my most successful poems (i.e. “Moral,” “Night Music,” “Necromimesis,” “Pearl,” and “Ceremony”), through an individualistic and dramatic lens of perception, the speaker becomes so lost in representing the nature of a specific experience that the product emerges with a sense of inevitability.
THINKING OF FIRE

By

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Childhood Reading

So many pages were dog-eared!
Then, one day, Narnia thawed.
I looked out the window,
but outside it kept snowing.
Rite of Passage

You heard me and felt me. First, I was the wind that dropped and wound through the thorn bush and rustled your face from somewhere beyond the mother cat’s tongue anointing four just-born.

On your knees, you cut through the thick, naked thistle. Dark hair hung over your eyes, dark hair burst into a circle of branch and bramble. Beyond that cut-out place—

beauty, the wanted world. But, you found me, the un-licked newborn, flies covering the place where thorns had severed my leg. It lay clawless in darkness beside me.

Because you could not snap my neck, you filled the pail with lake water. Duck shit muddled across the dock where winter’s freeze had pulled another a pillar under.

Only you were relieved that I did not struggle as you did, watching bits of afterbirth rise to the top, membranes of the clear sack that held me and the bloated body from which you turned.

Your first tears christened the pail. There is so much water in the world, cruel joke we breathe air. When it was over, you dried your face and wrapped me like a gift in a green towel. You sat a long time still before you buried me beneath the willow, where moles would not burrow and water would not rise.

I think you needed me as I needed your mercy. Your face reflected in the pail. Death’s form rose to the top as the water clouded. You tried to keep it at your back, but the spring wind stung your bare face. The clouds over the lake were heavy with April rain. And the sky spilt.
The Violin

My mother pours tea
into flower petal cups
and gathers women
around the fireplace,

hems pulled away
from curls of soot.
My mother disappears
and they wait,

their long necks bent
towards the space
she no longer fills.
Then she stands,

a violin cradled
between shoulder and chin.
The bow does not touch,
but joins the strings

as if in this instant
nothing else could happen.
Then, it breaks.
And because this is a dream,

it bursts against the floor
into sharp-edged shards,
as the bow slips from her hand
and slides across the floor,

a fan flushed open to cool
a room of gasps.
I realize I have been
so taken by her face

that everything has ceased.
My mother on her knees,
bent over the remnants
as if to demonstrate loss.

From this moment,
I watch projections
of another scene,
earlier even than dream.
The peeler that sliced
my beautiful mother’s fingertip
when we watched together,
from the kitchen window,

my father falling from
the ladder in autumn
onto the dry, brown lawn.
I was young, so young

I believe, that I stopped
to watch drops of blood
bathed in faucet water
run over bald apples in the sink.
Quiet

First, she approached
love with discipline;
taught herself
to wait for the sound
of his steps in the hall,
to stop at Whistler’s naked
girl. Observe her
restraint in looking
whimsical instead
of reaching for the towel.

Backstage gestures,
drawing in breath
and shoulders,
intended to
measure the wait.
Each time, it felt
like finding
a beautiful bird
in the unremarkable
tree of winter.

They unearthed the ruins
of love and family—
reckless exposures that framed
sleepless nights.
It was always early
after they fucked.
There was a guitar
and the pre-dawn
stream of headlights
through the blinds.

Naked, swinging
from the kitchen
doorway like a dumb,
opiated monkey,
she knew enough
to savor the way
time moved.
How it became
a room for the foreign
and familiar catalogue
to which she committed herself—
gargoyles, chess,
panic attacks—
preludes to the scents
and movements
that silence reveals.
Outside, the sun setting,
dry leaves, the world
changing color.

It was a year
before she learned
his private faces.
Anger, a stiff neck
and stone jaw.
Love, the tilted one
and foot over knee.
Detail moved
from the mind,
and into the world,

and they studied
the light on late
October afternoons,
how the sharp angles
of shadows made
buildings breathe.
Then, a quiet
more intimate
than desire
in which they slept.
The Apprentice

The girl with pot-shakes, jagged finger nails, watched the poet in tortoise-shell glasses. Full of Plath, aphorisms, dramatic readings. Weekends were deserts, all the tropes of thirst.

The poet, gracious warden of verse, wanted to give the gift of mimesis, but got bedroom eyes, hot office visits. She liked to dangle her key as they spoke.

