

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: DROWNING BOY

Laura Suzanne McKee, Master of Fine Arts, 2005

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The poems of *Drowning Boy* engage the world primarily through the frame of the domestic space, exploring the dynamics of familial and romantic relationships frequently from the confinement of a single room. In many of these poems, feelings of isolation prompt the speaker to interrogate the world in terms of the dramatics of the domestic or bounded space as set against a larger landscape—a landscape predominantly urban, but also, at times, pastoral or surreal. The domestic space also creates an occasion for the contemplation of the speaker's identity in the context of relationships both past and present. Additionally, the poems throughout the manuscript play with shifting perspectives and poetic modes—perhaps as a means of breaking from the confinement of the singular room or singular poetic foothold.

DROWNING BOY

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.		
	Finishing the Work	2
	As Forecasted It Was Beautiful	4
	Overheard Dream of the Wife	5
	At Swann and 16 th	7
	Old West Love Scene	8
	What the Orderly Did Not Report	9
	Alabaster Cattle	10
	After Burial	11
	Present Situation	12
	Of Homesickness	13
II.		
	White Kitchen	15
	Dream with Two Hikers	16
	The Whore to the Drunk	18
	Sestina	19
	Half-Window	20
	Nothing of Trees	21
	Blue Fish	22
	Drowning Boy	24
III.		
	Mother at the Kitchen Sink	30
	Medusa's Boredom	31
	Woman Waiting for a Bus	32
	A Sentimental	33
	Ode to the Creek Never Named	35
	Melons	36
	The Foal	42

I.

Finishing the Work

Breakfast begins too early, pulverized cereal bits
dust the newspaper like an old shelf ledge

and I hover, sipping coffee in slow increments,
skimming five frames of weather,

the politician faces that scowl and appease,
the mourning veterinarians and their dead lioness—

the cause, as always, accidental.
Hours ago, the moon had winced through the blinds.

I had expected rain. Maybe you, arriving,
your skin smelling of taxi brakes, drying sweat,

your clumsy ritual of undressing enough
to quench my listlessness, my annoyance.

It is clear I am used to this.
Outside, the scrape of a trashcan dragged to an alley's end

complains like the half-winded roar of a lion
rolling in its thin spread of dirt.

I offer rings of coffee to the page's grid,
gray and angular, its repetitions, its content.

What circumstances misplaced or measured?
And the zoo cat stretched out for autopsy

like a damaged or moth-eaten scroll,
her thick fur unanswerable to touch,

the tongue hardening as they pry in—
the chest clamped, the skull opened

and pinned as a flower to a botanist's tray.
They will collect what they can of fact, of event,

and later, the womb, unfolded to deliver
what by default miscarries—

tiny pink cubs still purred and wet
as old paper in the thick morning dew of the city.

As Forecasted It Was Beautiful

In the Japanese garden, a pond
where fish swam around in rings. Small ripples,
but like an earthquake's between the water lilies.
A little boy threw in crumbs from a plastic bag
then chocolate candies when he'd emptied the bag—
foil wrappers gleaming as they dropped through the green water
while the fish darted to catch them
like mermaids trying to catch bricks of shipwrecked gold.
In this there were many impossibilities.
Point out what you can. Whatever happened,
the sun splintered through the trees
as it has for centuries, blistering foreheads
that have bowed for a broad tree's shade,
cool well or wet-lipped girl
snapping her tail on a sea rock,
though this was not the thought
of the boy as he watched his face lengthen
and shorten by turns in the water,
leaning in, whatever happened, to have a taste of it
when his mother's back was turned—

Overheard Dream of the Wife

I'll open the window if I can.
Below, pigeons unlatch and slam their wings,
feathers like rusted knives slicing air

or clattering at the end of a broken drawer.

You'd feel if it mattered, or wouldn't.
Like the buzzard's first nip of scalp—
his gentle unsewing, loosening of seams,

the body falling back to the earth's silk.

