

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THIS NOTHING: POEMS
Danielle Syreeta Veith, Master of Fine Arts,
2005

Directed By: Professor Stanley Plumly
Department of English

This manuscript contains forty-two poems, written in primarily open forms, with some use of meter and measure in the line. One focus is to balance aural aspects of poetry—to transcribe the music heard in the mind—with visual aspects inherent in a written art form—to be interesting, beautiful and clear on the page. The poems follow an arc of momentum that seeks to convert the remembered moment into a map of the voice. Where they loosen, linger, or are halting, they hope to direct the pace of the breath. Any development in the work has been toward the idea of a measure based on my own breath, which incorporates an understanding of the tendencies of the language, while trying to remain faithful to an idiosyncratic voice.

THIS NOTHING: POEMS

By

Danielle Syreeta Veith

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2005

Advisory Committee:
Professor Stanley Plumly, Chair
Assistant Professor Elizabeth Arnold
Professor Michael Collier
Assistant Professor Joshua Weiner

© Copyright by
Danielle Syreeta Veith
2005

DEDICATION

To Christopher, for everything.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their incredible intelligence, patience and support, I would like to thank Stanley Plumly, Elizabeth Arnold, Michael Collier and Joshua Weiner.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

White Sky Mind	1
Suicidal Ideation	3
We Were All Born at Home	4
Rigoberto	6
Witness	7
No Fear of Water	8
The Smell of Dirt	9
Sophia Evelyn, 8 lbs., 2 oz., 11:54 a.m.	11
Parking Lot Maple Tree	12
Not Laughing	13
The Life Jacket	14
Tortured for Old Speech	15
When Sex Was Peeing	17
Bancha	18
Rain Like This	19
Tsunami	20
After the Flood	22
Unwinding	24
Through Glass	25
Suicidal Ideation (2)	26

Rest	28
Flowers for the Family	29
Heavy Golden Nagging	30
Honeymoon Bath Water	31
Blood Stained, Like My Mother	32
Out the Window and Down	33
My Mother's Wisdom Teeth	34
Tear Jar	36
Just Enough	37
Belonging	38
It's a Good Day	39
Johnnie Cochran Just Died	40
The Diggers	41
After Another Late Day	42
This Nothing	43
Twilight	44
On the Way Home from Seeing My Cousin, Whose Father Has Two Weeks	45
Dirt & Light	46
First Star—Fourth of July	47
Learning How to Do It	49
Finding Form	50
Sleeping Together	56

WHITE SKY MIND

As the sky fills with rain,
in the middle of the median
a ghost of a woman stands biting her nails,
holding her child's hand.
Our heads turn past,
eyes missing.
Rain begins slowly
tapping on my windshield.
The sky holding back slightly
—for her maybe.
Wipers fog dirt and water.
I don't want her to see in my face
I think I'm better. I don't.
I hate the sky
when it gets like this.

When gray naked trees
barely hold leaves,
brown grass like wheat cut short
echoes sadness, under white skies,
skinny black birds fly south
in shifting lines,
I'm a girl at a lake
where geese bite knees.

Everything is wet but it's not raining.
There is mud but no puddles.
The sky is empty, haze touches my face.
It's been this way a lot lately,
winter touching down.
It's how I remember my childhood,
the parts I don't remember.
The gray lake and the goose,
the photos of me with my brother,
our small dark plaid coats,
parents missing from the frame.
Quiet but for water
which is never quiet,
and memory

which was trying to tell me—
Hold this. There is meaning here.

SUICIDAL IDEATION

I can almost see the cliff, see the man
staring with eyes lowered as mine now.

I never knew him, my mother's old boyfriend,
but his name was Michael. He ended it

off a cliff in a state park, the day before
his wedding, and because

there is no sense in this world I can see
but something else certainly that's everywhere,

a friend of my parents, someone Michael
didn't know, was there with him that day—

this friend who used to sit and play
his flute in the mountains, to be alone

with music, had seen others too and so
he knew when Michael stood so quietly

alone at the edge for hours. They talked
but what is there to say—and eventually

alone again he fell away from it.
He fell and from his feeling of falling

something extended out and silently
laced my grief to my mother's mourning.

That day she learned something I already knew—
you can't love a suicide and you can't stop either.