The girl was shameless, twirling her hair when she praised the masters, Rilke, Eliot, Lowell. She enjoyed the feel of “fuck” on her tongue, letting it marinate and ooze with suggestion.

And began to write of the urge to part pages with her fingers, let the poem trickle out into the elusive center of the stanza, to measure meter in ink-stained strokes.

It was fantasy, one semester really, of spent desire that disrobed artifice. Even inspiration is temporal. By spring, she took more downers and wrote less.

But, those virgin verses, so cool, so pure—an epic invocation of short-lived intonation, so that when Persephone wilted winter and smiled, it was warm enough to tilt the girl’s gaze.
The Cat Jumped Over the Moon!

He leapt over our heads,
Vaulting the mattress,
Plunging into the dark
Air outside the blankets,
Arcing so splendidly
Over the diameter of the bed
That we stopped everything
To marvel at the cartoon-like
Perfection of his precision,
How his front and back paws
Stretched symmetrically
Over our entwined bodies
As if his very cathood depended
Upon the caliber of the leap—
Before aligning his four limbs,
Punctuating our prelude
To a good night’s fuck
With a graceful, almost silent
Thump upon the floor.
Short Visit with an Old Friend

I couldn’t look her in the eye. In the cab between 74th and the second bar, where she’d dance frantically with her boyfriend who mispronounced my name and did not shake my hand, she turned herself, drunk and with difficulty to me, and said, “I’m so happy you’re here.”

On 1st, a man with a patch flapping over his missing left eye (It looked like raisins.) sang My Girl for money. Another’s coins missed the cup. The song stopped. Rows of traffic lights lit the street like a runway. I forgot the day she waited for the tow trunk with me in the rain.

Ahead, lights changing, all the tropes of indifference, those icons of the city— eyes locked straight ahead, the street musician’s lack of self-pity. Minor endings all over town. In the time it took the meter to climb twenty cents, I forgot our friendship. smiled and said, “me too.”
Delivery

He asks you where you want it, 
the box-spring that should have arrived 
on Friday. You don’t care where 
he puts it or that it’s Monday afternoon 
and already the cat is pressed 
into the last spot of sun on the carpet.

Jagged wooden planks 
on the box-spring’s underside, 
the ones that pricked your fingertips 
when you searched in dust and dark 
for your suitcase, tear through his shorts. 
Blood blooms through the cloth.

You show him the bathroom 
and a band-aid. In the hallway, 
he stops for a second, appraising 
you like showroom furniture; 
face, to mouth, to tits. Five things 
he’d like to do to you flash across his face.

Slapping the light switch, 
you head back to the front room 
to study the strange codes on the invoice. 
Impatient, you follow half a page 
of Derrida before the theatrical sigh. 
Another glance at the wrist watch.

Then, he’s back out, and yes, 
you’ll sign here, and here’s the yellow copy, 
and there’s the fucking door. 
But, he’s left something behind 
you see, turning on the bathroom light, 
to find the murky pool

where he squirted; you see him 
imagining you now as he drives 
to another job, a wife or girl, 
the grin of getting off again 
as you wipe the floor clean.
Voice

When you wake in bed next to your one true love, you remember the silent walk home last night, a song of splintering ice.

Dread assembles like an impasse around the morning.

And the couple upstairs, you’re sick suddenly of their genteel poverty, their sterile pinched faces on the stairs.

You draw with a finger on the frost-dressed window while he writes a suicide letter in invisible ink.

When the ceiling starts crumbling, you toss animals—little plaster horses, wafer-thin flecks of flamingos—like confetti into the street.

_The truth isn’t convenient_…
a megaphone somewhere begins, as you shut the window, keep the warm air in.

On television, a machine pulls men gasping for breath from middle earth.

All afternoon, you return to their faces, black as beetles, blind eyes blinking eyes.

Upright in the cold, inviolate night, how long before the mind forgets the body to save itself?

From safe ground above the bottomless mine, a story takes shape.

The miners are glad, thank God, smile for the camera’s cool eye.
Trillium

Each of us makes something of loneliness.

My mother tends a garden.
She likes to plant flowers in narrow rows,
feeding the transplanted buds with
strange organic mixtures they don’t need.
This is what she calls nurturing.

