ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: FLY-OVER COUNTRY

Eva Foster, Master of Fine Arts, 2005

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The focus of this collection is the geography of memory, human connection, and home, an exploration of an emotional and literal landscape. Fly-over country is sealed in the middle of the country and the speakers’ consciousnesses. When the external world breaks through, it is in fragments: a memorandum on torture, a tsunami from a Japanese woodblock, a brief surfacing into a dystopic present presented through the voice of another poet. This fragmentation is central to the collection, which attempts to deal with the problem of experience and memory, dispersal and loss. History is addressed as a series of shifting and even contradictory experiences; landscape intrudes and recedes, in conflict with itself and with the speaker, who is often peripheral or disappearing into another perspective. The collection takes as its central subject the difficulties of estrangement and identity.
FLY-OVER COUNTRY

by

Eva Foster

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FROM HIGHWAY 51
for my mother

At the edges of tarmac where brown plants stand in fields, in fall, fallow, wild,
I almost see you the way you were once, lithe and brown, bending and culling.
Or passing the tiny, almost invisible creeks snarled with trees’ difficult deep roots,

I see you rising from the bath’s clear heat, its white mouthful cooling around you, then releasing you, and as you pull upward, your hand gripping the rim, the thin scar on your shoulder rises with your shoulder, your body follows it,

joining that climb into the loose, aerial touch of gravity losing and pulling. White noon sky confined by the horizon and wet from the pool you are ascending the steps the water sluicing away and back into its glittering sink. And now I can’t

forget that upward motion or remember when you learned or how the hospital looked: recovery that must have been like crawling, the day you said to my father, let it take me whole. It didn’t. I’m not wanted in this body, you meant. But the land doesn’t want us,

iron-soil cracking like clay and the kind of poverty that’s easy to mistake for hard work, and still, the fields fill with houses, the city digs a lake. I believed in your endlessness, the tender bones on your wrist as permanent as those rocks in the untilled fields

where flowers would spring up and die back to brown seed and spring up again. I can’t stop myself. This is fly-over country, or country you leave if you can, the car’s dreamed wheel-noise you can’t wake from as the plains unreel their old fences and dry gullies, but it stays with you, all that unmerciful light, no one survives this.
SNOWMELT IN JANUARY

Even in this all I’ve got is sadness.
   The trees
control the light
like hitting a switch,

the grasses’ false
greens odd as graves.

I buy the seasons’ new features
but never figure them out.

My mother dipping her hands
into the steel sink’s
still water.

My father
putting the final touches on his silence.
DREAM ARRANGEMENT FOR WOODWINDS

Lost in a train station, then the blizzard of islands

Collarbone, arpeggio in curving fifths, fall of

What’s left is yellow  Fire season

Nothing but sand and that cutting grass

A long way to go still

Later carried up hills

All the way to the boards

Blue and half-striped by salt, gray now, gray with

A lilt

All the way to the half-remembered cliff

The landscape a plate of flame  A globe

Sky the dome

Tide pools: little catches, blue-

dark invitation of tide and rock

Chain  the precise

Talons inquiring into incessant

Recovery

Noise of metal going to ground

At the center

Nothing, how far, how many?

Anenome  Collars open

Stung, talk of water.
AFTER KAHLO’S SELF-PORTRAIT WITH CROPPED HAIR

It’s when you decide you’re not young, or to spite someone.

Off to the barber in your husband’s old suit. Scissors at the fly. Yellow chair.

“Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair.” If?

Tangled drifts. The snips and tufts lift a little as if wind—

you want to wrap yourself the way you knit surgery, grotesquerie,

webs like a wedding dress. Native costume. Or earlier, tenderly dressed as young man

in your best young come-hither. Here to ash. You always worked fast

as if already angry about death—at your funeral, sitting up suddenly

in your bed of fire, hot halo—oh, heaven, take it off.
BEFORE

That summer bees got in, would press
Against the paned glass rippled with gravity,
Softly, not startled like wasp or bird caught

In a solarium and hurting in flight
But again and again in the gentle pressure
Of wings as if swimming toward light—

Maybe the walls were gold inside with honey
That darkens now—that was years ago,
I spent days in sun floating on the water,

Hair the color of honey, never the bright
Yellow I wanted. It darkens now, shadowing
Its old color, as I dream the walls full of bees