WE WERE ALL BORN AT HOME

Before me, Vermont, and more I don't know.
I was born in Jersey, in Lawrenceville,
in a small house that my parents found again
after I moved away, when they sat on the steps
and cried. Most of the rest in Pennsylvania.
One brother came a year later in Bedford,
and next year, the next one, at the Cow Palace,
a commune they left because my mother
hit my father and yelled that no one would
wash the dishes. For five years, in Newtown,
before the developments, before all the farms
were gone. In the first of our years there,
my sister was born, so there were six kids
and four parents in the half of a duplex
we shared with my Dad's sister's family.
Then back to Jersey for one more year,
to Allentown, closer to the nursery where
my dad dug trees with guys from Trenton,
Guatemala, Mexico and El Salvador.
The kids at that school didn't believe we lived
on that street because black people did,
and my sister beat the boys in foot races
and I started to remember these things—
The Indian man down the street who gave
my mother a turquoise bracelet she would
always wear and wish there was something else
held so closely, so my sister and I could
each have something of her when she's gone.
When I pull it on, I can't stop thinking
it will get caught on the veins of my wrist,
so my sister will get it. I can't remember
her without it but can see her happy the day
she got it. I wondered how my dad
would feel, another man giving her jewelry
while he was working in an empty field alone.
After that, they built a house in Gravelpit,
and my dad had to live east during the week,
where there was work, for what it was worth.
Two years of that before we were all
back east, living in a house my grandparents
owned in Bristol, down the street from where

they lived. They rented it to us for six short months before throwing us out to get more rent. The next six months in the cracker-jack box in Levittown, where we had cable because it was free, and my mom drove us every day to school, so we wouldn't have to change mid-year. Then back to Newtown, until I moved away, to live on the last farm left, in the middle of million-dollar houses. They've been there now for seventeen years. How do you move after that? The attic, filled with prom dresses, doll-house furniture, papers from so much unpaid nonprofit work, books from every level of education, things young boys would never think to save, the wood of unfinished work, empty boxes etched with dust. It's as if they can't leave. I've moved ten times now while they've stayed still, in that old stone home alone.

RIGOBERTO

As he paints my landlord's house where I live for now I stay inside blinds down
listening to the persistent scraping
unsure of whether he's ascended to the second story climbed his ladder to where I am
standing naked about to shower

I can't explain my need to know him and my greater need to hide that his shy square
face his voice that speaks Spanish
in English he admired my choice of paint color asked whether I chose it this is in fact
quite embarrassing for me

standing naked in the middle of my bathroom listening to the banging of windows
and the quietness of this man
and without resistance he becomes the men who unable to drive walk home from
work across the highways I drive

I know nothing about these men seeing their faces in the backs of pick-up trucks
exhausted and looking expressionless
at what passes them by as they are driven job to job around this sprawling suburban
work site

outside in the calm green day painting perfect straight lines like it matters Rigoberto
thinks something
about which I know nothing I know nothing I know nothing

WITNESS

He's not believed—

his memory now
comes in fits.

At middle-age,
having taken the stand, having since

it happened
served in the military,

learned to sit straight
and stare forward,

he testifies today
facing an old man fading,

about his rape
as a boy.

What came after? What
began his forgetting?

A girl maybe.
Or something less.

Maybe there was no memory,
for years never a thought.

Why now in waves,
scattered sharp parts—

Why would anyone listen
and believe

something forgotten is less true?

NO FEAR OF WATER

They've moved the snow
back to Tuesday. It's Tornado Week
on The Weather Channel.

It's Coming
the ad announces. You couldn't
watch if you knew. But I don't.

Once, there were sirens
and my mother, thinking of fire, didn't
stop at the bank. We would have been

in the way, she thought, in a town
that small. Maybe just minutes
later, the town was under water.

We had to find another way home.
I was ten when my parents
built a house in the-middle-of-nowhere,

in a town with only a church
and no work. We were trapped
when it snowed. All the Storm Stories

seem the same regardless
of wind or water. Damage is done.
Everyone is crying and grateful.

I almost drowned when I was young
but my father saved me. He was also
the one who flipped the boat.

I watch the weather
every ten minutes for hours
to see what changes.

THE SMELL OF DIRT

As I sink heels down in mud, as I hold
soil in my hand, if I even think of dirt,
with every breath, my father is there.

Mud padded and seeped through
the knees of his work jeans,
ten identical pair, ten dollars each,
bought at the beginning of each season.

Soil nourishes plants he labors,
sells for ten dollars a bag in New York City.
He laughed at me for buying it there,
where I lived and wanted to remember
soil and him and air encouraged
through photosynthesis or carbon release
or something he would know,
like the Latin botanical names
for plants he has by heart.

Soil, mud, dirt—one of these things,
it's hard to remember which now,
not being knee-high, not being at home for years.
One of them smells like him,
who worked so hard yet barely sweat,
never smelled of sweat,
never dank like molded leaves,
even after all day in mud and rain.

