

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: **COMMON GROUND**  
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This collection explores the different ways silence acts as a form of communication, recognizing both the power and failure of the unspoken. At once critical and empathetic, the speaker of these poems finds connection between the self and a self-destructive father whose influence carries into future relationships. The poems navigate moments of anger, forgiveness and guilt, ultimately allowing each to happen simultaneously.

COMMON GROUND

By

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## The Nail

I knew it had been there,  
lodged in my passenger side tire for weeks,  
an annoying light flashing to warn me.  
I knew also that it could be fixed, but my father was the one  
to deal with automobiles. I was meant to rely on him  
so I did, waited, and finally  
he took me to the garage down the street;  
drove me in my own car the few miles.  
More waiting of course. He asked if I wanted coffee.  
I didn't, resented it all for no reason.  
For the intoxicating rubber smell.  
But I was meant to say yes, and did.  
We walked next door not speaking—hands in our pockets  
and heads down, foreheads raw in the cold air.  
When he slipped, just a little, I thought how awful  
it would be to see him fall.  
And when we got there, got our coffee,  
he spilled just a little on his sleeve on the way to the counter.  
Awful. Hating a man with so little to offer.  
And I wanted so much to hate him.  
He checked his watch, we talked about car parts  
and weather. It was too hard to look at him  
so I thought instead of the nail  
wedged in my tire—the weeks it went unseen,  
a thin steel splinter. I could've left it for a little longer.

## Ruin

He tells me to look at him, he wants to see me crying.  
A poet, he can make something beautiful  
out of this. But I won't let him. The dishes in his sink,

water as hot as I can stand filling the curves of cereal bowls.  
The candle on the table blown out, the carpet vacuumed.  
Again, I'm leaving.

And aren't we tired of all this? Around his apartment—  
the leaves that crumple underfoot as we walk to my car,  
the color of the clouds as he kisses me

goodbye, another last time. He's hurt by my leaving, I know,  
but didn't Mother always say *leaving is the only thing  
to count on?* Or maybe it was blame.

There was a girl I knew in grade school whose mother  
fostered children. Every time I went to their house  
I met a new sibling. Once there was a baby with a broken arm.

Once there were six of us waiting for breakfast.  
The oldest boy struggled to butter toast for us, his mother snapped  
*just keep working at it!* Her husband was upstairs,

still sleeping off the night shift. The toast was just toast, breakfast  
only breakfast. I couldn't understand why her words  
were so frantic. Or maybe I could. How significant it all was.

When I say goodbye this time, I'll say *There is no explanation. I'm sick  
of all the repenting.* And I'll drive away  
from this collection of moments, on to another.

Stopping for pedestrians, minding the speed limit and breaking  
for yellow lights; even following these rules  
I can make it home in twenty minutes. And outside my apartment,

a dozen hermit thrush live in a hedge.  
Each morning I see them, pecking at berries  
and bugs on the sidewalk. When I get close, they tense

and then scatter, back into the hedge, small hearts pounding.  
As if my footsteps are a warning of danger, as if  
I might hurt them.

## Common Ground

I can hear my parents' voices in the room above mine,  
those ribbons of sound twirling  
down through the heating vents in the floor.

We don't speak at dinner because none of us  
will name the thing. We smile, we push around  
mashed potatoes with a fork.

A girl in class told a story  
about the night she was raped and none of us  
knew what to say. I could hear her,  
  
fourteen, locked in the broom closet  
with a hand over her mouth—his—muffling her cries.  
All of us hear, I think.

Later, after class, she told me it wasn't true. *It's fiction,*  
*all made up* she said with a strange smirk. That hand  
stays over her mouth.

Upstairs the television hums, private murmurs  
vibrate the floorboards. My mother's voice calls out in pain  
or pleasure. I try to listen for the difference.

Each of us lie someway  
in our rooms, collected by these walls. The girl shook  
as she told the story, and someone took her hand,  
  
but not me. It was too late to save her.  
The ceiling fan blows dust around the room, bits of dead skin  
and mold spores go spinning through the air.

## The Dog

Some nights the neighbor leaves his dog alone,  
locked up in some room of the house. I can hear her crying

while her people are away. All those barks and whines  
reaching out through an open window into a dark sky

that won't respond. And the cries reach me, too.

One of these nights I sit in the heat of my apartment  
drinking cheap wine and playing the piano.

I watch my fingers pressing the keys, some song  
from my childhood, a memory, repeats itself again and again.

But the wine takes over, and soon I am playing something else,  
not a song, really. No order, just the notes of a blues scale.

Up and down, over and over I push my fingers  
into the keys as if stopping up the holes in a life boat.

Letter to a Friend

*For MN*

If you came back to visit sometime late in the summer,  
I would make up the guest bed and sweep the floors.  
I'd clear off the kitchen table and over a plate  
of poached eggs, tell you all the lies I could think of.

We would hike Mount Mansfield, the curved earth  
reaching up ahead, the sweet pines, us breathing  
in the swell of life. In the city we'd pass bins of dead fish  
in Chinatown, run to the subway station where the old man  
plays an accordion on rainy days, dimes catching light in his hat.

We'd sit at the foot of my bed like you do these days  
and I would cling to your arms, beg at your feet.