Where no one lives, or no one we know
And so the same as empty, their hive, the press
Of humming alive in wooden frames

Darkening with age, as wood does when kept
From light, and under brick a hundred hard rains
Move and retreat. Tide of bees to sleep me here,

Tangled city where light does not retreat evenings
And the soil black with litters of trees, yellowjackets’
Swollen purses of hives papery, dangerous

In the branches. And how did we get rid of them,
Did we leave them there, in eaves, in framings?
What a long time it’s been, for me to think of

Their unrooted summer, could have been
Even a single day, this comfort: infinite wings
In the walls’ long night, sweetness.
TSUNAMI
after Hokusai

In the painting a white lace over the smooth blue well frames the mountain. Somewhere the earth divides itself and closes, as off the west coast even now the lips of rock contend with touch, meaning to move, changing everything.

Islands the wave slid over, erasure, right to left, clean as hand on slate: now the blank ocean continues, innocent, reflecting sunlight, and on the mainland, the dead open their eyes in the market square.
No one could have told you from the ocean that day—
it cools as the light drains down the west sky’s dome,
pooling at the edge, where night leaps out, sudden,
water a bruise, sky reflecting its uncertain little movements
that hit you like a slap. You’re floating,
disconnected, swallowed in sense, and below you,
eels are opening their yellow eyes,
the night-fish in their deep cages of phosphorence
are hanging up their stores of lures.
Impossible to disappear, covered to the neck
in yielding opacity, the lit house on the hill becomes the moon,
the hill becomes the river you’ll swim to those
last fierce heartbeats of your life.
VALENTINE’S DAY: ECHOCARDIOGRAM

It’s a gray muscle, shaped like a teardrop: wide at the top, tapering. You can see how those paper hearts came to be, their buxom tops, their wasp waists not so far you’d strain to see it, as now, she holds the sensor’s palm against my ribcage as that muscle, asleep in its ghost of tissue drifting from it like a train, opens and closes, indifferently, and like a washing machine, turns over its routine surprise.

Sixteen, in the back of your car at the pond we called “lake” because we’d never seen a lake. The catfish had their cold hearts, too, still, enduring the freeze we shivered through and took off our clothes.

I’d like to think my heart was in my mouth, your mouth opening, a fish pulled to the deck’s bright air and finding a terrible world there—that reason the old poets called it “death,” besides euphemism, that stunned look.

A stunned animal that shivers, then leaps to work. It arrives in the breastbone as if from somewhere else, then fast enough to dry my mouth it shudders at its work. The ambulance, electric valentine, plays a dry tune under the awning while the tech holds my elbow, her train of dark hair gathered in a knot at her neck. She slides the needle in as if it’s all a dance she’s done sleeping, the red-and-white a dozen roses wailing toward a sleepless venue. In sleep, it happens: rapid patter like if it talks less the audience will get up and leave it. Tonight there’s moon that leaves your shoulder bloodless, something carved. I don’t wake you. The walls dilate, then contract. I wait to hear the news, watching the look on your face.
CHINCOTEAGUE ISLAND

At night we cross the bay’s chalk cliffs,  
morning, the tide-flat smell smuggles in its heaviness,  
sleep we adhere to like a contract. The hotel’s cat  
asleep in tattered nests of reeds: how doesn’t she sink,  
a black burrower into the silt-stemmed grasses over water?  
The crabs in their sideways marsh eluding capture...  
I don’t say much. You answer the same way.

Across the cool slats of deck  
the sun can almost teach to whiteness, stripes  
of brown salt marsh: this place is built on water.  
The town, sulfur and fish and sand beach  
the ocean swallows more each year we  
come here, reading the paper’s real estate section  
as if a story; the way the ledes scold  
Parks for not shoring the dunes  
marked stay off, fragile, and Parks  
replies decay is natural. Grasses needle  
what’s left of them, but sparse.  
We don’t belong here. The ocean’s ironed thin  
with cold that moves like tides. Off season,  
the theater keeps its children’s movie advertised  
till summer. The one good restaurant  
still asks for reservations.
FOR J.

Think of you in your little house, the baby asleep on the glassed-in porch, “second bedroom” the landlord promises to fix.