Watching her in the garden,
it’s hard to imagine a species she couldn’t sustain.
Her back bent intently over white roses,
she lays out a bed of banana peels and egg whites,
flattening the soil with the cool underside of a spade.

Inside, at his work desk, my father has tired
of eating bananas and finding the spoiled suns
of egg yolks in the kitchen sink. He watches
the garden mature slowly all spring, until
a spectrum of flowers petal and bloom only once.

Daffodils, tulips, snow drops, and lilies,
my mother plants what she will outlive,
watching the robins in late spring,
perched on the granite ledge of the birdbath,
before they fly away to nests she never sees.

Inside the kitchen, we keep an herb garden,
chives, oregano, basil, and rosemary
in terra-cotta pots along the sill.
Basil, my mother’s favorite, sprouts
in dense clusters of ovate leaves along the stem.

The chives are my father. They grow tall and
indifferent to the others, in abundant blades,
thriving on the darkest part of the windowsill.
The rosemary couldn’t bear to live with the others.
Like my stillborn brother, it refuses to grow.

I am lost like the oregano, growing and dying,
always at odds with itself. The right side survives
in slick, verdant leaflets, bursting over the pot.
On the left, the foliage wilts and decomposes,
filling the kitchen with the scent of autumn.
On summer evenings, my mother shears fresh leaves from the plants for seasoning salads and casseroles. Then, she waters each pot diligently, even the rosemary, where only the soggy label remains, bearing species, genus and a picture of the thriving plant, blurred by water and time.

Humming the wrong verse to a Van Morrison song, my mother does not hear me when I enter from the back porch to watch her fingers at work for a moment, singing softly the right words a chord too late. Each of us makes something of loneliness.
Ceremony

I go toward her, across a stage by the sea
in some puritan township, the gallows
whispering whispering. Through the brown
wool dress, she seems too beautiful to touch.
Then, I am kissing her “I do” on this stage,
and her face pressed to mine is cold and pink,
but her just-parted lips, so warm that blood
shines through. And oh, the taste of her, peaches
and salt, stays in my mouth. They must be cheering.
Flower petals, pink are thrown into waves.
Later, night. An oil lamp is blown out.
I go to her. Behind the lace curtain.
She. Seductress? Hester Pryne? My mother?
I know she wants me to put my face to her heart.
Was my hand on my own as I slept?
Though our skin beneath nightgowns,
little pearled dollies, feels hot, we understand
the way animals understand which of a litter
cannot be saved, that there is no time.
This is when they find me, four faces,
like sketches above me, parting the bed curtain,
the long path of buttons to my neck.
I know they must examine me, end me even.
My voice comes from another place,
like June bugs before the sun burns out stars.
I stay with ice cracking in a deep glass,
because it’s my body making this sound.
Their hands are in my skull.
Now, I’m above the tree line.
I see the stage below as if from a plane.
Everywhere, everywhere the sound of ice cracking.
Everywhere, everywhere the ice slowly healing.
Chora

You like to watch the last scene of *Easy Rider* over and over, genuflecting before the television in your parent’s room. You like to watch it until the world dissembles like air after an apology. Shots from the car window. Burst of body and fire and metal.

Then, the long river that folds and folds like the house after a party. Card table and T.V. trays with wine stains on the presidents’ faces, towels left in the yard. You stand on tipsy-toe before the long mirror. *Please don’t fold me,* says the small mouth.

For a while, you like how words open and close inside your mouth. Scabs in crook of knee, crook of elbow. They break open when you’ve forgotten about them. Brave and red, made of what we hide. Words bleeding out into the world.
Your two cousins, convex, colorless in the now blank screen, squint at your back. One carved his initials, “C.C.,” into his arm and has to wear long sleeves all summer. You’re supposed to use a girl’s. His sister scowls in pink makeup, thick like a second face.

One night, you throw eggs at her Trans-am and blame the neighbors. One night, her brother ties one end of a rope around the stump of an elm. Ties the other around his neck. Runs hard until it snaps. You admire this. It moves like strong wind into your secret life.

It spins the weathervane pitched in the flattened fortress of your brain. It stirs the air behind your eyes. Awake now, you roll down the hill beside the river. Gravity, it grinds your bones. Time saws off Nothing here, but truth and hot.
Falling Woman

1.

