

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis:

FIELDSTONE

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Dissertation directed by:

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The poems in this collection move through multiple voices and spaces. Often the characters find themselves destabilized by complex emotional relationships that cause them to seek footing, with limited success, in their worlds. This tension, set within an authentically rendered experience, drives this collection's exploration of how matter and meaning are constantly shaping each other.

FIELDSTONE

By

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A View from a Hill

Morning has come and evening will follow and flow
over these groves and fields before me. I imagine
eons broader than the width of mind and memory,
see these mountains thrust to full height in an instant,
their tops sheared off by the coarseness of passing clouds.

Dinosaurs leave gorging ginkgo and lie down together
all at once with the forest to rest compressed beneath
a blanket of mudstone and condense into silky black
fossil fuels. Oceans fall in a single rain, lay down
a sheet of calcium coral corpses, then retreat
like the tide to more familiar basins full of fish.

Glaciers in motion plough furrows in plateaus
of single stone then melt in a flash as one era clicks
into the next releasing a torrent of the coldest water
and sloping sediments ported from the north. And all this
is concealed under lichens, then ferns, then fields then forests.

Sunlight rolls over the world or the world
rolls through the sun's light and it is glorious.
With a sweep of my vision I gather the grey blue
grey ridgeline more distant than clouds and everything
this side of that horizon: azure, amber, umber, alabaster.

Yes, this is good. I watch the sunlight roll, count the hours
that measure that movement. I've been looking for eternities.

Secession

The ditch, little more than a ragged edge of the soy field, ambles south beside a tar and chip back-road. Lobes of tufted grass and soil loll like tongues over the course. It is deeper than it seems, but dry. The ditch travels down the hill, away from my father's house

to a road-lime delta splayed, blue-dusted under the culvert, a corrugated pipe large enough to crawl into if the dark, the rust serrations, and creeping things were not too much to overcome.

It is not the black snake, irascible with clouded eyes. It is not the bullfrog with thighs muscled like the raptors in books I keep at my bedside. It is not the wolf spider, fat as a thumb and wooled gray as my father's rasping jaw. I can reach my hand

into the bloody mouth rusted through the galvanized tube, into that shadow and draw any of these out. I let them move freely through my hands, allow them to explore the warmth of my grasp.

I speak to them, scold them for their carelessness, and release them. I wash the oils of fear from my hands with the darker sands, moist below the surface. This pipe runs beneath the East West road and into Beaver Run, also dry but broader than a leap

at most places. A few yards into the forest the run hits a great rock that lies like the discarded head of a trout, bladelike in the channel. This monument my throne, this wood my nation.

Trees

1

The greatest of my trees is lost.
The curve of the gully washed wider
and wider and finally loosed one
too many tendrils. At 140 feet
tall it simply couldn't grip
what earth was left for it.
It fell, stone heavy, ash idle,
lengthwise to the windbreak and rill.

2

The tree that I might take for dead
With greying bough and downturned head
Took up full draught the earth's full share
Of worm-churned loam and sun-filled air

To swell the autumn's honeyed yield,
Saccharine meat and glass green peel.
All beauty, sugar, flesh, and seed
Drawn from bone of mother tree

Today I cut down the last of the monks' orchard that once stood here.
I ran my finger over the record of a life – leaf-thin years wrapped one round the other,
each alike – the stump damp with the scent of apples. One hundred fifty years
and eight feet tall. As it fell I could tell you, it wasn't worth it.

3

My young grandson
splits the birch;
takes up the maul,
holds it as you
hold a snake:
right ringed
tenderly
at the neck,
left at the tail.
Extends,
brings right hand
to left, and drops
the head through
the wood.
Birch doesn't
even splinter
the haft

when his aim
isn't true.
When we take
in an oak,
three years dead
at least,
he is the setter.
He rolls the stump-round,
three feet wide
and anvil heavy,
into center platform
and places on it
the splitting rounds.
His father
cracks them
between his hands.
The precision and
haste a testimony—
this is work.
His older brother works
bough lengths from the truck
and over the horse
where I keep
the chainsaw screaming
and stove lengths falling
fast as he can lift them
and he the slow link
in the labor chain.
This is work.
It must be finished
or the splits wont
season by winter.
It's not age that matters
in this business,
but fiber,
firmness of the flesh.

4

Pine plantation trees, all the same,
stand like tin soldiers in rows, tall
without majesty. They were planned
for a specific life; a foot of width

then let someone cut them
for lumber— woodmen in camps like
nomads, armed in the iron of

their work; timberjack and shrieking

saw. These pines are larger and old,
planted on too steep a grade. Too
steep for the cutting man, too steep
for machinery, too steep also

for Amish horses. These old ones
raise their bottom branches, create
a bed of cones and needles
like deer pelt. Umber glow shadow

beneath themselves, They kill
off undergrowth, even their own
offspring, whip spine saplings
dead for want of sunlight.