This was meant to say how much you're missing. How no,  
maybe the tears I cried at your funeral weren't enough  
but you missed the sun rising warm across the grass.

And the foot of my bed is empty, really, only me there  
imagining you back angry as you were, and myself as I was, pitying,  
foolish and afraid. *Truce?* I could have said, ceasefire, peace  
for a while? I thought my lies would save you.

Here is a letter, laid out across the eagle  
on your grave stone, *Flying Free*. You should have stayed—  
it will say—for us, for old shoes and Christmas sweaters,  
  
for houseplants and pots and pans. You should have stayed,  
stayed, stayed, God help us all, you should have stayed  
and lived out the suffering like the rest of us.

*Hudson River, August*

In the mornings I can hear Canadian geese.  
The sound dances in and out of a dream,  
not quite waking me. He shouts from the window

to scare them off, the way his father used to.  
During that summer at his parents' camp on the river,  
the rain comes in sudden bursts and we run outside

to catch sunfish in the early evening.  
He says the raindrops bring them to the water's surface,  
they think it's food falling from the sky—manna from Heaven.

I won't touch the worms so he slides them  
over the hooks for me, wiping bits of blood on his jeans.  
Then I cast the line, and it is easy to watch

the glittering hook cut through the water,  
young catfish and perch pecking around the worm.  
When I feel a bite, I tug up on the line,

unsure of how fast to reel. *Is this right?*  
*Keep pulling* he says, *pull!* and I do until the small sunfish,  
hook wedged in her eye, spins up from the water.

I catch her with a thumb and forefinger, holding  
while she seizes. I hold tightly, squeezing until  
finally she is still. The hook glistens there

in her eye. He pulls it out for me,  
throws her back into the water, and I think of her tiny brain,  
blue and pulpy as she floats away belly up.

## Episodes of My Mother

You rub your fingers over charcoal lines,  
a woman's face appearing through the black dust.

You can hear the engine of your father's car  
as he pulls away from the little yellow house

on Hullcrest Drive for the last time.  
The sound reaches to the corners of your room

and sticks there for years like cobwebs,  
catching what they will until you leave them behind.

You are seventeen your first and only year of college,  
not far from home, you sketch the faces

of friends as they pass around a joint.  
Don't you see him, the first man you will marry

running his eyes along your thin frame. You will leave  
that one year marriage on foot while he is at the office,

no letter of explanation. In an office in the city  
you are dressed modestly for an interview.

The portfolio of advertisements  
tucked under your arm flutters in the wind.

You will be turned down, of course, without a degree,  
and you'll give up the artist-dream nonsense.

You'll meet another man, dark hair and eyes. Does he love you,  
Mother? Do you throw your head back and laugh?

In a photograph your arms hang loose around his neck,  
you smile wide in sepia.

Now your hands—red as your eyes—are rubbed raw with Clorox.  
As you reach to clean the mouth of the bathtub,

the gush of water swallows your tears. And I can hear  
from the hallway where I am trying not to hear.

He stands over you, filling the small space  
between you with anger. He is accusing you, again,

of cooking dinner too late. Of staying too long at work,  
of not loving him enough. Someday you'll tell me

that he wasn't a terror. That he was better  
than having no one. And I listen

through the crack in the door,  
etching patterns in the wood grain with my fingers.

## To Be Fair

When my fever started during the night,  
you rolled down the window,  
and in the waiting room put your arm around me.

I was thinking about the pain  
in my side, the infection in my kidney,  
not of you.

You kept that arm around me—  
I was weak—gently rubbing my back  
the way you did after the first time  
we slept together. *You're an afternoon opening up*  
*to evening* you whispered as I pulled at the frayed edge  
of the curtain. I was nothing

but the poem in your head. Anyway,  
I kept my mouth shut then, like I do now  
when you come to my office, hand on my back,  
not noticing as I look away. I send an email.  
I should explain—

Like kids we sat on your living room floor  
eating the steamed artichokes  
peeling back each layer,  
each layer underneath softer than the last.

They ripped so easily in our mouths  
when we ran our teeth across them.

Or the lake near my childhood home  
which froze over every winter  
and each time I wondered what happened to the fish,  
if they fled in anticipation

or just waited to die. Regardless, when Spring came  
the water was swollen with them.  
It was like that. One day a silence  
filled in and it was better.

## My Father's Birthday

In the kitchen I think of it—while cooking wild rice,  
stirring the black and white grains from the edge of a bowl—  
how apart we have become.

Although it's not the rice or the stove's heat  
that brings this thought. I think it must be the radio,  
singing uninterrupted in a corner of the room.

I don't know who to blame. I stopped calling and you faded away  
quietly, graciously. Tonight I celebrate

loneliness, yours and mine. The wine glasses are tucked away  
in a cupboard somewhere, unused, the radio keeps time  
with the ticking wall clock. One day,

I stopped trying so hard to be good, and the world didn't end.  
Twenty-five years of this and it hasn't ended yet.

The radio sings, some company  
to fill the empty chairs at the table. In the living room, Sinatra croons,  
Crosby, Davis, tonight I will dance with the men I choose.