When he hands it to me, I feign pleasure, drag my finger across the first page of a blank book. Four squares meant to be filled with facts, measurements of the body’s increase. Instead, I write straight across the page while he sits in an armchair, lost in figures with his ankles crossed.

I can tell from his face I don’t exist. Our first breakfast in Palm Springs. Morning cold lifting off the Mojave and before noon, the unbearable sun.

His displeasure when I wouldn’t swim. And the way the pool glistened like a gun against matte brown. *I almost drowned once…*

The memory, real or made up of my mother pulling me through the convex lens of water, back to the wind that dried my skin.

I think he grinned and drummed a newspaper on his leg.

2.

Insomniac for eight months now. I’ve memorized the way my husband’s chin shakes when he snores. I sit up straight and large. The tickle-leak of milk makes dark half-dollars on my nightgown. When wind hisses through the ponderosas, through the window, across my face, it seeps into my body like sound.
I am suspended with the world, the slow waking world beyond the window. Waking, a word like wind folding over still water.

3.

I wait for daylight, for the doctor’s call, for the delivery truck to bring curtains. Paisley I must have picked, but can’t for the life of me, remember.

I sit all day in the porch swing, let my feet dangle and fill with its creaking music. I wonder about words: warm, shadow, swell.

Across the street, a girl waits for a cloud to pass over the sun, rolls onto her back and oils her legs until they gleam like metal.

4.

Blame my thick fingers, how they stumble thread through needle, a red spot on the collar of his white shirt. The unimaginable, it pricks at my mind.

Blame the bird that darts across the corner of the cat’s eye. The bird, a harsh black spot against the blazing blue spring sky.

Blame a string of quick accidents: the woman next door barely yelling, but the open window and air so still she might be speaking into to my ear.

Now, the neighbors’ kid weed-whacking the hedges with menace too mature for twelve. Insects and evening. Everything arrives as usual.
5.

There are leaves wadded up in the gutter. My water breaks, spills over flagstone. My husband takes pleasure in accident, almost misses a rung on the way down.

I want to climb, to feel coarse shingles on my palm. Instead, we pull my packed bag from the closet and glide like insects along the freeway. Empty and hot afternoon.

6.

In a Malibu mansion, I was mesmerized by a dead actress’ dressing screen; jade and gold imported from Asia. An actress who died of love and cocaine.

I dream of her long smooth legs peaking out from behind the screen while across the room a man watches; between his fingers, a smoldering cigar.

When I wake, he is hot and small, mine in the crook of my arm.

7.

When the heat wave arrives, we head for the coast. The baby sleeps through sirens. A book about love lies open on my lap. He swerves. I swear, look back.

In the middle of the road, dressed in dust and flies, a dead cow. Beside it, how can I say this? A half-made fetus, hard-packed papoose the color of bricks.

I trace the umbilical cord in the air with my finger, hope she bled short hours in the sun before night cooled the road and silenced the cars and flies.
Shadow-dark arms of night; calm, slow amnesiac around her. I touch my middle where the seatbelt no longer strains. We say nothing, but drive on.

8.

It has taken a long to arrive here, this crook in a long finger of coast. From the cottage on the cliff, the ocean seems featureless. The wind wipes us clean, wipes the cypress trees clean until their roots are bare wires. We descend with the baby bundled on his back. I can’t look away from the waves, their jagged lines. At the bottom, I catch my breath. He stares out to sea. The fog doesn’t roll in, but gathers at the horizon, dulling the sun.

It’s easy to think about tense here. Past. The sun-bleached afternoon. Present. In this light, he looks like his father. Future. The fog zipping up its white dress.

My mother seeped to her hips in white silk used to offer her back to my father. His hand, always steady, purposeful. A chill spreading up her skin.
Pearl

When I think of Colleen Green,
and how her brother found her
passed out on the bathroom floor
minutes after she’d slit both wrists
with the triangular tip of an Exacto knife—

I do not think of the rest of her,
the freckles across the bridge of her nose,
dark and light specks of pigment fading
into thin lips that curled to her cheekbones
when she smiled, which was infrequently.

Instead, I remember how everyone
in our high school stared at the thick gauze
that cushioned both wrists and whispered,
(mouths behind text books)
about how fucked up she had always been.