I stepped from the slip, its loop of pink
like the highway at dawn,
a flat, quotidian opulence

he would nudge later beneath a chair.

Rising from bed, his naked torso
upright, his winter skin the color
of an uncracked egg,

he moves into the hallway's shadow

as though he'd found the edge of the earth.
His large feet slap on the parquet; he'll buff
himself with steam, my drugstore lotion. The patch

between his shoulders he can't reach, hard like a spinner's thumb.

Outside, birds keep up their racket.
Figures along the street duck like injured dancers,
avoiding the low, lugubrious flight.

Long gray coats whipping like sheets of ash.

Some slip over ice,
cursing various mother of's,
and I drink some room-warm water,

watching him move in to hold me

with his long wet arms, and I wonder
if he's ever puckered at a girl
as if she'd blow away,

his red heart jurring like gravel

when she moved past, or turned,
her velvet sleeve ruffled
stiffly, her grace like an under-feather plucked

by one of those reversals or closings of wind.

At Swann and 16th

The trees
hurt wildly
in their skins
as the slender
girl braces
and bends
to inspect
the run
in her pantyhose,
tracing out
the splinter that
first snagged it,
her cool beige skin
all along
breathing through.

Old West Love Scene

The whore unbuckles
his boots, his belt
your mouth's
like a slipknot,
he said
as the horse
outside
tied to a thin black tree
stepped through its
hoop of reign
and could barely
lift its head
whinnying
into the earth,
its wide slick
nostrils
blowing apart
puddles,
though this
could not be heard
through the storm,
the sound of thunder
like sheet metal
tearing or
shook out like an apron—
what crumbles down
they have collected here,
what subsequent or
necessary thirst.

What the Orderly Did Not Report

She cocked her gray
thumb at the humming
bird to fasten it one
last second to its
hovering, her cereal
softening in a bowl
beside the untouched
spoon suddenly flipped
into the air by
her shoulder
when she fell—
the bird gone
having noticed only
the sudden effusion
of sweet milk
into the empty air.

Alabaster Cattle

This lonely hulking back and forth and this
blue wind that wraps itself around, a hiss

I overhear from back, the plane's hard churn
out carries all sinews of sound, a burn

of s's is all that rises from the girl's
sharp teeth who gabs on about the curl

of an actor's lips, or the leather sale
where stretched soft hides of cut white bulls in Hale

must surely make such silken rugs—
though she had been afraid to touch and shrugged

against the thought. The air
pushes or is pushed through, a harmony

of weight, of skin in equilibrium
with forces raised to peel it back, the hum

of alabaster cattle nuzzling through
the mind's unbroken field, their fur the hue

of what is never seen, but seen through.

After Burial

She slept all night in the crook of the door; I woke to the house plant's scowl of leaves and tried not to wake her though the light moved in.

All night she'd slept there. Her head propped against a cold brass hinge, her spine cradled in the narrow opening of the door's suspension.

I had once crashed on the same hard floor, hard drunk, after sneaking through the bedroom window at 3 am--the taste of beer and older boys on our lips.

Tossing over a pillow, she had tiptoed around me, the crackle of her clove cigarette like the mind unraveling itself slowly to the transparency of ash.

A year later, I knew little more, except how the abrasive morning light nearly erased her, how she hadn't eaten for days, hadn't breathed without the stale

hiccup of weeping, had not yet managed, alone, the darkness of mock sleep. Upstairs, her mother, weary-eyed and watering the porch's overhang of spider ferns,

turned for a moment to peer through the red-curtained kitchen window as if the house were a thing she did not own, did not know, while unswept leaves,

brown and curled, spun at her feet like an eddy of useless fists raised for nothing, or too late, in that hateful fall air.

for Jennifer

Present Situation

Boats creak in their slots
around us are the mountains I expect
even when I leave.
At night, the lake looks solid
like moonlight on a mare's back
or frost gathered on a rug
airing in a barn doorway.
I have left these too
for a tightly wrought room in the city
with long closets,
a mildew stained tub,
and a small window
through which I can see only
the middle branches
of an enormous, singular tree.