## The Thrill

He holds his wrist watch so close to his face, glasses smudged where he's touched them accidentally. The places his hair grows, where he is marked in ink. At first, there is a thrill. At first,

each place is a place unexplored. When I was seven I visited some relative in a respite home where she was waiting, they all were, to die. That old house, filled with waiting. It was a kind of suffering I couldn't understand. I followed the house cat up a flight of stairs, terrified

of the people I passed in the hallway. A woman sat in an arm chair, mouth opened with her tongue—purple as a violet—hanging out.

The staircase was creaking and dusty. Dead birds stuck in the corners, crushed carcasses and blackened feathers, tattered, bodiless wings and hollow bones, and everywhere I stepped, those bodies.

I followed the narrow stairway up and up—glancing into each room of each floor I passed. These rooms weren't used, they were left just as they had been before the house was converted: a trunk sealed shut, a magazine left open on a bed. And at the top of the last widow's watch

the sun was shining in through cracks in the walls, through windows clouded in dust. I don't know what I expected to find, but I looked up to the light and there was a wasp's nest. His lips don't sting, but sometimes

they leave bruises. I think he must be marking me, each piece. I am waiting to be explored, waiting for the end of it.

Suspended

Between Burlington and Long Island, thousands of miles  
upward in the air—there is stillness.

My whole life is only a pin prick  
of light through an airplane window, a blur  
among many the train passes. I have lost a ticket,  
  
an earring, a memory.  
Another man to distance.

I have lost the space between meetings.

Sometimes I still sit at traffic lights,  
tracing the night sky with my eyes  
  
through the moon roof in my car; a flashing red light  
through a field of stars.

## He Shows Me the Gun

He steps out from his walk-in,  
takes it from its case and holds it out to me,  
because I've asked. Like an animal.  
Like a message. No,

we've been listening to the blues—  
a man holds a gun  
out in front of me. Says he loves me.  
Oh my baby

my mother has said, baby don't  
love a man who will hurt you. But I know hurting  
is gentle in love, like the breeze  
as we stand by the lake. I clung to him

like I needed him  
against the cold air, mud seeping up  
through the seams in my shoes.  
He looked up at the sky, the reflection of a plane

in his pupils—the line of light  
moving through. I could feel the leaving then,  
by the lake, birds flocking  
like dust in the clouds. Mother,

I know we're only here to hurt  
over and over, loving, eventually  
the hurting itself. Finger on the trigger—  
even you hold the gun, even me.

## Lineage

### I.

A train moves through the night,  
heaving on its rails  
over fields and mountains.

The far off echo of its whistle  
comes to me through an open window  
and I imagine the old steam locomotives—

the smoldering coal, low panting  
rumble of wheels, a white puff  
bursting into the frigid darkness like a dove.

### II.

I sit with my grandmother during the summer,  
in her sun room, after picking strawberries from the yard.

We've been discussing the books we're reading, the book she is writing,  
who *Time Magazine* will name person-of-the-year. I tell her  
about the men I'm seeing. She wants to know  
their moon signs and how the sex is.

Outside the sliding glass door,  
a crow is eating seeds that have fallen from the feeder.  
Too big to perch on the slender hanging column,  
he stays on the ground where he can avoid chickadees and finches.

He would scare them anyway with his size and manner  
which is why my grandmother runs to the door when she sees him.

There are two men, I tell her, one who I call the Surgeon,  
because he pushes with splayed fingers, prying me open  
to excavate the pain I must be hiding.

My grandmother waves her hands at the crow. If I would give him  
just a little more time, then he could find the cancerous memories.  
The bird flies away—more startled, I think,

than afraid. The Surgeon could fix me, then. His wings  
are a matted black flutter in the wind.

He perches only a few yards away in a nearby tree on a scarred branch, making his angry sound. I wonder if my grandmother is thinking, like I am, about the omen the crow brings.

The other man is the Ghost,

the shadow of a thing, there only to turn away from unhappiness—mine or otherwise—blinding in the sun.

Maybe the omen is only a metaphor. I can't decide which man is worse. *You're not so fragile*—she doesn't say, but should. Instead she reminds me of a trip

we took when I was a little girl.

Sometime during the drive, she pointed out the window to a dying field

where wild turkeys were feeding in the melting snow.  
They looked nothing like the primary red and blue smiling birds  
I made in school for Thanksgiving—palm flat  
against construction paper, a marker tracing each finger.

These were female birds; crouched between dried stalks, each tail down to a dark point, small heads at the end of hunched backs.  
They were frightening

to me, but even so I wanted to cry when my grandmother joked of eating one of those great wobbling birds for dinner.

She didn't scare them then, but something did—a passing deer or a strong gust of wind—and they fluttered to a tree. Fat black ornaments stuck in the evergreens.

We sit silently now,  
eating the strawberries from a metal bowl, sucking the warm  
sweetness from our fingers

until my grandmother remembers a man she dated. He said once

that a father really ought to be the one to teach his daughter about sex. The brute. They didn't last, she says,

which is obvious. But she can't help thinking of her own father, or rather, of his leaving—of all fathers, her ex-husband, years ago, with his new family. Her son would sneak out with his bicycle, riding around and around until he found the new house,

then he would sit on the curb and watch through the picture window at his father's family eating dinner. This story might not be true, but it doesn't matter. There are so many ways to hurt a child. There are so many stories.