You manage the all-night sandwich shop ten to six, then lock yourself in the living room and let her crawl. You’ve learned to sleep listening.

Alone, you hope your seizures stay gone, writing to them in your head like the lovers you don’t want to see back again,

the one who threatened you with a gun,
the vegan who wouldn’t let you sleep in his bed. To your ex-husband you say don’t make me love you again. Don’t take the baby.
If you last long enough,

you’ll leave behind the dry twisting grass
that turns to fire in October in the hometown where everyone knows

the way your parents divorced. You survive everything.
After a while we count on it.
LONG DIVISION
after Kenneth Koch

Wait long enough, and nothing matters.
The need to purchase what you thought needed purchasing passes;
you have learned to do without it. Filing papers
you thought would need filing as they gathered in masses
until the weight of them slid a drift off tables
you discover irrelevance in passels,
insurance policies long since cancelled, solicitations, other hassles
that diminished as you passed them.
Leaving unanswered the machine’s stacked story of calls, tussles
for your time you couldn’t face, you find the time has passed
utterly from which these calls could matter,
just as those old photographs, never put in albums, have gone from shutter’s
capture of faces no labels now remember to dusty stacks, or
as continents turn under whole cities, until water
covers them, or ice hugely patrols the dim shoulders
and shoals of earth, and retreats, whole species shattered
and remade, their strange cries and eyes the color of wheat having passed
into memory that returns to matter, carbon, to the blank slate of atoms.
So consider carefully what’s worth doing, the irrepressible murmur
of obligation urging you on, and on, repeating these tasks, or
turning elsewhere, the small shattering pleasures
of sidewalks or lit late-night signs that movement blurs, or
taking on an attitude of despair, for
these, too, scratch nothing indelibly, but will be murdered
by time’s indifference—nothing matters
against the long view—choose carefully! The lovely blather
of everyday tasks, the declaration of love: among infinity’s dull stare
are equally dust: what becomes of us?—but go on, blunder
lovely through, hope dumbly. This too, doesn’t matter,
so do it, the universe indifferently clattering onward.
BLIND WOMAN

In she comes held by two hands. Sunglasses. Here's the chair. No. Left a little. Now they take her glasses. Her son lets go her hand. Her husband moves to the desk to make her next appointment after handing her a magazine: we'll read it together. She holds it in her lap a hand along each side, curving it. When he hands it to her she turns her head before he speaks. Now she waits the way I imagine the dead must wait, a kind of silence that grows up like a row of hedges. Now she turns her face to me, her eyes moving over me as if seeing me, weighing something in me disinterestedly, her brows indicating a recognition, her mouth impassive. Setting aside the magazine she lowers her head and strokes one hand with the other hand, feels surely at her cuticles as if seeing. As if practicing what it is to be blind and now growing a little bored, letting the world back in in sips of strangers’ faces thinking it safe to stare, in the familiar commonplaces of fingers. The way you might, diagnosed with some eventual darkness, practice first, learning to do even then without what you knew you would have only a little longer. The magazine has fallen to the floor: she looks up at the re-arrangement of air that is her husband arriving out of the cavernous mystery of the waiting room, its plants, its row of staggered chairs. Imagine that rehearsal, as even now she must be rehearsing with the practiced air of the professional who has done this so many times what he has feigned finally enters him.
BODIES OF MOM, SON FOUND; EX CHARGED

Uncovering them, alluvial.
An archeology, the dried skull
Leathery, moon sickle
Gap of grin in the white grasses.
In Juarez, too, where no one looks
For them. Utah’s blue mountains
Like a technology of scenery.
Somewhere the uneasy
Near-sleep of a man riding
The night bus. No, he’s at his desk.
That light’s been buzzing
In the office for what feels like years.
He almost remembers something
But he has his other self on,
Smiling skin suit. It lifts up
The pencil and makes a considered
Mark. Drops the dull coins
Like eyes into the terminal dark
Of the fare-box. The door sighs
Like the neighbors, if we’d
Known we’d have helped her
And later, but he had a hard life.
JAPANESE LADY BEETLES

Mustard carapaces
under, wings tissue
taffeta black trailing

like a slip when after
flying landing
on warm walls

not managing quite
to fold flight
back to its hidden

beginnings.
All autumn slipping
through crevices

in walls to congregate
in the secret coombs
dark to the joists.