5

Barefoot, I sip tea and look from the window.
Two trees stand in the frame, similar
and of the same species. Bradford pear
I believe. One has adorned itself in flowers,
white as if carrying the recent winter's ice.
The occasional early bee browses clumsily.
The second tree remains bare having decided
that this warmth is not yet the warmth
for flowers— winter dormance, skeletal grey.
My wife throws a log in the stove.

It's the God Damn Lord of the Flies

She said because we had been in the creek
And caught all the crawdads
We'd swung down the fox grapes
pulled quills from porcupine carcass

fought the barn cats and lost
we'd painted our faces in tiger lily
lost flesh in the green briar
got our mouths black and swole with raspberry

I'd stung the back of his knee with nettle
he'd pushed me in guts from a hunter's field-dressing
we'd knocked a jay's nest from the broken elm
and fingered the split where the lighting

struck in a hailstorm last July
burdock in our hair we'd slung rocks
through the paper wasp nest
and pulled the snakes from foundation blocks

where the corncrib used to be
and gone in secret to the *dangerous shed*
where the Amish farm tools bristle
and a rot split beam floats overhead

we'd chased the sheep until the ram chased us
and mosquitos came out for twilight
picked the ticks from each others backs
before they got a good bite

old dog barking all the while
we brothers returned up grandma's drive
sharp stick armed savage summer worn
the goddamn lord of the flies

Dudley

“Hey, so my dad had this dog, *Bailey*, a bitchy dog, one of those fluffy dogs who’s supposed to work with the sheep, but he wasn’t fluffy because he always had a reason to get shaved, like the time he went out hunting groundhogs but found, fought, and lost to both a porcupine and skunk, or the day he got himself sent to the basement like usual, ate a gallon of tub lard, and washed himself into the sump with his own shit, and he never learned to sit let alone watch the sheep, the damn dog could open the front door but he couldn’t even understand when you told him to fuck off. For like nine months there every time a neighbor would drop by for a pot of coffee they’d offer to shoot the poor son of a bitch, just being nice, you know, since they know it’s a hard thing to shoot your own dog, even if you can’t use the front door because the dog’s too decrepit to move off the mat. Well on Tuesday after he died of his own old age, he was fifteen, they say the donkey woke them up at five am honking and kicking the piss out of a coyote he had cornered in the pasture, the farms got no dog for one day and the coyotes are in the sheep pasture! You kidding me? So anyway give me one that looks like a *Dudley*, dad already decided the new dog’s gonna be a *Dudley*.”

Behind the Sign

Behind the posted privatepropertynotrespassdumping sign
I sat beside a leaflitter rainwater washingmachine
And stroked the glossy bluebelly of a frightened fencelizard.
The man who nailed that sign into that tree must have driven
Fifty miles from the deadtoad chemlawn tictacsubburbs
To nail that sign to that tree to keep out the dumpeddefunctfridges.
Tinyturkeys flutterfopped from a tirepile at his hammering
Thwackthwackpak and sportutilityvehicle grumblehum
and mamaturkey dragging her wing.

Gumdropfrogs gluedgreen unseen in the treecanopy
Shake awake blink and think *who is this to be hammering here*
where live the scraggytrees, the shallowroot, the jaundicerush,
the mossgangrene, the mountainblack, and waterred?
Where there's flies a plenty and the mines are dead. We don't know this man.
This owneragent who did not set a wellshodfoot to this side of his sign
for the only tracks in the silt and slime are a clovenhoove's and mine.
Perhaps he feared the brassbronzecoppersnake or the one with the rattle,
or more probably, the ripriproar of the fourwheelerrabble
who live here with their rattlingwrecks alive and dead; HatchedbackedHondas
hurling refuse down the ragged strippedoutslopes into red water
reddened by the foolsgold rusting underground and redbeavers
slap their tails and dive.

Here paperlichens enwrap boulders – give their lives to rebuild the kingdom
with corpsehumus. Even the lily that floats upon blackwater
and spreads her petals open to the sun has her roots entangled in this mud.
Tied in place, toadvictim lost ecosystem, but her every cell were built
with what she drew out from silt and decomposingpast alive behind
the posted privatepropertynotrespassdumping sign.

Ruin

Bullet holes in the Posted sign invited us inside.
Graffiti grew like lichens on the cement block walls.
One Way Jesus in green had been there long enough to have grown
a purple penis. In red it read *All Nigers Must Die* as if the author
could tell you that Niger is in Africa. Below, in the same red
paint, a swastika with a backwards leg scratched out.
The blue painter settled for straightforward simple *FUCK*,
which an illustrator in white gave a graphic homosexual interpretation to.
Three circles: Peace, Satan, and anarchy, were lost among the cartoon breasts
while gang tags swirled together. A well hung orange dinosaur
looked on and said *It Is What It Is*. It was a good place
to speak in things we didn't understand, you and I
there on our blanket out of sight in the shelter after school —
the colors blurred into beauty, beer cans and spent shells scattered
gold and silver light from the single window, and for a moment
every Thursday, I could forget you,
blur into you, as long as no one saw.