By this time the sun is moving, the crow has flown away.

She doesn't ask about my father  
on these late summer afternoons. There's no use reiterating misery  
and anyway, I wouldn't know what label to give him.

### III.

The Surgeon pushed and pushed and I said *if you keep pushing you will end up right back at misery*. But he kept on.

He wanted the scalpel, thin glint of silver pressing against me,  
wanted to feel that part of me throbbing in his cupped hands.

When we spoke, I couldn't help but turn away like a child  
getting blood drawn—outside the nearest window,  
wishing for even the ice-cased branches, white salt crinkling  
on the streets, wishing for anything else. It isn't the needle, but the panic

of catching a glimpse at the syringe, the darkness too shocking—  
the swirling purple from inside my arm,

within me, how could I not know my own self?  
And he was sure to know me physically would be to

know everything, so sure our suffering would bind us.  
I was sure, too.

I told him what I had to and he let go. Not another cut,  
not even a stitch. The needle removed and replaced with a bandage.

When he removed his hand, I'll admit, my arm ached.

### IV.

My father said that after his older brother died,  
the ghost would come to see him  
in dreams. Each night, or maybe

less frequently than that, it would arrive

at the foot of his bed—sallow, pale, yes  
but vivid and opaque—sitting with a hand  
on each knee, calling to him  
until he woke up.

The face—Donald’s—was clean  
sometimes, other times bloody  
and pierced through with pieces  
from the shattered car windshield.

The last time it appeared there  
on the cold pilled sheets it said  
*Brother, you don’t need me anymore.*  
And then it left, and he fell asleep.

30 years before I was born but this  
I grew up hearing—the lullaby, the incantation  
to conjure the death-child of my father’s  
memory. It was the prayer

I would whisper on his worst nights,  
clasping my palms together  
and trying to summon the memory  
which was not mine.

The end of that story—the word *need*  
like an iron bell tolling  
to mark the finality of adolescent life—  
how sensible. But what was said

during those unearthly nights  
while their mother cried in the kitchen,  
the dishwater drying her thick hands  
until they cracked and bled?

And what will I say, at night, the ghost  
at the foot of someone else’s bed?  
Why didn’t you let your brother go  
when he released you,

Father, were you afraid  
that you too would disappear  
if you let go of despair? *Brother, you don’t need me*  
*anymore*, Brother, you are free

to carry your own weight. Father,  
your head is covered at night with the sheet, your eyes  
with the palms of your hands. Daddy,  
feel him gone in the night air.

V.

My mother dreams of flying. She loves these nights,  
but never gets very high off the ground.

I think the sound of geese must lift her in sleep.

My mother dreams in color—dreams of diving  
into Lake Champlain where carp, perch, and sturgeon swim

magenta lime green, yellow silver blue around her  
in the clear water.

My mother dreams of blank newspaper flying through streets,  
of lying naked in snow.

My mother dreams of being chased.

My mother dreams of dragging herself across hot coals.

My mother dreams of painting, concentration set on the fingers  
of an old man's hand.

My mother dreams herself into a painting, a hawk's wings stretched out across  
canvas, her, the grain beneath it like waves in the wind.

My mother dreams the running dreams, the paralyzed legs, teeth falling out dreams,  
of collecting each wet shining tooth and placing it in her pocket.  
In the morning, reaching for it, finding nothing.

My mother's dreams become a waking in the night, body frozen, heart  
pulsing in paralyzed chest.

She is not alone on these nights, my father in bed beside her  
lies on his back—his breathing and gargled snore  
cannot save her from the dream-sound of footsteps in the hallway.

There is a pressure on her chest—something holds her down.

My mother dreams each *step* she dreams and dreams *step step*  
but her body anchors her in place.

VI.

The TV was on in the other room. You remember—  
we were cooking spinach for dinner

in our first apartment. The awful one. Loud neighbors,  
water from the faucet tinted yellow, the strange smell always

in the hallway. We were delirious, drunk  
on independence. Remember,

we roasted crushed garlic in a hot black pan,  
salt and ground pepper. *Police called to the area*  
*near Lane Press at 6:45 pm.* Remember the scent of it,

wilting and wet. The sizzle,  
steam rising, my hand at your waist

softly, with love. The television was humming

maybe a news station, *man lost control of his motorcycle*  
*on Hinesburg Road.* Your hair was long then.

I pulled it back over your shoulder always  
looking for the tight curls around the nape of your neck.

Remember my touch, your hands holding a fist-full  
of fresh leaves, tossing them into the pan

with olive oil *biker taken to hospital, multiple injuries, body covered*  
*in third-degree burns.* We were making a home, I knew

I couldn't say it then. We felt like a family.  
The whole lot withered down to nothing more  
than a tablespoon. It wasn't enough,

remember? We closed the windows, *driver*  
*lying on roadway, thrown 30 feet,* outside the kids from next door

were playing, ruining our quiet romance and there on the plate,

only a tiny shining pile of green  
shared between us.