Of Homesickness

From the kitchen smells of combustion,
the stove eye flares from old crumbs. A tiny red fire

like the kind painted in an apse over a saint's flat heart.
My mother holds her hand there, patting down the spice's burn,

holding still until it stops, asking for nothing.
At lunch when the woman from church peels

a supermarket orange, she'll feel more awake,
sun pouring over her shoulder while a cloud wheels out.

When my mother prays she prays that I'll find it—
a quietness she could recognize, a certainty, appropriately sized.

I see her on Sundays, her hushed voice lilting
like a child's toward the plaster vault

of the Methodist church, the crack in the ceiling
drawn as a single hair caught against her cheek

that I'd pluck away when she sleeps...
I can't make her out without the house.

Her hand hollowed over a yawn,
the green paper of the neighbor's lawn.

II.

White Kitchen

The woman at the counter touches my hand
when she gives me change, slips into the paper sack
an extra spring roll, a cup of sweet potato fries.

She winks, pats the wide breasts beneath her apron,

insisting I eat more. Her eyes are the color
of branches reaching into fog,
and they rest on me, finding something companionable.

Tomorrow too, more rain. She waves,

backing through the beaded curtain to the deeper kitchen
where the painted walls are seared or kissed with oil,
where boxes of broccoli and onions stand waiting

to be unpacked, and her husband rinses a wok,

leaning back from its hiss, a flaring down to silence.
I sit at the only table. An ambulance passes,
and the traffic shifts into a mess

like an angling of wings, pigeons landing at a littered curbside.

What is assumed is always arrangement.
The rain stopping in pattern or misplacement,
the walls of a room engineered to hold, bulge

from leaking water, plaster pushing out like a stomach.

Each spring they paint over the spirals of mildew—
the first splotches of brown have begun already,
rising like a bruise's first color.

Knowing things cannot be kept up as they are

they speak routinely, the woman cupping her husband's elbow
as they rest, looking over the small white kitchen
with its strangers who chew slowly.

Dream with Two Hikers

Yesterday I was nearly side swiped,
you meticulous in the afternoon

as you iced my shin
with a river cooled tin of biscuits

we had planned to eat for breakfast,
though you could hardly tolerate the dirt—

sifting through the seams of the tent,
its job as dirt to cover everything.

And how had you slept in what
had taken us an hour to mis-pitch?—

until the old man with arthritic thumbs
and a flannel trailer awning

re-staked it in five, patting your shoulder
as if to console you through my faults,

the lines of his mouth carved and forked
like the wiry, distraught branches gathered for kindling—

those red cracked lips tugged, paper-thin,
into a smile I was sure you wouldn't forget.

Later, I remembered how to improvise a fire,
and after, to douse it, to stamp it,

though the wind obsessed through the hot
cleaving ash, enlisting

flames to fatten and gorge again on the air
while we dreamed, while you dreamed

and I sopping it out in cupfuls
from the slender leg of a creek

the water opaque, the moon lacking
invisibly—the fat tree root

I couldn't have expected, nor how deep
the muscles of your shoulder

would allow me to collapse
even as morning crept back, shame-faced

and I telling you everything,
overhearing it for once, for the first time.

The Whore to the Drunk

The hatcheted light fell across your back as though skin were husk,
 brittle or deceptively pliant as the veins of your forearm
run through muscle as threaded steel,
 though their round blue paths are as supple
as metal bending in fire
 or the water sent through to cool it.

I pressed one down while you slept
 to see if you'd feel it—if the body would panic
at the slightest re-maneuvering of blood,
 your skin just flinching, automatically
like a horse shaking from its shoulder
 a single, imperceptible fly—
the only answer I received.