The 43rd Grave

His father is out of town. The lights go out at the breaker.
There's a fire on the slag flats. A plane had hit the company power plant,
shattered through the tree line, and across the black desert.

He is seventeen, his father's apprentice, still polishing brass
and practicing the warm handshake. His is one of seven
mortuaries called to manage the body search as the ashes cool.

Volunteers, men sent home from the dark and silent breaker,
lock their dogs inside and bring out empty ash pans from their basement furnaces—
round ones for plane parts, the square ones for what might be human.

The smoke, black at first, then a softer grey, catches the pink and gold of sunset.
The last of the volunteers are shaking trees and kicking through the shale chips
or standing by, resting weary hands and eyes. The hearses are all full.

The government man asks whose mortuary is closest. The process
must be centralized to ensure accuracy and efficiency so the nearest preparations
room wins the labor and the pay check whether the father is there or not.

The other hearses drop their ash pans by the backdoor in the alley.
The government man leaves the boy to make two piles, one of stuff
that might be recognized, the tattoos, the unburned hair, the jewelry, the scars,

the other pile for things so broken, so burnt that their connection
to a human life could scarcely be believed let alone be determined.
By the next afternoon, when the government man returns,

the boy has the viewing room lined with tarps, neat rows of death in pieces
and is sleeping on the foyer settee with a vapor rub moustache.
Forty-two people on the plane. Forty-two boxes one name on each.

The government man has brought forty-two cards with lists of things to look for.
They find a finger in a recognized ring, "shut her coffin, I'll make the call,"
the man says. The boy places the finger in a body sized box,

centered it on a bed of tangled straw, and lets his hand rest on the open lid,
his eyes on the open space. "Look son, the families won't be looking inside, they just need
something to bury." It takes just two days, the bodies are identified,

the pans hosed out and sent back to catch coal ash in furnaces. Forty two families
receive their loved ones, yet the flesh and bones are here on tarps upon the floor.
The government man and the apprentice stand silent and look at what remains.

The food distributor donates a one-ton potato crate.

Pictures

My mother, in middle age, began hanging framed photos on every wall of her house. My father alive and with hair. My mother younger than I knew her. My brothers

at all ages. On both sides of the hall: twenty eight years of vacations under the same yellow umbrella on the same beach. In one I sit in the dinghy carved in sand

by my father. A few steps and twelve years further down the hall, I carve a sand boat in which no one sits. My own children, as mom says, still a twinkle in my eye.

Numbers of faces gather around ham's with glasses raised to Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving; faces like moons at dissimilar phase some waxing, others waning whiter, cooler, passing darkly from the frame. Up the stairs:

graduations, wrestling, and little league. Babies over the bathroom counter, naked, laughing, crying, sleeping, framing the mirror. There, toothless mouths, my brothers', my own,

screaming from hairless, overlarge, misshapen heads, registering touch and sound as violence, at peace only in sleep and at the breast. Above the toilet, a watercolor print of sailboats.

The room where I sleep on visits home too has been handed over to mom's museum: a gathering in a dim room, some get together with neighbors who never became friends. Myself, no a brother

as an infant, cradled in unfamiliar hands, as large as his still womb folded body. Beside the highboy a portrait in which I cannot recognize my father though his eyes are like mine, but gentle.

Beside that, me again costumed to mimic adult formality for a junior high dance. My first date. To my eye now, a boyish little girl folded gracelessly in my childlike arms. My hands, as if a true embrace

would break her or them, rest lightly on her stomach. She leans her shoulder to press my sunken chest. How brave we must have been— to stand before our parent's cameras and love each other.

Aquarium

My family was always efficient at killing fish. Pet ones. We provided the right number of gallons of the right kind of water and the proper gravel, the right number of plants fake and real, the recommended filter and bubbler for oxygenation. We cleaned the glass with regularity and precision with no harmful substance and clean hands. Once a month we siphoned the detritus from the blue bottom and refilled the tank to the fill line with the right water and, always we watched our fish swim a little further on an angle one way or other a little closer to one side rolling the whiter belly a little bit further around to the carefully selected light that provided the suggested measure of heat until the moment their bubble bellies broke the surface one by one and the little fellows ceased to swim at all. It was the least of our effort to replace them – just a matter of puncturing plastic bags from the pet shop, carnival, pond, etc.

A family friend who's dorm room goldfish was now ten years old and had the pleasant form and feature of an over ripe mango who was of course appalled at the parade of barrel rolling bloated corpses winding their way around our toilet bowl and through the plumbing. Our friend offered to create a fishbowl that might extend the lives of our momentary friends and perhaps allow us the time to become fond of, even attached to a bag full. He took the mass of supplies we'd accrued over the years of habitat construction: the gravels and marbles, the drops and pellets, the tube bubblers and treasure chest bubblers and skull bubblers, filters and plastic plants, fake rocks and scuba men, treatments for algae and supplemental algae for oxygen,

acid drops and alkalines –
the full extent of pet positive purchase
and each unit of it with a body count.
He held each baggie of this and jar
of that and turned each in the light
like a master considering the plain
on which to cut a large diamond.
He selected marble by marble a bed,
leaf by leaf a forest, and, by principal
of symbiosis and conviviality,
selected from private stock a single
fish for each cubic foot of water.