We needed this, I think, to account
for cause and effect by balancing both sides
of an inconstant equation that summed up adolescence,
one that seemed impossible to Colleen
spinning her pottery in ceramics, brow furrowed

in uneven lines, fingers carving patterns
that always gave way to clusters of skewed shapes,
as if the idea of symmetry pained her. I think it did
hurt her somehow, the scrutiny endured in those years,
all hope for a secret uneven self, mutilated

then sealed with the body’s own preservation,
like tissue binding a pearl inside its shell.
So, Colleen never wore long sleeves to conceal
the size of each scar, one running to the elbow,
and one ending at the forearm. She knew

there was more we wanted of her but would not ask.
The scars revealed only the remainder,
obscured what no one understood or could imagine.
Her secret, tucked away like a pearl, bound
the common threads of gossip shut like stitches:
which soccer players she’d blown at some house party
and which clothes made her look like a slut
were extraneous variables, cancelled out by her choice.
It didn’t matter that she’d chosen death.
She represented something provocative and untouchable.

The scars were proof of her difference,
a testimony of her will against invasion,
to remain naked and self-contained
by a silence deeper than death—
the sealed shell enveloping the pearl.

Looking back, I’m ashamed of how much
I admired her then, how much fascination I placed
in the initiative she’d taken into her own hands,
the knife that was both an act of self-effacement
and self-love; destruction and preservation.

Because it was everywhere, this need to find
some end of the slow humiliation of growing up
beneath the unbearable gaze of each other.
I’d tired of patience and all of its passive faith,
sought out death as survival, but couldn’t commit.

I tried to reach her once, in history class, asking
her to partner with me to make a timeline,
“I’m supposed to avoid situations like that,” she’d said,
looking up from her lap only once, recognizing me,
the seeker, and she, the enlightened one—

how she eyed me in my eager intentions,
and folded her hands into her lap.
The Eightfold Path

There are eight doors with unfit keys that I must open with my mind. There is a body that I must teach to wear restraint like a leather bind.

There is an earth, a dim-lit alley that must not capture me for long. Wisdom, announce yourself, the first key dangles uselessly from a steel lock.
Moral

I buy pot from him.  
Not that this makes me responsible.  
They were Bonnie and Clyde on acid,  
someone said. Fast cars on empty stretches.

Four, five a.m., up smoking, eating pills.  
Sure, there was that time before class,  
beneath the imitation Restoration chapel,  
she showed me the tab on her tongue,

tiny butterfly tiny cocoon. Then,  
at night, in her bedroom, the raised shirt,  
bruises, fistfuls on her back, how  
her bra strap winced against raw skin.

When she finally opened her mouth,  
as if any of us needed words,  
still, I died when it came out.  
What can you say, really?

Everyone says she’s crazy.  
Left her own shit in a bag  
outside a neighbor’s door.  
He’s reliable, though, takes

his shoes off, never misses a call.  
This is how it goes. Behind  
every accused, a drive-you-to-drink  
antagonist. Try to understand,

the shepherd wasn’t deceitful,  
but longed for the wolf  
so much that he seemed real.  
Harsh, but she had it coming.

And when he came, he kicked  
through the door. I try not  
to think of this as I watch him  
weigh the bag and tie it tight.

I don’t want to wonder  
if he helped her up  
or if he hugged her after.  
So, I ask him if the pot’s good.
I don’t think he saw me flinch
when the pads of his fingers
beat twice against the bag
and everything settled to the bottom.
Lost and Delirious
After a Film by Lea Pool

It’s a strange scene at first, the sort of boarding school
where Tom and Daisy might’ve sent their daughters.
Here are two roommates making girlish love in cotton briefs
while the third who’s lost her mother and helps the gardener
plant crocus bulbs at dawn, lies awake listening to their sounds,
sounds of birds chirping into sleep. I want it to go on like this,
the quiet one learning desire while the other two, the tomboy
and the debutante, so lost in each other’s skin, never noticing her stare.
She grows accustomed to their night noises, no longer needs
to peer through the pillowcase. Steady sounds, rain drops on the roof.