Wasn't there something else?  
A simply cooked chicken, a pot of rice? A phone call  
from home, *Manda-bean, there's been an accident*, but  
that spinach against your tongue, *lying on the ground*,  
against mine, touching the roof of my mouth. *The man thrown*  
*30 feet, speed and alcohol a factor* the savory spinach *condition unknown*. tender against our teeth. Remember it, remember  
the taste in our mouths when we kissed,  
how could we think of anything else?

## VII.

I found them in a box in the basement  
—the drawings of women on old newspapers,  
delicate and yellowed. Some school vacation,

I must have been bored, not knowing exactly what it was  
I was looking for. My dust-covered fingers left  
smudges on the pages as I leafed through, choosing favorites.

I liked the youngest one with large cold eyes.  
Her hair, parted unevenly and falling in rings down the side  
of her face. Her chin was soft, hint of a dimple—like mine  
and I studied her,

traced my finger along her jaw, not noticing  
at first the smear I left, the slight blurring. How could I know  
then that these drawings were my mother's?

I only saw the beauty fanned out in front of me. I turned  
to the box where chalky pencils and glass pots  
of ink lay waiting for my itching hands.

And maybe I left my mother's women alone. Maybe  
I found my own newsprint from the recycle bin  
in the kitchen upstairs. Maybe my mother

was home from work, asking what in the world I was up to

and maybe I lied and hid away the odd treasures  
for another day when I would ask her where they came from.

She might've told me they were hers,  
with a sheepish sort of laugh, not allowing me  
to call her, with pride, an artist.

On another day, maybe she sat down to draw me and gave up.  
These basement-kept things were just a story,  
some relic from her past, no time for them now.

## Persistence

He waits at the bus stop,  
rain curling his hair.

Tiny globes break against his skull—the sound  
he imagines so soft and quiet.

He is alone, always, at the bus stop.  
Hands in his pockets,

flicking fingernails, feeling hip bones  
against the dense leather of his coat.

A cricket chirps. He feels  
the world turning, carrying him

right along with it.

The girl is twirling around

in his brain. Her eyes are blue  
as the faded paint on the bus stop bench,

fresh, ripe plums on her breath,  
and his ear is a rose

she whispers into. *I liked yours the best,*  
she breathes down into his soft petals,

the creases catch her words.

And it hardly matters

that it was second grade, that girls grow up,  
or that she only meant the picture

he had drawn of cops and robbers.  
The gravity was gone from the room

then as it is now, the sun sets around him.  
Newspaper spreads on the streets

and catches in the wind. A headline  
strikes across a car windshield and blows away.

There must be meaning—the poem he can't write  
about a day in second grade

when the pretty girl  
collected drawings and *liked his*,

somehow, *the best*. The meaning is falling  
down around him, raindrops catch the light and break

against his skin. Only rain. *It hardly matters* the girl,  
so many years ago now,

seems to say. The trees lean  
over his head. He is waiting

at the bus stop. He feels the earth  
beneath him move

not a turning but a twitch  
like the second hand of a clock.

## Ode to Hands

Moving meticulously  
across things—running the words in a book,  
curving to peel the chalky bark from a birch tree.  
To fidgeting hands that hold still, *hold still!* and to hands  
that lay folded now in a woman’s lap  
as she waits at the window for rain, for flooding, waits  
to drown. Another mess to clean. To holding the memory  
of a father’s workbench in the basement,  
where he built for his daughter a dollhouse  
and painted in acrylic pink each wall of each tiny room.  
To holding, to letting go. To those things that can’t be let go  
of. To the memory, the silver cuff links stolen from his drawer,  
the white hot imprint they left in the palm even days later. To touch  
and to be touched, to those things that beg to be left  
untouched. His hands again, for instance. The roughness  
as he cut through each wooden wall, *be careful, careful...*  
To hands that hold, even in separation because love’s separation  
is incomprehensible. And to her hands now, cold  
on a winter morning cradling the cracked leather steering wheel  
as they drive through rain,  
that wide stretch of road through the windshield.  
Each interruption of the center line a relief,  
a warning. A stick, a stone, the knobs of the radio.  
The song she hums along to and the hands that don’t hear.

First

Here's what I remember: not the wind  
blowing off the airport runway on the other side of the fence  
or gray clouds, swelling in the sky.

Not the cars in the distance, coming and going. Not the families safe  
in their homes, clinking silverware sounds  
echoing through open windows. Not the planes

flying so low overhead you might see scratches on their undersides.  
Not the flight attendants, either, flying to Boston  
to pick up connecting flights,

sleeping in cheap motels off the coast of Rhode Island,  
eating free continental breakfasts and falling  
in love with traveling businessmen in nice suits

who buy them drinks, stay the night, and then leave  
for early meetings. Not all those flight attendants lying lonely in bed,  
smoking cigarettes and thinking *this is the life we choose*

and *at least it isn't home*. Wondering if there is a home anymore  
to go back to. Not the deafening roar of airplanes.  
Not the chemical smell of a condom wrapper

or the cold grass against my back. Not him, above me,  
gripping and pushing *is it ok is it ok is it ok*, but my heart  
like a hummingbird trapped inside my chest, seeking a way out.