Stained Glass

Kneeling in the back of mass I notice,
in a stained glass window, the toddler Jesus
stands stiffly, seriously in his mother's
arms raising his hand in benediction,
but it is not a hand, it is a foot.

Now maybe the Christ Child can get away
with that sort of thing, but I do suspect
that the creator has certain standards
for himself, even if they are listed
in scrolls of sacred mysteries that the church

and I are not privy to. I suspect
that the all man, all God, son of God
would have caused quite a stir among Romans
and evangelists if his hand was a foot.
Mary does not seem to notice; her eyes

stare woodenly with the glazen confidence
of one who's received divine assurances,
but I wonder at what point, after how many
infant fingers were broken, dropped, miss-set
in the leaden webbing of the window,

did the artisans in some factory
in Ohio decided this was
the right and reasonable thing to do.
They tried to describe the foot in hand form.
The grinder shaved the heel flat on the wheel,

The painter drew in palm lines. The setter
made it fit. At best they managed to achieve
the metaphor of handness, yet there it is,
a raised foot at the end of a child's
forearm offering all the holiness

that God has to give. Maybe this window
shows a more primal God, whose form is older
than the reach of memory and whose image
is less secure within our imagining
than iconography has proposed.

And who am I to tell Jesus his feet
ought to be only at the ends of legs.

Still kneeling I notice that the drone pulse
of Catholic observance has quieted.
The candles are snuffed and smoking.

The caretaker is banging his ladder
as all caretakers always do after
the solitary priest has drifted back
to the rectory. Already I feel
the hallowed dust gathering upon me.

Freight Train

An airplane in the distance, like a kiting hawk,
hangs seemingly motionless and, from here, silent,
in the sky. That doesn't happen with trains.

An engine resting among dead tank and hopper
cars, is waiting to roar: to strain couplings one then
the next and next, then all together. Move

closed boxes of things that must be moved to somewhere
distant. I've never lived more than two blocks from tracks.
Midnight clashes of coupling cars, steel threads

tied to industrial corpses— bloody iron,
black coal slag tipple, stone on stone. My town. I hear
swells and shudders in the intake as train

body, unable to speak, insists *I Am Alive*.
There is nothing so alive, so present, as a train
heaving past with bluster and glide and nothing
so distant as a train gone round the bend.

Reunion

We've been out all day, one of the several
fleets of irregular craft populating the water
where the Bohemia, Susquehanna, Northeast
and Elk rivers gather. Evening has fallen
and with it the tide. The half-light insects appear,

as if breathed forth on the exhalation of the
summer day. The water is warm and will be
for hours, so we sink low in the shallows, rest
our chins on the Chesapeake's darkening surface
and splash away the biting black flies. Swallows

reel and roll at eye level where the feast, midge
and mosquito, floats cloud-like around us.
A cousin wonders aloud if the swallows like
the taste of our blood. These many winged
things are soon lost in darkness as the sky,

horizon, treebank, shoreline, and bay wash indigo
And black. Soon, our buzz too grows dim.
We turn our dinghys toward cigarette tips
ever glowing on our distant dock. It's late,
and for each of us, a long drive home tonight.

Down the City

I step out to the platform,
raised concrete. The train
I came in on is late. The sun
is resting on the mountains
at my back, setting

the rooftops in color.
Below in the paid parking lot
she waits with others,
friends I don't know,
her hands planted in her pockets.
She squints toward me and the sun.
I must seem a cut-out of myself;

black against the tones of sunset.
I see her in full. In my palm;
Queen Anne's Lace I cut
roadside back home.

Beyond her,
the neighborhood reclines;
its streets running fast
and linear along the hillside.
She belongs to one of these
houses and I can't
find the platform stairs.

After the End of His Life

He came and went like a shadow
in shifting sunlight. He walked
slowly, drifted slowly along,
always moving, always moving –
west down Beech Street
in the early morning, passing
under each street lamp
one by one as it blinks out.
Streetlights fluttering dark
before the rising sun. Then out
of sight. He would pass,
his ancient features, his silver beard,
recognizable when his form passed
through our view as he crossed,
from blocks away, our street.
East on Willow, West on Apple Alley,
then Oak, Hickory, Pine, Chestnut,
then somewhere past the crest of the hill
Market, Gage, Water Street, and beyond.
The old man an echo in the alleys
for just about a year. He looked old
as only something terminal
can make a person look, older even;
a ghost of something past – dying.

His obituary said his name,
that he was forty-eight
and very little else. But a name
and age had said enough. The name
echoed west and east in hushed tones,
until from glimpses of the shadows
and words in the whispers we heard
that the State had found him
close enough to death to let him free
some twenty-three years
after he took his sweetheart neighbor
and her friend on a lovers' lane
drinking date in the woods
and the next day went back
poured acid over their naked bodies,
broke out their teeth, and buried them with rocks.