Surprised or palmed
to dark the smell
of copper, bitter grasses.
ILLNESS

The things that matter, you don’t talk about. Elude discourse. Etude. Pain like a bowstring playing the breastbone, or the lungs sleeping there like a pair of steaks, slackened, sponged with blood, marbled. The words for things go mute with effort. Agree to disagree. Better to look at the way snow coming on leaves the moon in a swollen ring of that light that laps at everything, doesn’t illuminate. There it is through the bare trees: look there, the unlit white a lake through the jointed limbs. Let’s not talk about it, not when the deer are just now making their double-tracked way through the winter thorns. They’ll eat what there is by the water until daybreak.
NOVEMBER

Scalded milk
into the coffee
and the windowpanes
blue at four-thirty.

Already the parking-
lot’s lights silvering
the flat expanse.

How the door opens,
how the unsettled night
inhabits the undersides
of little tables...

The last morning
of trees finally turning
each leaf red.

Tomorrow black branches
are language you almost
speak. Today: incarnadine,
multitudes, dark at the palms.
NORTH OF THE CITY

Winter afternoons the house grew into itself, secretive, its closets cathedrals of castoffs, its creaking white halls imagining the attic fan and spreading their roots into the rooms until the rooms were themselves transitional:

In one my mother sleeps into various species of pain and imagines to leave it off. In one my father labors over his taxes: the light is thin. Outside the boys are bicycling, the boys are honking their horns, outside, the undersized rabbits blink on in the lawn like discrete fog, then shudder in their clay burrows under the evergreen bushes the neighbors will soon uproot. The man next door dies in his sleep: every year of his life he bought just one box of the candy and edged with silver shears. The air here has been still for a number of years. I am standing on the driveway, waiting for the kids that climb our stockade fence to the unlit pool each summer the night we leave town.
FATAL IMMEDIACY

*The danger in relations between women is that the daughter will eat the mother alive.*
--Margaret Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*

How much you must have feared I’d never relinquish you. Hard-bellied as a ship that ninth month stretching into ten. Everything you liked was bitter in your mouth by then.

Even your husband: a gray lump at the end of a long chain, balloon full of nothing-talk that drove you finally to hospital. Induced, the indignities of shaving, crowds of students receded before that bloody heave of me into the world. You thought to free us, not knowing I would always need you, my house, my skin, my meal, my wife, my self.
OUR NEIGHBORS HURL THE TELEVISION
FROM THEIR BALCONY

Tipping over all the old shows, peanut butter on the horse’s teeth
to make him seem like talking and the pearl-necklace wife sleeping
across from husband’s fatherly cardigan folded neatly on the chair,

or the news hours’ lipstick rendition of neighborhood sorrows
and spelling bees in technicolor, every lisp—it’s a heavy cabinet,
the old style, pretend furniture with this wood grain,
baptize you credenza with a lit world inside instead of the usual
liquor sitting there in the black until it’s old enough to throw out.
Either crooning out its salad devices and cleaning powders

at someone’s too-vulnerable moment or else it stopped talking,
a slick gray iris no one could shut. The railing is good and high.
Three of them, shirtless, sweat to lever it. The landing, spectacular:

the wife dreams salad dry in a single vicious twist, the horse rescues
the latest high-crime neighborhood. The winsome champion sputters out
the winning words: *Angostura bitters. Maraschino. Triple Sec.*
OBSERVE THE WASP’S LEGS

Picking signals out of the air as it circles, 
embroidering, embroidering, 
its buzz lining the window-blind, 
its neat, martial body:

brown tortoiseshell Wright-veined 
wings like a hard lampshade against the light,

teardrop head coming to a point. 
It tilts to the right. 
It lightly listens. 
Flight that hovers, a casual lilting, 

approaching not directly 
its rustling fist of nest, 
shuddering touch of others, 
their eating, 

their blind young, 
and mornings, the hover like nodding 
and landing on water 
and drinking and returning.
ALMOST NIGHT

before the way it rains here,
air to water, the air blue and lit greens of vines you walk under,
midday, light turned wet as undersides
of leaves. Life has denseness.