No one wants a happy ending. So when the two girls are found
in bed together, it’s understood love has been spoiled. I cannot judge
the pretty one when she lets the boy she doesn’t want unzip his pants
and press her against the cypress tree. The choice is cruel and timeless,
her denial bathed in the bare bone of moonlight while the boyish one,
cloaked in the shadow of branches, nurses a broken-winged bird
as she watches her beloved. Is it betrayal that breaks her?
Her fate is certain now as she falls from Maggie Tulliver to Tess,
and I admire her spirit when she overturns the lunch trays, screaming
to the sky, Unsex me! How can the debutante watch, unmoved?

A tear, an afterthought from a turned cheek, the only hint of sympathy.
Innocence, experience, jealousy... someone is always sacrificed.
When she stands on the slate roof, ready to end herself, the bird
on her shoulder spreads its healed wings and flies when she dives head-first,
the survivor below gasping as if it is death’s vehicle that surprises her,
as if she understood all along what fate meant. Just as I see hers,
an opportune marriage, the jewelry she will measure guilt against.
What to think of the motherless girl, who weeps openly as blood seeps
from beneath her friend’s shattered body, the one who prays to her mother
to care for a new soul. It is her face that fills the final shot—

Intent, brows furrowed, she coaxes the crocus through thawed ground.
Dream House

You can almost taste the mosquito that might have landed in your mouth as you rode your bike past the scene, the flipped Cadillac, bent iron mailbox and bent over girl, into a swarm of them, after dinner but before Johnny Carson, the summer sounds of sprinklers and backyard barbecues, telephone lines chain-linked across the setting sun.

The girl wears white shorts. A pouch of flesh folds out from where the cloth cinches her small thighs. Gosh, I imagine her saying, the lone witness to disaster. The knot in her gut as if she’d hula-hooped too long. If I were right, she’d deny it, ride away laughing, snug in her banana seat. Golly, this can’t be happening, not here.

Instead, she is staring, mesmerized almost, at an unopened suitcase, the kind the Cleaver’s might’ve packed for the Grand Canyon. Despite the smoking engine, a golden light shines from the trunk that’s been flipped open like an empty chowder, illuminating her. Against another backdrop, the suitcase might be a baby carriage. The trees might sway in unison as a slight breeze tousles long hair.

She is ready to unhinge it. I’m talking Hitchcock, not Patty Duke, says the lock of hair spiraling around her ear in the humidity. She notices the stump of the tree where she and her sister tied a swing and remembers the pull and slack of the rope, her stomach flipping upside down. No matter what’s inside the suitcase, it says that everything will change. The sky will turn to ink in a moment.

I wonder if she’s ever had a difficult thought, an unshakable idea, if she understands the shaft of light or her heartbeat’s drumming in her ear. Dreams or a rare school book might’ve opened with obtuse preludes. She has the look of innocence at its breaking point, the way mothers look to their children in old photographs. Naïve isn’t the word for it, nor lucky. Here, all of the elements aligned as if to prove

environment is external. Still, I can’t let go of the idea of her as part of the landscape before disaster, before a car leveled the mailbox, wrecked her with possibility, or saved her with the same. And what does this say about the unbeliever, who thinks that by October, she’ll wear her first pair of heels, be felt up in the back of a Buick. What does doubt label me? Romantic? Skeptic?
Interrupted

I was slitting my wrists in the tub again.
“This could be your big break,” I heard you laughing in my ear, the vibration of your breath that close and hot, I could’ve ripped it off right there.
“This could be your big break,” a joke so black and sick, that we kept it hushed.
I was listening to the Monkees’ “Porpoise Song,” humming the verses, twirling my finger in the bathwater redder and redder.
Words like solute and solvent came to mind and left. The droplets following my finger were just so beautiful, that I wasn’t ready.
I wanted to stay there forever in that perfect poinsettia tub. Each chord felt like coming.
My grade school teacher, Mrs. Hall, held her hands stretched at her left side and there was a door, then a long corridor. I climbed out of the warm Christmas bath, and the stars just slid around her hands.
What Goes On

Lately, there’s always something new, something tragic on the television, which makes it harder to ignore. Print is just another plot, unfolding.

A single photograph of a sullen boy on the screen, then a snapshot of a girl, her face all gloss and shine and smile. It hits me hard. The girl in the photo

is the same skinny, sulking boy who’s been dragged from a party, beaten, strangled with a leather belt, and buried not deep enough in the barren foothills

by two high school boys in Newark, California, which does not sound sunny like Santa Clara or San Diego, but reminds me of gray airports and stolen cars.