Side Truck

Monday – today is the long route
and It's already too hot. Recycling today
thank God. That means no cat shit,
no maggots, no mystery liquid dripping
down my wrist above the glove.
Six neighborhoods' waste of the weekend
gathered curbside—

Here bottles broken and unbroken
confess that this is the house of drunks.
Here is a woman in clothes she never
meant to be seen in running her bin
barefoot to catch us. Here is another
in fury at the truck's waking roar; I feel
her there glaring at the side of my face,
but I learned never to be looking in
the windows. Here again is the same mistake,
Styrofoam we can't take. Queen Mary's got her

underground daycare out calling from the yard.
Here is the house of a father who gave up
his daughter's childhood yesterday—
Drawn in wax, A tall being holds the hand
of a small girl in a red dress, wedge shaped
and scribble washed. It's one image
I catch a glimpse of as I tip a childhood
worth of papers into the hydraulic jaw.
I do not know these people.
There is a kitten in the street.

Infestation

They nibble
at night in the dark
at first just at your ear
like someone testing a locked doorknob
in another room.
Then their small pink feet run
deeper and their whiskers tickle your eardrum,
at night in the dark,
like the sound of a fire tearing
skyward in the wind.
During the day you clean
and the mice infest your mind.
Then, one night with the lights on
and mice running wild
through the grey maze of your brain,
countless mice with countless pink feet
racing through the Graukäse maze of your brain,
you walk barefoot and shirtless from room to room
planting glue traps.
Then you lie down in the maddening dark
and listen to the maddening silence until it breaks.
You listen to the silence broken by chewing
mice and look into the darkness until you forget
if your eyes are open or shut.
Later you awake to the sounds of mice in the maze
but it's only in your head and it's morning.
You again spend the day cleaning.
Then, at night in the dark,
with your eyes closed or open and mice
running wild in your yellow Jarlsburg brain
you hear soft screams and you smile.
It grows quiet. In the daylight
with the lights on and your eyes open
you see him breathing, small and soft
like a catkin fallen from a pussy willow frond.
In pity you try to pull him free and succeed
only in tearing off one of his limbs.
You rinse out the teacups. Every night
for a week you listen in fear for cries
at night in the dark
with your eyes open or closed
and the mice run in fear with quiet orange feet
through the blue Stilton maze of your brain.
During the day you clean.

You throw away glue traps rolled about the bodies
of trapped mice waiting to starve to death.
At night in the dark you close your eyes
and eventually, after you've lost count
of the nights and the bodies and the number
of times you've moved the stove
to sweep beneath it, nothing gnaws.
You tilt an ear to the darkness
and set an ear to the wall of the white Munster
maze of your brain and hear no feet.
You fall asleep and sleep hard
like the three legged street cat under the porch,
like the boxcars parked on the siding down the street,
like the thin girl on the first floor tired from a long shift dancing,
like the teen alone on the second floor on the couch with the TV on,
like the fourth floor man who offers you
a beer from his pocket whenever you see him,
and somewhere in another part of town,
in a building much like yours,
the ragged insulation on the electric main finally catches fire.

Debra in Watercolor

Saltmarsh rising to the ankles
of a lighthouse, classically stuccoed.

The sky is near clear, the sun shines in
the cool morning wind from the East.

The rushes lean with it in still
motion without distress. It's a good

day for sailing and the flecks
on the sea may be sails

or gulls or sun swept in the wash
of blues whites and greys. Though

I cannot see her I know there is
a woman standing before the lantern—

her body reflected a thousand times,
a tessellation in the great

multifaceted light. She looks out
to sea and holds an open hand

across her forehead. I can't see her,
but her hair is red, redder in the sun.

It's a patient scene— The stone bluff
would cut you bloody with its sheath

of barnacle hulls, Terns call *kip kerr*,
the water is rocksalt cold

Art in the Dark

I seem to wake more wholly in the dark
where it is easy to invent deep meaning
for the shadows. Lies that do not end.
All around me spooks and saints each at seven
and-a-half heads tall, your breaths in common time,
smears of ink, memory made of brick, memory
made of straw: products of the candle flame.

Here is light, as best I can present it:
yellow sticks pointing outward from a yellow circle
towards your figure, represented by sticks
pointed downward from a black ball. You fill
in with waxen pigments of trust: birds perched
in a stem and sphere tree, birds pulling worms
in the grass. Here is time, represented

by a line, this time it points away from you.
You are not what I imagined,
Though you may be that if I wish it so.
Watch me make worlds into modeling clay
To fix my thumbprint in. I craft one more
living creature in the palm of my hand
then one more a thousand times over:

make each mimicry different from the others.
I build a world built upon rules: all creatures produce
more offspring than can be allowed to survive.
If parents don't eat their children, something will.
Fall is the only word that the rain knows.
When I wake you we'll make love: silent with no lights on.