It crowds against itself. Tell the water
to let up, the dark cluster
of locusts to stop singing up
the shadows in the corners of these rooms.
Our houses already rotting as we lay them down.
The slightest exhale
a pouring biology of revisions.

This building as if
rooted, as
if bursting to flower
and manufacture’s fast autumn
until windows tilt.
The screen sags,
the rain comes in,
a silverfish articulate as water
eats the books whose dust will cover you sleeping.
THE FIRST YEAR

Folding and re-folding the tender crooks of jumpers
stuck to each other like burrs in socks when later

I hiked to my grandfather’s burned-down school
in wild grass the red bugs sleep in, waking to burrow

under the skin: I spent a week in the house in welts
you painted over with that patience you’d learned
to catch in your teeth. You smother them, that’s
the secret of medicine. And then? Your body
dismantles and uses what it can. They disappear.
How familiar it must have been to you, folding

what I came along to unfold with my unformed hands,
infiniteesimal, remorseless. As later you taught me
to disappear into a book: if you couldn’t talk
to someone real at least you could have some silence.

Mostly I wanted a set of real paints like yours.
The way you could fall into the paper’s grain. To put you

on like a skin. If you saw yourself wouldn’t you come to love
what you saw, wouldn’t you have to take what was in you and use it.
ELEGY

First Alabama’s dark eternal dirt
And breezeway dog-trots and your childhood house,
Then what the oil-fields smelled like in the dusk.
The ‘30s poverty. Your mother’s face.

P-38s: their ululating blasts
Of sound that slowly beat your eardrums flat
So now your “what” is what we can’t undo
Or breach. The boys who in the cockpits spat

For luck, and lifted skyward: there they burned
 Entirely, and killed, too, in their turn.
And if returned, were changed. As now again
They change with this forgetting that you’ve learned

As once your body unlearned hearing.
Your wife you too lost twice: her early death
You stumbled on. That whole, still afternoon—
And now, too soon, it seems, as if a breath

Blurred her, her pictures lose their sharp relief
Becoming just another swimming face
Among the rest that you can’t name. The years’
Indignities: the brother you can’t place

Who’s dead of cancer, our names, those you know
The best. It’s you you lose now: stroke: as if
It meant a gentle touch instead of these
Undoings. Little failings. Now the breadth

Of love your daughters have’s between yourself
And anonymity. The house you loved
You’ve lost. I’m not myself, you say, but you
Persist. Your thinness. Your unrest. Who cleaved

The west and east pecan trees: trunk and branch,
A graft of fruit that always fell, and root
That weathered drought. Who ploughed the garden down
Its red clay rows—whose hands remembered, wrought,

And kept their paces. Ringed around by death
You lift your head still, don’t you? As those boys
You loved would rise on blackout nights, and lost,
Would leave the earth, burning, that fire their voice.
STONINGTON

The glacier’s had it. Now the woods choke light out. Clear them, the field’s full of rocks. People lived here, they farmed—mostly, the ocean’s black-ice four a.m., boats holding their unswimming bodies into the choked fog and wide throat of foghorns, hands raw and slicked with the soiled sludge of bay-mud as the traps pull up, gleaming red with catch. Now it’s restaurants, this one good month with the light gleaming late in the coves where salt tide’s mirror-still, its rocky undergrowth and weeds visible, then sunset. Boats moored everywhere, hotels stuffed like cliffs of seagulls. When winter comes, the old dark self returns. The fishers wake to their cold work, the ice returns, the children go hungry.
THE ASSISTANT: KA’ANAPALI HOTEL, MAUI

She burns under klieg lights, fake Pele, local boys
in loose loincloths just that age the women like
to look at over chicken as the lights

go drinks-on-the-house-till-9 when her magician
husband lets her climb in the disappear-you trick,
the spin-you-in-half trick, her face the requisite surprise.