What’s sadder is his weeping mother, who loved her son, or Gwen, the woman’s name he borrowed from a pop star, unconditionally, even bought him skirts.

Behind it all, an envious girl, caught briefly refusing the camera, who told the boy she’d been wanting for weeks, that the girl he’d been kissing had a dick.

Was it most awful that the killer liked the kiss, liked the man’s tongue in his mouth? So much that his skin crawls still, in his cell, a revulsion even revenge can’t stop.

And, I wonder what’s the harm in it? Does desire make death the thing deserved? Betrayal, envy, always violence at its core, vices marching on like commercials.

Nobody wants to think too much, so I focus on small things, how the cat curled at my feet keeps his belly so white, when my soles are stained shoe-polish black.
I can’t forget the mother, her fingers flicking
a speck of lint on her lap below the lenses.
I’m moved by the way her words capture love.
*I’m going to bury him in the prettiest dress.*
Night Music

Getting off is easy, until the couple next door start to sing in alto then tenor, off-key.

At such time, it’s important to turn on some music. Nothing too sensual: You’re a sure thing.

Something without words, words that remind you of the ridiculous task you are hell-bent on finishing. Tonight, it’s drum and base with enough pulse to keep time. It’s difficult to describe—

this moving inside of yourself. Finesse, a Latina beauty said of her dead lover in bed,

in a movie I can’t remember. Oh, why can’t I just think of her? Then, it happens. Sometimes,

it’s as simple as a scene in a movie, or a character in a book. Once, a woman professor, a poet with perfect skin.

My toes curl, and I thank him or her. Because, gratitude, it’s a must, even if it happened in my head.

It’s time then, to return to the ceiling, to the cat attacking Venetian blinds, a framed photograph
of someone absent,
and still shaking the walls,
the neighbor’s screams,
then singing off-key.
Elegy

Four years ago, a long sullen summer
in the middle of the night. Can it
be four years? Since you walked

with Nora through the streets behind
the harbor while echoes assembled
around you, like the mind of the landscape

in which everything was still. And the heat,
the way it singed your skin like the breath
of passing buses. It was either bearable

or unbearable. It abbreviated the world,
made things simple, this yes or no heat
before love and limitation, both of which

happened eventually and, as it was,
Together. How easy it was to lose yourself
in someone, anyone else’s life back then,

to listen to Nora describe falling asleep on
her sister’s shoulder, listening to the cabs;
their strange songs of stop and go.

Machine after machine moving into night
until they became the sound of her sister
pushing out each even breath as if it mattered.

And the smell, she said, smell of the end
of summer when fans filled every window,
smell of pennies clutched in a hot palm.

So, you tried to give her the cold of your
childhood, the cold collecting out past channel.
How, if you squinted into black long enough,

the buoy seemed to step from night sky.
And for a moment, time, in its strangeness
would shift, restless before the half-drawn shade.

Memory moving sidelong, even then.
Nora’s small red nails like Spanish olives
when she smoothed her green skirt.
And the sugar plant glowing red across the harbor, its candied smoke of chemicals. Everything sharp and hot.

Summer laced up like a straightjacket around the city. The exceptional thin of her Audrey Hepburn ankles.

And her high-heels, how did she stand them? Tapping and tapping, steady as a carriage horse over pavement.

Nora, who could make a bridge along the back of her thumb and cut a line for whoever across it. Loneliness so delicate and full. The way waitresses off the late shift flicked their cigarettes into the water and waited for the hot red to disappear before catching the bus.

Walking beside her, matching her stride as if you could know her history by finding the rhythm of her body.

That was the summer of the apartment with no dishwasher and the crazy ivy league kid next door who blasted death metal and slammed his body into the walls or furniture you never saw.

Only you enjoyed it sometimes, having some standard against which to measure how fucked up you felt inside; somewhere between ashamed and satisfied. That was the summer Nora’s mother arrived with designer luggage for a weekend.

And you liked her because she said your eyelashes looked like fans. Nora’s mother drunk on cheap red wine, winking, warning:
he won’t keep the cow if he can get the milk for free.
Later, almost autumn, the future arrived
in strange costumes; the cool breeze of night.