The Rent Was Low

A cockroach at the edge of a glue trap
realized its life was ending and voided
its ootheca; blasted its eight hundred
nymphs also onto the glue. They are black
when dead; the shotgun residue of a cockroach
death. I witnessed such a birth once

years ago and elsewhere in the sink below
the night-before's dinner plates. The roach
was exposed and I had grown quick with practice.
I reveled in the killing. I struck
her with the fleshy side of my fist
I felt the flat shield of her back fall through

the soft underbelly and into the steel sink.
I saw them when I raised my hand to wash
the gore from it— they were spreading
like glass shards dashing outward from a fall.
In that kitchen gamma-cyhalothrin was

always in reach. I rained the poison
over the dishes and my fist falling over
and over into the spreading field
of jewel like bodies— I killed those hundreds
I could reach before they slipped to shaded safety
and washed the stain from my hand
with water I boiled.

For My life

Everyone loves the spider when the handwringing fly's
shit kissed proboscis pierces skin, the snake when they see a rat.
The pigeon plumped and fluffed, pop-eyed mooncalf,
necessitates the hawk. This too is a kind of love.
Fish eat fish. What else are they to eat?
Love the tiger through the cage and for every sunset
laying my shadow toward evening—
You.

Walk the baby

I walk the baby down the hall and back again.
I've turned off the lights and closed my eyes.
I listen to the rhythm of her breath, uneven,
unskilled as yet: she is still awake.

I've turned off the lights and closed my eyes.
I secure her head against my chest,
all is quiet, though she is still awake.
My earliest memory is in a rocking chair.

I secure her head against my chest,
she presses her warm breath into my neck.
My earliest memory is lying on my sleeping father
trying to swell my tiny chest with the fall of his,

I pressed my warm breath into his neck.
I stayed awake in the darkness failing
to swell my tiny chest with the fall of his
and exhale at his inhalation.

I stay awake in the darkness failing.
It's a passage repeated often—
I exhale at her inhalation
her breath in easy rhythm with mine

It's a passage repeated often—
I walk the baby down the hall and back again.
I listen to the even rhythm of her breath,
I inhale at her exhalation

I walk the baby down the hall and back again.
I've turned off the lights and closed my eyes.
I listen for the rhythm of her breath
gone quiet: she is at last asleep.

Eating from the Tree

I was almost back to the car before
love like the heaviness of a four-day
flu, love like anger, stopped my throat.
I sucked the August air, warm
and sweet in my nose like breast milk breath
between a baby's gums.

My daughter lays her life out in front of me,
places day beside day in a landscape
that I walk through. I rest under the trees
of her infancy, bathe in the stream of her
youth. And she walks on, this garden
forever behind her

Collection

Ahead of me there is a collection
on the sidewalk, various items: plastic bags,
tar crusted cardboard, a golden trumpet
and, at the center, a street worn shamble man.
He plays his horn on the sidewalk
low and slow. Swaying, playing long goodbye
high on the C then falling soft on E flat.
I walk into the sound and feel something
like memory, feel that music stroke hidden things
buried below my throat. Hard things forgotten,
unrecognized now like sands falling, dancing
ghostly through cartilage and bone. He plays
with no beggars bucket for alms.
I place a dollar at his feet, watch it blow
with the music into the street.

Empathy

Driving by I saw you
at the bus stop, waiting,
and I thought that, if I stopped,
I could count, with you, each raindrop
as it plopped and exploded
into its crown shaped spray

on your perfectly bald head.
But I didn't stop. Instead
I began to count the drops
that spattered across my windshield.
Soon there were too many
and besides, they were not the same.

So I imagined that it was I who was bald
and at the bus stop waiting in the rain,
taking notes to be sure that I would be forever
changed. Suffering sounds better,
with "We" than with "You" or "I."
So I will say it was "Us" standing baldheaded

at the bus stop wearing ten-thousand water crowns
that pricked as they plopped and I hope
that eventually, in translation,
our baldness might be interpreted as nakedness
so that the two of us might have stood
stark naked in a rain that never stopped, waiting

for a bus that never came, and people in cars
looked on us through rain spattered windows
and drove past without sparing a heartbeat.

Monsters at the Door

On the Halloween sidewalk I tell my daughter,
a ladybug, to be brave, and point
her to miss Marta's walk.
Her house is at the dark end of the street

set back into the tree line.
She sits on her porch
in a rocking chair, looks down
over a convex nose, sucks her dentures,

and smiles only at the corners of her eyes.
She's a perfect witch, older than anyone
can remember murmuring
in a record player voice with an accent

that the Brothers Grimm might have found,
had they marched East through a dark wood
and came upon a cabin. She extends
a shaking hand, nails unpared, offers treats—

Her forearm slips from her sleeve,
reveals a grey tattooed number applied to her
when she was young, soon after the first time
she opened the door and found monsters

on the stairs, men in costume who looked
down and smiled with their eyes
and spoke with their boots in unison
to the child and her parents.