## On Returning to Maine

Tonight at the water's edge each wave peels back  
revealing a razor trail of stones and shells. It's never  
the same, each year the dunes recede inch by inch,

the environmentalists throw warnings—might as well bellow  
into the salt-thick wind—and each year  
the vacationers care just enough to notice.

The August nights when we drank on the beach,  
stumbling up over a corroded fence to those dunes  
we didn't think of anything but our bodies

and our need, beach-fires, faces ablaze, hair soaking  
in the smell of smoke, bodies flickering in and out of love—the clichés  
were ours, and they made us happy.

The year Michael died, we told beautiful stories  
as if the telling could re-build him better than he was.  
How naive to think of the blueberries he picked

by the bog, red hair like a halo, a halo! around his angular face.  
How selfish to dream him into happiness.  
That was five years ago already,

and the circle's smaller now, sure,  
but no one thinks of him much anymore. All of us  
dwell in our own shade of despondency.

Here, between two friends, one with a guitar,  
I sit running fingers through the sand, flecks of mica wedging  
beneath my nails. The first—the Dylan-like hang of his hair,

a vagabond, a wannabe—opens his mouth, *freedom*  
*is just another word*—and between his lips  
I can feel the lust for simplicity.

I could look up at the boozy sky, let the ocean swallow me  
with sound, rest here at the end of love  
where it has yet to sour, but something is always

just out of reach. Michael must have known,  
didn't he? what we refuse to know, the silence just beyond  
the waves, the laughter. He lit the match, let it drop because he knew

the water might save him if he walked a little farther,  
his body numbing inch by inch, and the Atlantic—  
cold in every true sense of the word.

## Thrift

We have been searching the same aisles again  
and again, the same pieces catch his eye. It is August  
and we have been together for six months.  
He is running his hands over broken furniture and figurines  
swallowed by cobwebs. It has been hours. I am hungry  
and tired of knick knacks and junk. Here is a rocking chair  
with scratches along the arm rest,  
a piano stool with a broken leg. Six months may lead to years,  
may lead to a lifetime. He is kneeling down  
to see the undersides, as if looking for clues from past owners.

He shows me a brass trumpet from the 1900s he found  
in a corner under some cardboard. A cigar box,  
a broken violin with a note inside the case,  
*Dear friend, someone has stolen  
the deed to my house, locked the windows  
and doors.* The wrinkled man stands forever  
in our minds, cold and aged, homeless but for his fiddle.  
The lease to my apartment is up in a year and we've talked  
about moving in together. He purchases the instrument  
although it is overpriced and missing its bow.

At two in the afternoon we are leaving once more,  
digging ourselves out from fingerprints and price tags.  
We are holding hands and walking to a sandwich shop  
across the street, but I am still in the thrift store.  
I am running my hands along lamp shades and book shelves,  
holding up gaudy jewelry and moth-eaten clothes to the light  
and wondering what it is he sees that I can't.  
A deed is not a home. It's nothing but a slip of paper.

## A Name

When my cousin told me—though it wasn’t a shock,  
and afterward he was so much the same—about the sex change,  
I couldn’t stop using his old name. Mariah  
was suddenly everywhere. Mariah  
through doorways and in photographs in the hall. Mariah  
at home, on the way to work, singing along with the radio.  
He didn’t correct me at first, but then it became so obvious. Everyone else  
was using the new name, the *right* name,  
but for me the world was still full of Mariah.  
Much as I tried, I couldn’t stop myself. Mariah,  
in my emails and over the phone—Mariah  
where are you headed, Mariah,  
are you coming to visit soon? I knew I was hurting him.  
Even when I caught myself, stopped midway through the name,  
I could see the pain in his eyes. Each Mariah  
was a stone on a tin roof, a painful pinging sound. And what could I say?  
How could I protect him when Mariah  
was leaping out of my mouth like a bird? Mariah;  
the yellow cake, buttery icing piled into roses, Mariah,  
the name I had known since he was an infant in my childish arms.  
The name I called when we were four and seven years old, him having lost  
his way when we were swimming in the lake. Mariah,  
the girl in pink pajamas crying in my arms after another fight  
with her father. Mariah, Mariah, I was hurting him, Mariah  
when I all I wanted was to save the Mariah  
dying in my mind. Mariah  
stopped meaning what it had, my cousin, Mariah,  
wasn’t him anymore, only the pearly shell  
of a thing I had once known. The man was in front of me, and Mariah  
was just a word, those three syllable sounds, an impulse  
springing from me as if—that sound—I was afraid to lose it.

## The Waiting Room at Howard Counseling Center

A woman sits across from me, eyes down  
and sunken like my father's. I feel for her  
the way I do for him—pity, my own  
selfish form of empathy—until another woman

walks in, *how was your holiday?* Horrible  
spits the first, *mine too, I'm going to lose my job*  
because someone brought her to the hospital where she works  
after a fall down the stairs in her apartment.

They sit in the waiting room  
across from me talking to each other, against each other.

I say, not to them, sometimes I open my mouth  
to spit in the sink and blood comes,  
pinking the running water. I panic,  
I panic, no one knows. They sit in their misery.

And then my father walks in, ready for his ride home.

## An Old Friend

A friend and I went to a museum. We hadn't talked  
in a few years. There had been some falling out, some anger,  
someone to blame. Neither admitted to remembering,

so in silence we agreed to let it all go.