Night when Nora, on her hands and knees,
searched the dark cracks between couch
cushions for a gold earring from Tiffany’s,
a gift from a boy named Connor, who played
lacrosse and, as they say, broke her heart.
Opening and closing the shiny pockets
of her purse as if repetition might restore
what time and accident had taken.
Sad, dark kohl pencil around her eyes

and the unlikely translucent stream of snot
that stretched to the bow of her mouth.
She seemed to stand there for minutes,

still in the darkening doorway, twilight
sulking across her face as it found
her hands and disappeared, eclipsed by

the sudden chill stealing up your skin.
Freed you of fiction, so you went alone
into the world more daring and mean.
Necromimesis: A Sequence

1.

An aunt with black lungs
has sent a box of Florida oranges.
At this moment, in Texas, pieces
of a space shuttle lie steaming
on an interstate and you remember
a dream you had last night
of a white beach where it was always noon.

There’s a wedding today
and one-by-one the bridesmaids float in
with their hair done. It’s a new century,
though already, it feels old and tired,
like the neighbor with polio who said,
*I’m tired of New England winters,*
and buried her husband and left.

2.

You are on a beach with fifteen strangers.
Your towels are laid out in a perfect circle
beneath the sun in the sky, which is so bright
the world around you appears bleached.

There is a silence, like the first second
your head surfaces from underwater
and the world deafens you.
When the woman beside you,

wearing a matador’s costume,
speaks, you see her for the first time,
as if the light has parted like legs
from the force of her voice.

You know that in life, she was gored
by a bull. Small skeletons are engraved
on each of her glistening gold buttons.
She explains you’re there to read each other’s minds.
3.

In winter, sex becomes primal, almost violent between you and someone you love, as if breaking your bodies against each other is essential to warmth, which reminds you of a transsexual’s personal in the newspaper last week: *Forceful sex care provider*.

Destruction is turning into prayer, everywhere. Fucking, really fucking each other one night after the bar, you feel in the friction, a union with the energy outside. Contrapuntal notes of skin slapping skin, a communion with disaster.

But, all of this passes eventually. You are young. There is time for the boredom of television and political discussions, nights when your flesh feels radiated, too clean of desire to care about the sacramental violence of sex.

4.

You remember part of it again—the man who loves the woman who’s been gorged by a bull sips a coconut and orange rinds are falling from the sky, pecking your arms and face like beaks.

He shows you the girl you were, who played in the yard and pressed four-leaf clovers into the pages of a dictionary. Emptiness, then was the finished book or the silence in the house when someone was sick.

The girl followed her pretty mother who drank orange blossom tea, and read the headlines to please her, laughing as her mother laughed when she struggled between *physical* and *fiscal*.
Only the sounds of the words stayed with her and the barest traces of context, like the imprint of the sheet on her face in the morning and the scent of her mother, who’s never aged, something violent in the obscurity, like scars.

5.

One day, the cloud of youth lifts and you move away and begin to worship the Great Suicides, who reassure you that they are just bones and buttons in the forgetful, frozen ground.

Below, from the plane window, the ground dissolves into clouds and the woman beside you hopes to land in time to make bible study. Her husband’s gone into the next world and she wants to feel closer to him. Outside a farmhouse, a girl stares up at the sky and says *look,* but her father is too busy looking at his cow’s ribcage. So, when he finally lifts his head, she says only, *It’s gone.* And childhood hesitates, turns away, into the crowd.

6.

Sometimes, the body is tired of growing, of submitting to the mind. A girl finds herself alone in the world, alone in the bath, in awe of the body’s strangeness—how the nipples float until they seem to unhinge from the rest, darkening and swelling. The water so hot, it’s a conversion.

Follow the melancholy scene of the not quite woman alone in the bath with her failures and the sadness of the world beyond the shower curtain, transparent above her and toxic and lovely as a man-of-war, almost indistinguishable from the water and the white noise in her ears.
as the head slips under, the faucet’s hot stream
still breaking into the bath, still breaking
as the mind slips and the body is weightless now.
If she were she a man, she’d have been forsaken here,
by a woman or a dream or God, but she is only thin
and too serious to be lovely in her sorrow,

which is as bottomless as the ocean
her body pours into and drifts on the waves,
until fishermen rinsing their bait pails,
or a family at the beach for the first time,
or the lone runner on the shoreline finds
and covers her nakedness at the water’s edge.