Her parents who sold children's shoes in Darlowo
and taught her the words to "kotki dwa"
to sing herself to sleep.
Her sleeve slides back and the children

run in clusters giddy with fear to the streetlamp.
The same as every year—
The year I dressed as Rapunzel and mom
commanded that I not be afraid and I cried.

The year I was a witch, the last time I dressed up,
and I was afraid and I was ashamed and I wanted
to break her window.

The Nurse

The home calls. She is up tending other residents again, a phantom cigarette held delicately between index and middle fingers, low and out to the side so as not to burn her pressed white nurse's uniform like she did once and only once in 1926. The small black circle the ember left was a shame she did not tolerate.

They call my grandfather every time she goes back. It takes the firmness of her son's hand to guide her back bed. When he can't go my father does, when he can't go it's me. It makes little difference, she knows only scraps and sketches of each of us and these stitched ragdoll into one man. And to us, the scene is the same: We find her standing indignant at bedside in other rooms.

She holds her cigarette away, leans across the arm of a hopeless nurse's aide and places two fingers on bloodlines in the loose throat or on the lined and damp forehead arched over lost and seeking geriatric eyes.
We'll have you well, we'll have you well
Each in our turn we find her there—

her body curved, too brittle to be up like this and at work. I call to her. She turns: greets me with questions *how is Molly? how is Joy?* These my grandfather's wife and first dog. I answer falsely. I take her wrist to guide her; her wrist soft as it is translucent, like vellum to the eye and velvet to the touch.

I walk her to the hall and then I am my father answering on a birth, maybe my own: *yes, it was a hard labor. Mother and baby will be just fine. Just fine.* I return her to her bedside, she folds the tousled cuff of bed sheets down just so, checks the corners, and sweeps the wrinkles flat. *How are your children? We'll have you well...* I fold her gently back into the impression where she lay her days lately.

Harvest

After the diagnosis, prognosis, doses, doses,
and doses they cut me open like Moses
splitting the red sea and inside of me
through the surgical stoma found a crop of carcinoma:

strawberries infesting ten feet of intestine
blueberries scattered on top of the bladder
plump melons swollen in rows on the colon
and tamarind beans hanging down from the spleen.

The produce all picked the opening fixed
and the farm tilled under we wait through the winter
in hope that the spring never comes.

The surgeon's scissor missed a sliver in the liver.

Cut a raspberry bush at the ground in December
you'll eat raspberries still by the end of September.

What the Father Said

It was true what the father said
that evening at dinner. He had
done the dishes every day that
week and much of the week before.
The mother's scoff at the pride
with which he declared it was

unkind. The ache of motherhood
as if by necessity escaped in
the rush of air through her nose.
Rage that she must go to a job
that does not pay because he
can no longer work. That if her

youngest is read to, it is by
someone else. It was cruel of her
to hate that he would love
the chore work but neglect it –
resting his cancer crippled hip
lying reading on the couch having

taken pills for pain. Memories:
clutching the railing two fisted
after she tore her calf running in
yard games – moving slowly,
sideways up the stairs to find,
gather, dress, bathe, feed, and soothe

the children. The vitality spent
in close-jawed love as infants
sucked first milk and blood
from her wounded areolae.
The time not long ago, she
returned from work: the youngest

child in the kitchen— unfed, working
through the wrapping on a sausage
with the carving knife.

Splinters

Franky never beat his wife even though he tells my father he ought to every time he stops by the lumberyard where we fill the bed of his '93 Nissan pickup truck for as cheap as we can. He takes pride in driving the side streets back to his shop dragging his tailpipe in a spray of firelights carrying four times the recommended load of hardwood. He says he never beat his wife— not even when she came back to him after losing her job at the Giant and deciding, for a week, to never come home.

He says he's losing ground at the front; dad says Franky says a lot of things. His son is at home regulating his moods and clutching a baseball bat that Franky can't pull from his hands, but no one says much on that.

My father says Franky used to be a real carpenter— how he pieced together doors, adorned cabinets with intricate beading to match crown moldings native to old houses, built in cupboards and ornate highboys— how he made art of tool marks with stain and resin; entire houses of exposed wood for visitors to run their envious fingers over when they thought the owner wasn't looking.

Dad says that was ages ago. He's a furniture man now and furniture work is just parts. With his back to the shop door, Frank turns spindles from 2x2s on an ancient lathe, turns them for table legs and chair backs. He stands over the machine in a spray of splinters, leans his great chisel into the wood, lays ring upon ring around decorative balusters. On Sundays he shapes baseball bats for children that stand by the dozen in sauerkraut crocks in every corner because they are far too heavy for anyone to swing.