We had been meaning to go look at art,  
but stumbled instead,

out of the cold, into the *Museum of Natural History*—  
dinosaur skeletons, a room of diamonds, the giant squid translucent  
and leathered sprawling inside a Plexiglass tank,  
it was all wrong.

But we stayed. The cold outside kept us,  
encasing us in its own way so that we gave up  
hope of finding the place we had  
meant to go.

In a later conversation,

I asked what he meant by quoting Keats,

*So in my veins red life might stream again  
and thou be conscience-calmed. See here it is—  
I hold it towards you*

while we were looking at giant sloths. Strange, even  
for him, and I couldn't remember the thing I had said first  
or if I had said anything at all.

It was only a response, he said, nothing to dwell on.  
Maybe I had said what I was thinking: that an unspoken word can never stand  
in for mercy. This formality we held each other to.

We took the metro home, kissed each others' cheeks,  
we'd meet for coffee sometime  
in the coming month. Or sometime.

Outside the sky was so blue, so blindingly blue.

## Answering Machine

If it becomes  
twelve o'clock, one  
and I'm still  
alone, I might  
dial your number  
hopeful  
with each ring.  
I might move  
around  
the furniture  
in the living room.  
I might change  
a burnt-out light  
bulb or sift  
through the mail.  
I could leave  
the phone not quite  
off its hook,  
take the keys  
and drive,  
headlights casting  
their eerie  
light onto the street.  
Then again, I've  
never been  
spontaneous and the roads  
are slick with rain.  
I might call  
in the middle of the  
night, an act  
which is always rude,  
unless, of course,  
there is some  
emergency.  
Then again,  
I already know  
what your voice  
sounds like  
over an answering  
machine.  
So instead of calling,  
I might listen  
to the messages  
I still have—not

necessarily saved,  
but there  
all the same.

## After Leaving

Eventually, I had to wash the clothes  
he left in my bedroom. To think he'd left his smell  
on purpose, to think he might come back for it

or for anything. Here's the thing about holding on: years ago,  
when the family dog died, my father kept her body  
out in the garage in a blue canvas bag. Waiting

for a night when we were all home, waiting for a weekend  
or a nice day. Waiting then, of course—because it was late November  
and snowing almost every day—for the ground to thaw.

For weeks the body lay curled and cold, stiffening in the bag.  
Our neighbors put up Christmas lights. Wire reindeer congregated  
along the edges of lawns, half buried after the snow plow went by.

My sister and I would dig into the dirt-crusted mounds  
at the start of the driveway, snow collapsing in on us  
before we dug through to the other side.

Those months were darkest, even in the daytime—the sky  
that terrible opacity, the scent of snow hanging dry and harsh  
in the air, urging us all inside. Even as kids we kept our heads down,

quiet, half the year spent waiting for it to end.  
And that November my father, going out each night to drink,  
sitting with the canvas bag. I would be in the kitchen doing homework,

listening for goodbyes, for decay. Maybe I was young,  
but it seemed to me that regret is all the dead leave us. And we did  
bury it in the spring, dug up some of the lilacs

that grew wild around the backyard. Where my father tossed them—  
half-heartedly over the fence like old brush,  
like a mound of garbage—they took root and continued to grow.

## The Apology

My father sits across the kitchen table from me,  
the wrinkles on his face make strange shadows, exaggerated  
in the pale overhead light so that he is almost

not my father. Or more my father, a caricature  
of himself. And there are scars there, too, the ones  
I've tried not to see. I think it's true

what my sister has said over the phone,  
he's lost weight. You can see it around his cheeks and eyes,  
a hollowing out. He's talking about everything he's done

around the house. Out back, the grass mowed,  
a wood chuck trapped and taken away.  
An old beech tree is dying, leaning uncomfortably close

to the house. Cutting it down comes next.  
He's looking for praise, and I know it wouldn't be too hard  
to give it. My sister says he's not drinking

anymore, but he doesn't mention that. He's been thinking  
of painting the walls in the living room, fixing the small hole  
near the fireplace where mice have gotten in. He looks so hopeful,

his whole body delicate as paper. I know each chore he lists  
is, in its own way, an apology. I give him the grace  
of silence. Not enough is all I can do.

He tells me the skunks are out now,  
he saw one last week in the garage. More than anything  
I want to leave. The kitchen air is stale

even with the window cracked open. The breeze blows ripe  
with the smell of manure, diesel fuel  
and corn stalks warming in the sun, but the season

is ending. Already it's time to put in the storm windows,  
pick up a few cords of wood. Already,  
the air is turning cold at night, and the leaves are changing.

## Left Unsaid

I am waking in the middle of the night again with something like a song in my head. For a second I am lost.

This bed, too hard, the radiator's uneven growl. Someone is snoring and I think it must be my father

because it's always my father. And there is comfort in this involuntary noise, reliability.

The teenagers murmuring outside my window stay up till dawn. Their shadows grow tall along the vinyl sides of houses. They are laughing,

flicking lighters, dancing fingers through the flame. They're ready for Friday night. Ready for the end of something, for the time to leave

this god damned too-small town, ready for their lives to matter, for anything to matter. The neighbors in their beds breathe,

the sheets shifting with each toss and turn of each body sleeping, and my father is in his bed one room away, snoring.