Sestina

We were sure the sky would boil over
with darts of light like wayward arrows.
Astronomers warbled on the local radio
about the physics of rock and speed and heat,
their voices pitched like virginal boys,
imagining it—getting closer to the long white limbs

breaking through space. As we drove, the limbs
of winter trees spread as fissures over
the windshield, branches like the broken arm of a boy.
He flicked out a cigarette, its red light arrowing
to the roadside where shadows of trees held off heat
during the day, cars passing with blasting radios.

He was reaching for me when he turned the radio,
I thought, and again, when we parked, stretching his limbs.
Tires settled in the slush, the engine clicking out its heat
like a faucet dripping into a metal sink—sound carrying over.
We lay in silence like soldiers waiting for a line of arrows
to break over the hillside. His chin pointed up, smooth as a boy's.

I turned to look at him—he had the look of a boy
near sleep, but fighting it. Then the pulse of news on the radio
broke through, a woman's voice summarizing the awful arrows
that fall now, meteors against cities of folded limbs.
Then suddenly, he snapped nearer, pulling me over
his tall lean frame until I could smell the heat

of his mouth-- the scent of whiskey musty as an old car's heat.
We were tired of being who we were, the girl, the boy
without plotting. I had known him for years. It was nearly over.
His skin was copper by the light of the radio.
The moon reflected off the high limbs.
Twigs snapped under the tires like dropped arrows.

We followed the road back, its winding down to the city,
and I held my arm over the arm of a boy
while the radio, over-heated, cut out between the hills.

Half-Window

Winter fizzles out without bang
the cosmos flings its atoms
like a hand tossed back in sex,
striking the wall behind it.
Later, the knuckles barely
limned in blue like the sprigs
outside the apartment, the wily heads
of tulips that miscalculated
the light to break from their cells
only to be caught in one of the
early season's accidental frosts.
How I came for hours,
nearly. The skin of your shoulder
the same feel as my own and when
I kissed my *own arm* by mistake
I laughed to save myself,
though you didn't notice
the sun high and cold through
the room's half-window,
Watch your step
outside the door, I call out
when you leave,
ice still holding
in the building's shade.

Nothing of Trees

I will write nothing about trees as
you have asked. Though, I have to ask
where do you step when the rain switches back—

when the ribs of your umbrella snap towards
the sunken clouds. If you have ever found yourself wheezing
beneath some surly oak—no, I'll write nothing of trees—

with only the staggered shadows to dry you? The people
they pass hunched into their bellies their jacket sleeves blazoned
against their runny noses when the rain switches back.

Yesterday, I stood unmoved in a pile of wet leaves
to remember how you once described the jagged petals
of some lost and exotic flower—using nothing of trees

to say, what I mean to say—I would wear
the ache of your bones for you to forgive
how I've waited for the rain to switch back

How I've waited too long for you to bring
the points of branches gathered from the ground
from the flooded gutters when the rain switches back—
to come and tell me nothing and everything of trees.

Blue Fish

I said nothing, washing the gray
 peel of dishes
that hadn't been washed in weeks.
 My hands red
with the repair of steaming water,
 the faucet's throat
still burning as all our silences,
 our breaths held long.

We managed the evidence
 of sudden departure,
collecting trash, casting out dust, while
 ignoring the fish
that hadn't been fed, though I stared
 into its blue-fanned tail,
its rake of luminous cobalt scales
 dissolving into the filmy water

I threw a dish towel over
 to prevent you
from seeing, as you gathered
 your things alone
in the room where he was found—
 the door shut to us—
to its usual order of openings, closings.

Siamese fighting fish glean oxygen
 through the water's skin
by a second labyrinthine lung
 when the air is starved
from the shallow root-clogged byways
 of what might
be called their homeland
 though displacement

has made their beauty—
as the fluorescent
lights of pet stores illumine them,
their stretches of color
frantic against white plaster walls,
unmarred glass.
This one, like an angry Narcissus
had once bloomed

virulent against the mirror tipped
towards its bowl
antagonized by its reflection—
the repugnance
of the self unrecognized and blaring
into its tiny fistful heart.

for Laurel and Butch

Drowning Boy

It is nearly the end of winter. Over the city,
the sky turns down with a down-grading blue.
I return to my apartment where the evening light

cuts through and I open a high, half-sized window.
A low breeze enters, and the sound of leaves turning under it
hisses in like water spilling over a stove.