The husbands laugh hard, the wives smile. Her hard thighs
strut the hip-cut leotards. Between each act she changes
costumes and not the run in her stockings.
FILTERING MECHANISM

If you stare long enough it begins raining.
The bright sliver of beak astonishing the dull body.
Work has its words: site abandonment, eels

Named Lampetra as if lit up. At the nadir
Of cold lakes, unwelcome glimmer. Meanwhile,
Mini-vans are experiencing a crisis on the news:

Who wants them? The armored helicopters
Float muscular and delicate over the proceedings
Of the first elected body. Democracy by show

Of hands and the slow attrition of car bombs
And someone thinks for the first time why not
Put TVs in them. Well, imagine the beach towns

In this light, gulls circling the off-season dive
Graceless until they make that water landing
Even in heavy surf. Sleeps six with Y privileges

For an even thousand. The songbirds
Of Jurassic Golf catch Rex mid-bellow,
Raise their children in his stalled jaw.
COVETING

Spring’s brutal—so sad, that’s why we like it. The rain across the sky like a palm shading a lamp, the buses with their lights on the cold afternoon breathing out nightfall. The trees are grand with sadness: mother-of-pearl sky tearing itself to tulle in the wet branches. Everyone walking one by one in those first long dusks, down the avenue of telephone poles rich and full of wet light. They pause not at the parks’ green strath, but at the burned house boarded up for twenty years, the lonely store we all know will never last till summer. When it’s night at last, we rise up lit stairwells like moths, drink the water-cladded air in our sleep, and dream sad dreams, water, mirror, those bare halls—wake sad in that first light, completed by our sadness.
A HISTORY

Before, my mother smoked. My father, too.
My grandparents, packs until the air
Was blue. My great aunts in their hazy house
Smoked, one deaf, one blind almost:
Could see my shape as if through smoke,
Against the light.

In Catholic school on Wednesday nights,
Between lessons on chalice and chastity,
The prettiest thirteen-year-old smoked
And told me how one afternoon she lit
The Bic bright as an Easter egg until
The flame ran out, then pushed to flesh
Its two straight lines of wheel, a scar
She covered at the wrist when, lit up,
Got into boys’ cars. And in ballet class,
Later, leotard against the breasts
I wanted, or wanted to touch, she’d arch
Her back into her curve of arm, ankle-
Centered, face near mine and hair beginning
Its disarray would waft the smell of smoke.

At parties, parents’ friends: their children,
Too, now grown as me, know the flick,
The hit of pack to palm, pull of breath, quick,
To bring the flame along the stick
To lip. Lipstick on the tip: my mother
Took a pull, my father, just for fun—
I was worried—and when my grandparents
Lit them in the car, I hurried the window down,
Migraine like a dark spike mixed
With Da’s gold tooth, Grandmama’s perfumes.

High school: my best friend and I
Wandered through the rooms of our lives,
Lit matches and a cigarette. The light, the pull:
It’s hot, I found, another thing to strive, and fail,
Be bad at—but my friend was cool, liked menthols,
Like my boyfriend that summer in the deserted school
Against the wall, down hallways, where he
Smelled like camphor. Taste of a headache.
Said quit, but he didn’t, he left, joined the army.

(continued, stanza break)
Buried my—grandfather, two great-aunts,  
Who all quit smoking: first my mother with me  
Swimming in her like a fish, then the aunts,  
As if in answer, did so mid-painting,  
Mid-vacation, mid-letter. Died of cancer,  
Anyway—no, the eldest was a stroke:  
Smoking’s a pleasure, for the old,  
*And I don’t want to live forever*, she’d said.  
But stopped. And one noon bright as cut glass,  
Said *my necklace is too tight* and only that.

Da told me: *In the Navy, gave them to us  
With our rations, free, and no one said  
How I would need them*. Handed my grand- 
Mother her lighter, pack. Those two put  
Them down and picked them up like cards, like rocks  
Around the birch tree in the yard. I grew up.  
They stopped for good one year and we  
Celebrated—they would live forever or five years  
Until leukemia—Da, a vet, Hiroshima’s  
Clean-up team once, and still didn’t want  
The Navy benefits they used to treat him  
At the end, didn’t think they owed him—

And now, no one picks up a *cancer stick,  
Light, acquired taste* and I’m too old  
To learn the trick: pull and flick  
Of lighter over knuckle into fire.  
So after class, my students or my friends  
Light and, animal at their pyres  
Of leaves blossoming orange and up,  
I watch and breathe what cradled  
All my family into their next lives.  
The dark smell, welcome step through  
Some remembered doorway, one-note song,  
The sweet rain-on-grass tobacco taste,  
Cupped hand of fire: what makes and takes us.
DEAD LETTER

Such logic will lead / to loss without death
--Anne Sexton

Under my fingers.
Under belly rising like a hill.