Something always brings me home. The promise, maybe, of familiar noise. The crickets, the tree branches cracking in wind, the creaking

floor boards as my father finds his way to the kitchen. One sound and I'm awake with eyes closed. Is it the cheap bed in this apartment

I can't afford or the memory of a little girl's room—they're not so different in the dark. The neighbors are always fighting, everywhere.

Maybe my father will spend another night drinking. Another bottle hidden in the hall closet where I'll find it, but leave it there empty.

And when I wake in the middle of the night, startled by silence, there may be snow falling outside my window.

## Mistake

The burn—I won’t say—is from an iron,  
innocent enough at first. The shirt laid out over the bed  
the heating metal a familiar thing, the smell,  
curling across cotton.

But then, as if in a trance, my hand lifting to my chest.  
Thoughtlessly, directly, the small triangle tip  
touching—just for a moment, less—the skin above  
my left breast. I won’t say

I did it to myself. How foolish a thing  
to admit. And for a moment I could think it didn’t  
happen really, just a strange impulse. Until  
the pink stinging of flesh, the smell.

In sleep, the triangle burns cold. In my dreams,  
it is always winter. No more than a moment,  
but enough to blister, burst the skin.  
The thinness of each layer peeling back,

shocking. After the newness wore off, a red  
then brown scab replaced it. The hurt changed too,  
to a tempting itchiness that I did—I admit—scratch  
until it bled. How embarrassing, how

trivial. The first time we lived together,  
those empty boxes, stray cats in the hallway. We almost fit  
together in the bathtub, the water’s faint chemical blue.  
Hard to believe, once again,

I’ve done a thing I can’t take back.  
There is a scar now, smooth and pale. And in sleep,  
the snow burns the place that is healed.  
I only meant to touch it for a moment.

To Love You, Father

You exist only in moments of exhalation,  
the chance that the lungs will fail

so that the next breath  
is pulling and gasping. You live

in the air between highway cars,  
shrinking and stretching as they speed, you threaten.

You are the silence between each sob  
my mother cries, the second

before the front door slams shut. Your body  
is the void you leave behind,

the line of light shining through  
the gap beneath the door.

And what connects us, Father, but more emptiness?  
Cotton strings and scotch tape, we are paper dolls

cut from these pages you will never see  
where I have written you into poems,

the spaces between words. I have created  
hundreds of you, an eternity of you,

the spaces widening with each year  
I spend away from you, each mile

I put between us. You are  
the faint hum before a phone call,

you are the stillness before morning, you  
are the naked white page to fill in.

And I won't. Because the words will say  
I love you, Father, and to love you

is to be destroyed. Sleep easy:  
I will never reveal you.

## Recital

The call comes—mechanical and lukewarm,  
the indifference I have hoped for thickens our voices  
and it's a relief, the end of hoping. Things are fine,

of course. I've moved the couch, repotted the plants,  
everything is fine. Even my old records, gone now,  
I don't miss, the singing in the shower

waking me in the morning. He's getting in shape, I'm out to lunch  
with friends. One says she envies the way I feel sorrow—  
showing none of it on the outside. I wonder what there is to envy,

even now, what else to do but drown, demurely,  
with hands folded? What else to do at a time like this  
but remember your manners? I do

hope as we hang up that something more than the voice,  
drifting in particles through the air, across state borders,  
bridges, through toll booths and over highways,

will reach me. In a dream, there is the clarinet again—  
sickeningly sweet as I sit at the piano playing along  
to the disembodied melody.

I hold open the chords like an offering, a fermata  
in the sixteenth measure where the key is about to change.  
I can see him, tongue as it was,

cupping the reed. I lift my hands from the keys to hear the ringing.  
I am shaking, in the solitary darkness, myself awake,  
blue light between shades, hands poised above the keys.

## On Caring for a Friend's Cat

The hang of a head, hair, the sigh  
through pursed lips. A man is reclining

in a black chair by a bed, feet up and crossed  
at the ankle. We'll allow ourselves

this company, this emptiness is at least gentle.  
The room is so hollow, ceilings high.

While I am pretending to read one of his books,  
he pours a glass of wine, touches my shoulder,

maybe kisses my forehead. This moment  
is meant for someone else. Later,

in bed with him I can only think of the cat  
I cared for once, a friend's cat, and her awful cries

that kept me awake for the better part of a week.  
During the day I might see the curtain move,

a shadow, an almost imperceptible sound. But at night  
I would lay in bed, trying to hear beyond her

to the night time trains out the window. She hid  
from me in the hall closet, tightly curled

behind the heating unit. I wouldn't have known  
she was there, had I not followed her wailing

like a siren, a child, begging to me  
or to something else for rescue. Sleep reminds us

of our loneliness, doesn't it? There, wide-eyed  
in the flickering hall light, she looked up at me

as if she might know me, all of this confusion  
just a fevered dream she would wake from

with eyelids twitching, legs cramping.  
Poor, dumb animal—lost as I was

in the smells, strange and everywhere,  
of a temporary home. And that moment

of recognition, that I was not  
a familiar thing but one to be distrusted.