Somehow I feel less lonely. Bits of a world break in.
After dinner, a TV show about whales—
cameramen in boats chase them over thick water

where they hang vertically in sleep as if drowning.
Loneliness has nothing to do with it. When I think of him
I am sad, but it's not the same sadness.

*

At the window, I pull back
a single linen curtain that catches and diffuses a lamp
as if it made its own light

like the scarf of Rembrandt's Lady of Sorrows:
the white silk luminous over the layers of soil-colored clothes,
its light revealing, barely, her deeply shadowed face.

Today in the museum, she might have played a woman dying,
though it wasn't her story—another was made of arrangement,
isolation, proximity. Next to her, a portrait of the son—

a blushy Christ with cheeks like a baby's ass.
He gazed toward the corner of the room
as if bewildered, or perhaps,

not bewildered enough by circumstance—
The face of unknowing right before knowing.
Across the hall, a neighbor opens his door,

his jangling keys irritate the silence,
a small disturbance like water
flinching beneath a mosquito's tread.

By the dam in Kingsport, Tennessee
the bugs were ruthless until October
when the first frost would break them from the air,

from the lake's surface that seemed solid
at night with the moon repeating over.
My neighbor is a shy man. Mostly he looks away.

*

A day of song or labor begins the same.
When they found the boy it was
the beginning of fall, someone searching

for a lost hubcap had spotted him from a bridge—
his shoulders reflected the moon
flatly, his body a slash of white like Icarus

deep in, with his wing torn away.
Soaked to their waists in the early
morning dark, they had pulled him back too late,

their breath steaming in the cold, in the silence
until the sun broke through. Light partitioning the sky,
then the fog drawing over.

*

It stays the same, that place—
a crook of town most of the town forgets
even in winter when the roofs of houses on the hill

poke above the bare-armed trees
that stand like god with
their silver arms striking across the water.

*

From the neighbor's apartment, a TV blasts
with the brassy percussion of a courtroom drama,
blue light washing from his window to the street

as the mourners slowly disappear scene by scene.
I dreamed of the boy last night, his wet arms around my neck—
his body was the weight of a statue slipping.

Needless to say, I didn't hold on, knowing
I couldn't change death, knowing I'm a terrible swimmer,
and then the neighbor leaves with his usual clatter,

and I hear the TV still on and turn on mine to match it—
a woman has drowned and it's TV beautiful,
the blue lips, the bereaved mother who falls

and the proud cop catching her like
Magdalene catching the mother as it is painted and
as Rembrandt must have caught it just before—

Lady of Sorrows reeling before collapse,
except her skin, the color of polluted water,
is closer to the grief.

It has happened before and will again and has already.
Replication by picture, replication by fact,
Lady of Sorrows, by what right did we paint you?

*

We were 17 when it happened,
our bitchiness in full bloom, our cluelessness
of death at its peak.

Only the starched white shirt looked real
at his wake and the long blonde hair
that his girlfriend had insisted, *down*.

When she reached out to stroke it,
we winced, but didn't stop her. Holding behind,
looking away, I gripped her small waist like a falling child's,

her head tucked under my chin.
Later, her feet didn't touch the ground
when we carried her through the room,

past the lines of frowning figures,
past the women in black whose legs
were white as heron necks under their skirts,

their whole bodies bowing as if caught in the undertow.
Mothers imagining it—
how the boy sank through the darkening strata

of water before drifting back up—*the thought of it,*
the sting in the belly--as one woman had imagined
over a Ritz hors d'oeuvre while another

discussed the heartlessness of florists
who build funerary baskets from filler and leftover flowers.
Heartlessness everywhere she'd insisted

with such self-exclusion that I remember it
and wonder if I too had latched opportunely
to the occasion of mourning, the spectacle

of life wringing itself out next to death
as the sea spits out bones then retreats
imperceptibly, a shade bluer,

and the birds diving down to have a look,
their shadows repeating over the waves.
Light hitting its mark. An image forming.