Hammerschmidt

Hammerschmidt keeps up his machines using what he harvests
from the dump heap; says his reaper is near half washing machine.
He drives a truck for money like his father never had to.
His thick wristed wife twists string beans from the vine.
The fields slide ever towards feral, the upper pasture given

over to dogwood; he has no need for fencerows. With the March
thaw comes the reliable crop; the earth births great loaves of fieldstone.
He walks the field in harvest rows pulling stones, loading them
onto the trailer. His son keeps the tractor straight and slow.
The stones are piled on the hilltop— sloughing mounds like graves

of ancient kings. Come fall this field grows wild grasses knee high
to Hammerschmidt, that's thigh high to most anyone else. He sits
on a red iron scoop-seat between the wheels of his Farmall
mowing the wild grass for hay, cuts it low to the earth. His son
walking in front to chase off the small things and mark the turkey nests.

A Kitten Went Missing

The farm has always had cats.
People bring them up here and set them
loose in the fallow scrub.

I hate them for killing the fox kits
and winging swallows down from the eaves.
I can't drown them

so I feed them a little, let them die the normal
ways, and hope they keep rats off the feed
sacks. The current barn cat

has gone the forest the same way
housecats go to the alley— come home
pregnant again.

I guess we expect this. Used to hope
for it. When I was young and this was
my grandfather's farm

we'd see our cats come pregnant
by a bobcat. Half-bob kittens come out
all in domestic stripes

but with ear tufts and roughs down
the neck. They find their way back
to the wild once they get

up near 20 pounds. Except the one
that stayed long enough to get named,
the one I was named after.

Quentin grew fat and old drinking milk
right there under the stairs, narrow eyes
wishing the children

were just a little smaller. I haven't seen
a bobcat in years. The current cat came
home and rolled herself

in my work shirts, laid out four kittens
too little to hate just yet. She spent all night
nursing them and all morning

keeping them in a pile and them spilling
out across the floor like yolks out of
poorly flipped eggs.

This afternoon I count only three.
We've lost kittens before to neighbors'
dogs, to the pigs,

to the donkey's hooves, to winter,
even to the well, but this morning
there were four

and here there's only three. I'll mark
the sound when engines turn, and scent
of every crevice.

Nina

When my great grandmother died
she gave me a poem
in bits and scraps,
in the things that were hers,
that lived at her house
and died there.

Like GreatGrampaCharles
who I was almost named after
and died on thanksgiving
when I was five and was packed off
along with all of his things
before the pin in the turkey popped,

like Paddington Bear
in his hat and duffle coat
who sat quietly on a small chair
and was not to be played with,
like tiddlywinks in a wooden cup
and a wind up wooden car

with square wheels for crawling carpets,
like the mechanical lawnmower,
all iron, with its twist of six whirring blades
that was always too heavy for me to push
though my brother, who was just two
years older could move it well,

like puffed rice from a plastic bag
to heap sugar on and eat
while GreatGramMom smoked
at the Formica counter
under cabinets, heavy with blue paint,
like the little glass cabbage on the mantle

that moved one place to the left
to make room for a photo
every time a new great-grandchild was born,
like the window seat that liked to bite fingers
but held the wooden cup and the wooden car
and so was worth the risk,

like the sticky note book with a balloon printed
on every page so when you let the pages slip
rapidly one by one from under your thumb
it was a flip book of a floating balloon rising slowly
with a small man in its basket –
the picture did not change from page to page

so the balloon looked as if it wasn't moving
at all, like the photograph book
of GreatGrampaCharles'
life before he met a thin young woman
in a plain dress and fancy hat,
like the silver women's pocket watch

under a glass dome in the china hutch
that seemed quiet in the daytime,
but ticked stubbornly, urgently all night
though I don't recall it ever being wound,
like the doorway from the family room
to the kitchen where she would sit and talk to the adults,

and these things, my Great-Grandmother's
things, clatter and rattle inside my head,
the corners and rough edges wearing smooth,
and one day, I hope, I will tilt my head and they
will pour out my ear and make a portrait in opal
and pearl, of Nina.

Nina—

She brewed a pot of tea

She let the bird out of its cage

She drew a warm bath

She stood below the tree

She walked along the ridge

She painted to relax

She stood at the edge

She struck a match

She walked out of the sea

City Park with a Bag of Wendy's

I stand in my customary spot – arch bridge
where lovers stop for pictures – absurd semicircle –
wooden beam – iron rail – it spans the artificial
narrow in the artificial lake – lake traced
in stone wall – depth of a goose leg – geese in pairs –
black necks – blacker legs – shoe leather – they rush
in gaggle when I drop the first cheeseburger –
fight – serrated bill – serrated tongue – the victor
finds its meat repulsive – headshake and retch – it was
not for him anyway – the diner I serve is slower to come –
wedge head – snake neck thick as my wrist –
primeval – claw foot snapping turtle –
color of mud stone – color of sand

Day After Hoof Trimming

Morning; Merciless light
through East facing windows—

I need to get up and piss.
The herd is waiting. A sway

passes between them. I can hear it
in copper bells and gate rattle—

the sun rises quicker now. Workmen
will be leaving— there will be work

when they have gone. The cut on my palm
is deeper than I remember