

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THINKING OF FIRE

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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.

**I**

## 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 74<sup>th</sup>  
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 1<sup>st</sup>, 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  
Oiforgets 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 Prynne? 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 disassembles  
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

*After a Photograph by Gregory Crewdson*

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.

# II

## 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*

*After a Photograph by Gregory Crewdson*

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.