*

The mind is blue with it. Have a look.
There is no way of knowing any other way.

*

My neighbor turns toward the stairs, and for a moment,
in the musky light of an ill-lit hallway, I realize
his cheek is the shape of an awkward bird

and bears a resemblance to a foundering boy I had known.
I turn toward my door and say nothing; mostly he is a stranger
and the coincidence means nothing.

Outside the end of winter nears, and the blue air
warms and unfurls over the city, over buildings one by one
like a tide ripping in, a spectacle of light and loose cloud cover.

We know the scene sped up, the sky flooding mechanically,
each repetition a distant sorrow surging near,
though there's no way, for certain, of knowing.

III.

Mother at the Kitchen Sink

Dropping the crusted spoon
back to the soapy water,
she scratches her head from vague nervousness,
an old family habit among the women.

Her scalp becomes moist again
barely with pink blood
and she asks for a cup of water,
though sucks in air, wanting a cigarette.

Turning toward the window, she fixes her eyes straight out
to the garden mismanaged by the well-meaning.
She knows the irises at the end of the yard
will not re-emerge—

the boy across the street slips his back tire
every morning over their bed.
“How long will you watch me?”
she might ask, wanting death kept to herself

as she licks the last beads of water from her lips.
Their borrowed purple color
leaves a half-petal print on the rim—
the color of muscadine

hanging over the driveway—
the vines thick and tangled over branches,
The insignificant berries had stained
the cool white paint

of her Pontiac as it sat parked
for days at summer's end.
She won't turn to look at me, her eyes undeterred
by the sun's blasting through,

her pupils darkening
and wide against it,
her face over-determined,
then suddenly translucent.

Medusa's Boredom

I have exhausted the house's glass:
the wool-dressed windows,
the mirror stapled above
the bathroom sink, the old vase

gathering dust in the garage.
From what I could make out
the sea was heavy as mountains,
empty of ships tanked full of wine

and olives brisk with
the salt of ancient fish.
I had to open a window to see it—
is it known that the sea

at certain depths hangs like tar?
So thick you could rake a fork
through, and the parted water
only with difficulty, folding back...

This house has a thinness,
a transparency
like old skin pulled taut
over veins, curving bones.

There are no sails billowed
or coughing in the wind—
the horizon's as bare
as a waxed shoulder.

Woman Waiting for a Bus

The sky is pandering to what it can,
her body a sieve the rain would step through—
its deliberate, incremental fall diffuses
the gutters' stash of cigarettes, unhands

scraps of paper whipping past her feet—she scans
the traffic coolly, searching for the long-due
bus, its strain of lights to be mirrored, impugned
in the dark wet street along which we stand.

When she speaks, she must speak softly, hushing
herself to please what is often mistaken
for stillness, like the overhearing of clumsy prayer.

The smudge of lipstick I could almost brush
from her chin, as the bus arrives, breaking
against this recognition, unaware.

A Sentimental

Muscles of clouds peruse the sky,
shadows cast slick on the grass.
Serious. Deliberative.

The neighbor's lab
shakes himself dry of the lake,
then licks clean his balls.

I lean against the patio table,
elbow almost missing the edge—
what has spilled from the glass held aslant

is on the blouse for good.
The pebbles brought by the small daughter
sit in my hand like gray wilted moons.

Things are shaped up for dinner,
we wait while the others
trail in, renewing the question

I'd only half-answered.
You ask me, *why bother with it*
who listens when

it's *hard work* to hear it all:
the clinking of stemware,
the unbending of water,

your own breath in your ear.
So I recite instead
a poem with earnestness

and you agree at its words,
its use of *sturdy*, *azalea*,
and how when said, the lips do not touch.