Sure, I loved you—like the cool smell
Of dew rising from the night grass when
I climbed my father’s fence to touch
Your father—

My parents slept their hot sleep,
Sleep of the old.

When I discovered you,
They woke: they wailed like mourners.

Did they see me and know what you,
Already full of my blood, my taste,
My air, there under my ribs’
Frail cage, had absorbed already,
Knowledge at the bone?

Is that why my father
Bowed his head?

Because in the end,
I chose. We all do. I wept, my hands
Over you, because I preferred my own life.
NO SUCH ADDRESS

Little fly-wing.
No, smaller: may-fly’s prism vein, sun-struck.

Small grub of mine. Blood-fed. You drank the taste of me like air.
Graceful as a bean, that kidney curve of your back, lovely ancient tail.

Shark’s eye, black gaze deep as a globe, you must have tasted sorrow, resolve—
Your future, chemical, in the twilit thrum of the body—

Before I woke to
presence, necessity—

Hungry thing. Tree-root
Draining what feeds you its mixed self.

The earth would drowse too.
Felling what needs it, would try to speak.

Would wonder if you raised your head as these hands
Fell to root it up, save the host.
NATURE OF INVENTION

The city moderates the forests until, like the apartments always spilling their late lights onto the spits of asphalt cars rush down in a blinkered fury, they grow small, heavy with detail the office-building reflects in its silvered glass all day hiding those inside who labor dully. Out of its once-wide limbs-reach step the deer each night when the last car coughs its way from the lot. Their eyes are black as bark. When they dip their faces into the wet grasses, they imagine themselves, their undangerous mouths wet, their necks arching like the buttresses of cathedrals, in a ring of trees, the traffic only thunder, the glass mirrors of the building like water pouring itself in silence from a height.
MY SISTER-IN-LAW MARRIES AT NINETEEN

That summer you crawled underneath the summer stage in its crater of grass carved from the best wild park of our town and all the coaxing we did came to nothing. You emerged, as always, when the spirit moved you. Now you lower yourself into the long sleep of marriage. He’s a good man. I regret nothing; maybe you will feel the same. But you’re so young, my grandfather said to me, driving me down some road fringed on the sides with empty fields fallow with tall grass. We have buried him in the graveyard east of town, a flat stone like a mirror when I visit it in December... I mean the young mercilessly outlive us. You will survive what we did. That summer, you’re taking him away, you said, as if your brother was going into the land of death. Cleave, said the minister, that word that means joining and splitting apart. You’re so young I can still see your childhood trail you like a shadow. At the altar now, your hands folded together until I can’t tell where they come apart, or what marriage: I am looking across the candle at your brother, half serious, half laughing. That summer you emerged when it got dark, of course. It’s not so serious, I want to tell you, but what could I ever tell you that you’d believe? I won’t take him, we’re not going anywhere, I said, lying almost from the first second I knew you.
FOR MY FATHER

Everything in the way you bend to bank the fire in this house you built
and the long day starting at five in which you comfort your own mother,

the doppler-effect of small emergencies. Need like a drowning’s grip.
At night, your blue police shows, their lives starting with killings

like that’s the key that turns the music box, your eyes opening,
shutting until your dream is the argument for evidence. Morning comes:

you have put the night to bed as you once put down your own daughter,
whom you know like night: asleep you know, words spill from you, your body,

ghostly, travels, doing what it believes is real. Morning passes, its work passes.
Here in the afternoon of your life, your car, its clean gleam of paid-for,

carries you across these low hills not quite believing in themselves,
their scrub oaks single and quiet, unknown, unrelenting.
MOLE QUEEN

Within the colony a single female produces recognizable castes...
— Encyclopedia of Animals

Naked, we live by touch, fur of earth our boundary our warmth the dirt and pale twitch of touching skins, brother and sister. Mammal-hive, this is blinded care, cradle of claws, travel of sounds, each utterance through ground and bone reverberating to the pitch-dark throne and center, ear and reason. Who bears and bears us, speaks a weave of voices, nurses, moves seldom, who teems with we who tend her black eyes or skin innocent of hair. Whose sere sisters tender their thousand gentle regrets, sweep the depths, hands for brooms, make the rooms: sterile as doctors, who fix, scuttle past her,

(continued, no stanza break)
mother, our
object, her reclining
body, her dark,
her fixed firmament.
OIL PAINTING 1977

It seems strange now that it is always there when I think of sun, behind the sofa, its frame a slick bamboo series of lines like the movement of green traffic stakes hashing the bridge over the Cimarron River.