Water nudges the dock as a boat passes,
the lapping, slopping sound
of short swells breaking

—how warm the house looks,
interrupting the dark,
how blue your mouth by a wine glass.

You ask, finally, how things have went
and I respond that they have went
until we sigh

solidly with hints
of songs like crickets
tuning their legs.

Ode to the Creek Never Named

My brother barefoot in its gray thread, in his hands
the small fish hooked out, fluttering like a loose paint chip.

A jar of crawdads he'd take home sat on the bank. We'd watch
them for a day until the tiny albino shapes would hang

shiftless in the collected water like missed bones.
On the hill, our mother, lean in dark trousers, calling us.

The dog barking to punctuate. She'd be partly angry.
The water she'd say, *didn't look right*, and she was right,

the color like sky reflected in an empty oil pan.
We collided even then, though it was quieter,

until my brother grew taller and I hissed to be alone,
and the creek, sometimes quick with a slash of red

from a car bounding over the short bridge
like a paper cut's blood, startling, but nothing.

At 16, he flipped his navy Chevy over
an eight foot ledge, landing in an old lady's garden;

cement petals scattered with glass—
the trunk had smashed a birdbath.

And he'd crawled out like an Achilles, cheek
full of Skohl, angry at the road, limping home.

Cubes of near-blue glass holding in the lawn
like crumbled water. The only blood

from a busted football scab, one edge
pulled up like a molting scale.

Our mother cleaned it, smiling in relief,
her hand shaking through the band-aid drawer.

Melons

1. (A Visit Home)

A pile of my father's shirts are heaped in a chair.
My mother watches TV as she irons.
There are shots of dewy melons, sliced and spritzed, then a woman
wearing a yellow floral blouse. She is happy.
Her children happy too: their smiles overdrawn
as in the opening montage of a sitcom.

They run across the store. It lasts only a second—
linoleum shiny as a hospital tray, then the shots of melons,
melons showing their seedbeds like surgically opened hearts.

My father calls. Her voice changes when she answers.
He asks about dinner. She can't help how she loves him.
The TV switches its music: a couple, actors in white coats,
grip each other in a hallway, furrowed brows, open lips—
someone's heart must burst to stop them.
Then the patient wheeled in, bleeding at the mouth...

2. (Visit Home: Conversation on Soup)

We'll have soup, she says, what kind of soup sounds good? Your father likes one soup, and I like another so you decide what soup. There's vegetable soup, and chicken soup, melon soup and tortilla soup, or really, we don't have to have soup. I'll be happy with either, either soup, I say. So will we, she says. You aren't home often—we'll have what you like, we'd like to have what you'd like. My family is a family of feeders. We feed when there's nothing and when there's something to say. During meals we talk about next meals, or old meals, or best meals. Feed her, I think she thinks, and she'll stick around like one of those sweet stray cats.

3. (Dead Bird)

At five, I found on the porch my first cat-killed bird.
Its stiff little body, torn at the wing, bone jutting
like a needle left poking through an unfinished sleeve.

My mother told my brother to bury it, and when
he refused, she took a spade from the garage
and headed toward the side yard. She tossed it

in a grocery bag and told me to help. It only took a minute.
My mother on her hands and knees digging
a quick grave beside the rose bush, a thing she never tended—

it was planted by the family before and was wild
of its own accord, huge white blooms exploding in summer,
leaning against the house like a heavy-breasted woman.

4. (Conversation on Maturity)

I'd always wanted breasts like my mother. How they'd cradled my weeping head and fed me to my greatest fatness. *Breasts are not that big of a deal. Breasts are heavy and plus you are slim; I was never slim as you. The boys like breasts, yes? Yes? Breasts aren't as important as you think; breasts aren't important to important boys who will love you for you. Like who? Like husbands. I don't want a husband. Yes you do... Be careful what you do.*

5. (A Visit Home)

At night she rises to nurse me back to health.
A grown woman, I can barely lift my head,
sick with a fever, sick from a Christmas ham.