The mountain’s Japanese line of volcanic soil, loaned red hearts of coals, from left to right rose into the air like a chart—jagged spike, its lifted heartbeat—and over it all, mustard gold of the sun, its black threads circling and losing themselves, its spheric ridges of paint, the way it glowed, a fire skimmed with oil, an edict, too, that between afternoon’s slap of heat in the yard flat from stem to stern and evening’s glowering in the west, I think of it, and turned to bed, my last, filial kisses be hand along the frame, furtive left-turned trace of its stalled orbit, its mouthful of flame.
MEMORANDUM

The virtue of torture is that it’s hard to understand. When rendered in the clinical niceties of newspapers’ earnest reportage (loud rap music was played in the prisoners’ cells, the prisoners were interrogated harshly with the collusion of medical officials), it loses its last glamour, darkness of the incomprehensible, romance of the late-night knock on the door and you don’t know where, becomes pedestrian, the trials barely penny dreadfuls, the pictures blurred strategically, losing, in repetition, the clarity of amazement and becoming only a thing that happened.

What’s key is keeping it from happening to anyone who’s anyone, or anyone one imagines knowing—and the hunger for information, too, you can use: stress how pressing our need to know more about ourselves. Who can discuss, at dinner, on the subway’s noise of momentum and politesse, the techniques, which are often ordinary and nothing we haven’t heard before, the electricity, the false hanging, the beating impossible to imagine, the shit distasteful to dwell on—no, things will die down. It will become possible to sustain further inquiries quite soon, with a modicum of restraint, with the wisdom of empire we have surely attained, carefully, the way one must not incapacitate but only encourage, so now, we prepare the listener, we tell what he most fears and show him how easy rescue is.
WAITING ROOM

Mostly we are old, fat or thin.
Bad breath, shambles. We have
the hospital smell of sterile band-aid

boxes and roughly cleaned skin—
what’s worst isn’t the fear but that,
discomfort, which no one tells you.

Everything is very clean, you’d be amazed
how little care goes into that. The sheets
scratchy. The gowns missing the crucial string.

This room comes to be your comfort.
Busy, everyone in it dressed for lives
they intend to pick up again, like knitting.

The lost gravity of suspension, as in water.
You may go further here into the corridors
you can imagine the look of: gray, many

doors leading to machines’ lapsed etiquettes.
Or on reprieve, encapsulated in the reproaches
of the trembling elevator to the front hall

smelling of sandwiches. The streets
deal in sunlight and appointment books
while very far away it approaches.
SWIM

The water’s touch. Salt taste
in the back of your mouth,
phantom salt,
the pavement’s rock-salt whiteness
lying to you, saying
salt, natural.
Redbud bleeds its stems
into the white basin
each spring
you jackknife
into the deep end’s
arrhythmia
at Easter, the ice barely
clear. Summer
the dearness of water
in a farm state.
We pay. You learn
not to see the cost of things,
you turn away
from the meddlings
of water,
father’s offering
to childhood you use
when you seduce
the lifeguard at the Y
in your
first two-piece
slicing the bland expanse
imagining it
opened like an eye
at night
knowing even then
how you would enter
high, and fast.
CALLING
for my mother

_Come here!_ Across the house my breath jerking as my knees pull up into a hop you sing about in the kitchen, my daughter

_hops like a cricket,_ you sing, _the dog is making some bread_...
In the morning, your hands are animals speaking the animal language
to my laughing, and in the garage, they turn to tools, break wood as sometimes your voice breaks into that anger like siren, tornados,

_come here! Why are you such a mess?_ You smash the glass—that rising rage that builds itself from nothing—sorry already

you’ve lost your voice when I hear your least whisper, even these years later in another place, where it wakes me

long past the last light you’d douse to talk me to sleep as if sleep were a house you were calling me into,

your talk the taut thread I could never unknit myself from, the scattered trail white and uneaten in the forest.