Standing in her nightgown against
the dark window that faces a dimly lit
suburban street, she might be a figure

in an old war movie—the bright nurse
moving through the gray examining room,
metal gleaming off medical trinkets, their luster,

in black and white, like water catching sun.
She offers me water, then bites of chilled fruit
(they dissolve in my mouth like ice).

Down the hallway, I hear the pulse of the TV—
someone barking orders, the groan
of a fighter plane hurtling near to ground.

My father watches, sprawled on the couch,
waiting for her to come to bed.
He can barely sleep when alone.

Jesus Christ, I mumble, spitting out
a bit of melon so under ripe, I still taste
the rind in it, its hard, bitter, seed taste—

I wish you wouldn't curse, she still says to me,
though in the dark I imagine she's smiling at my blasphemy,
as though, secretly, she'd raised me for it.

She lay beside me all night. The moon bright off her hands
as she brushed away the fever, her fingertips cool
like summer fruits just washed of their dirt.

6. (Visit Home: Eavesdropping)

Like my mother, strong-willed, but not, sweet-natured, I heard her say to the west coast aunt in the next room when they thought I was asleep. I admit I took some pleasure in this. Meanness has its usefulness—a stony heart like the stomach of a bird who eats up rocks when it can, the stomach having, then, a set of makeshift teeth. It's hard when you swallow things whole—to grind up the seed with the fruit, the shell with the snail—of course...there was the time...I punched my brother in the tail...

7. (The Buck in the Basement)

The painting hangs at the base of the basement stairs,
staring up to the rest of the house,
to the yellow, steamy light of the kitchen.

The buck stands in the middle of a Bob Ross woods
and has enormous nostrils like an extra set of eyes.
My great-grandmother painted it upon her own orders

after a mastectomy when the doctor had ordered
she must elevate her arm for several hours of the day
to allow the left flesh to heal, to keep

the veins from clotting beneath the stitches.
She learned to paint. This is the story.
The buck looks at you as though looking

over you, his head just lifted, like he'd expected
someone else, or rather, like he'd expected to be shot.
And how had she gotten so close?

Though the technique is off, the eye is exact:
the way the hair beneath his neck is softer, lighter
but for a dusting of dirt from the underbrush. The nose

glossy from mucus, like a baby's mouth, wet with milk.
Perhaps she had painted the ridiculous nostrils as wide
as she had seen them, as she had seen them breathing her in.

8. (Early Morning Conversation)

My mother called at 8 am. At 8 am
I'm barely awake even when I'm awake.
It was raining, I could hear the rain

splashing up from the cement.
She called to tell me, after taking the thing out,
the lab technicians had declared it benign—

a lump of sweaty fat, pearly tissue the body
had made for no reason. She'd called to tell me
the good news, and I was pissed

she hadn't called when the news was still news.
No need to worry you, and after all,
it was nothing. Only her mother's mother

had had it and even then, it was probably
a misdiagnosis, but then again...what did they know then?
I knew she was calling from the kitchen phone,

clearing mail from the table for dinner,
the TV on as always to keep off the silence
of an empty house. I nearly broke.

It's rained all day. It's rained all week,
I'm so sick of the rain, have you been
getting much of this rain?, she asked

and then I asked, *Did you get to see it, mom,*
did you get to see it? Of course not, she said.
Why on earth would you ask?

There was silence and I listened to her breathe
over the rain that came down over the ground, over the house,
over the rain just under it, coming down.

The Foal

The broodmare shifted her weight
as the wind left off its push—

her giant belly, wide like an oak cask,
flinched every now and then

and the first gray milk began
its drip over strands of hay.

I watched as it came,
a jangle of wet limb

clamoring and steaming
toward the disjointed air

that seemed to catch
in my lung like a knee

unbending and snagging
over its first feel of grass