Years later, running my fingers through dirt
or digging my fingers into dirt, this came to me
like a revelation I can't shake—

My father smells like dirt,
like the inside of tree branches snapped open.

He, who was midwife to my mother
for my birth, for the three
who came after, who wanted twelve,
like a Catholic, like a farmer who has enough
children to work the land,
birthed four who don't know anything
about the earth. Not like he does,

what it feels like, when the soil is right
for a Japanese maple or what makes a dogwood
grow here and not there, when the ground
will freeze for winter. He knows
everything about dirt I could imagine to ask
but wouldn't. And how could he teach these things
he has learned not about the earth
but from it? And what does the earth
know of him?

Heavy boot-shaped tread of mud,
on our floors always and
I, knee-high, his knees covered in mud,
learned about dirt, about earth,
about the smell of my father.

SOPHIA EVELYN, 8 LBS. 2 OZ., 11:54 A.M.

I'm on second shift tonight. Or think I am. If I knew my role, I wouldn't bake lasagna. At this stage—early labor, you'll call it later—when you're still smiling and we go for a walk, we still think there are roles and jobs and lists, that any of these things matter.

Outside, it's beautiful, even though we're in the park that isn't the nice park. It's spring, time for birth. You have always planned everything so perfectly. Later, when all you want is to lie with the father, I think, *This is how it's supposed to be,*

romantic, like its origin. And for a moment it is. Neither of us have done this before. You're getting scared, think everyone's staring, but you make progress. Our mothers tell us everything's progress, even when no movement is felt, that we can't see anything that matters.

We're learning we are so like our mothers, even in how we labor. That's what they tell us. But what do they remember? A number of hours, a time. Our weight, once we hit this world. Things we're still counting, waiting for. What we will remember of this

has yet to happen. We don't know why your labor has slowed. We don't know how this is supposed to go, whether it's okay. Even though we spent all day waiting, we still can't begin to imagine his lips and your nose nested on eight soft pounds.

Your mother says labor prepares you for never having control again. For twelve more hours, I feel this. It's so late now, sixteen hours since you called to say something I can't remember about the day, and, *oh by the way, I'm in labor, come over when you can.*

PARKING LOT MAPLE TREE

Just days ago aflame,
now is the time to lie down.

Each leaf turning rigid alone,
unable to stay soft, bendable,

they fall, overlap each other
on dirt, in parking lots

they crumble, are absorbed
inside again, inside this ground

I don't yet understand.
I look away, seek nothing,

miss seeing even one leaf
from branch to ground.

Feel no breeze
against dehydrated eyes.

Can't pray, never could.
But what instead?

Stark Naked Branches,
rest will come soon.

NOT LAUGHING

Sitting outside on a bench at a busy intersection.
I see one man then another.
Both in fatigues.
One walking tall proud.
The other slumped in the parking lot with a turban and a cup of change.
What do they need?
I hold my arms out for joy, ask it from everyone.
Pathetically.
Pathetically not laughing at anything.
Driving home I pass a trash truck in opposing traffic.
Mickey Mouse two feet tall and stuffed is strapped to its grill.
Who pinned it there?
What do they want from me?
No laughter comes.
A truck spouts exhaust, a puffy horizontal trail.
It must not dissolve into the leaves of the small highway trees.
When I pulled up my dress I was five walking to a friends'.
Her mother yelled at me.
My panties had ruffles.
I didn't understand not showing them.
My most embarrassing moments are funny to who?
Why not me yet?
School started recently somewhere in rural America.
A teacher tried to explain to a boy why we don't clean our pants in the toilet.
Why are they laughing?
Is it more than etiquette I don't know?
How not to be laughed at.
How to stop feeling everyone outside like I know something.

THE LIFE JACKET

The life jacket didn't slow my sinking.
The canoe I would be pulled into floated
gently over my head as my father dove,
full of fear, thinking of my mother,
from the capsized Sunfish to my descending
six-year-old body. I remember being
surrounded, eyes open, by water, wondering
will it always be like this? and not being unhappy.
When I think of being close to death
I think of my sister. She wasn't even one
when she fell from the third story window
as my father watched the game. I was the one
who saved her, kept her head from swelling,
her skull from losing its one remaining
connection to itself. That's what they said.
I was four. I didn't want her to cry.

TORTURED FOR OLD SPEECH

Perhaps it was always this—At the gray lake,
when the goose bit me. Maybe this was not
a surprise. Maybe I already knew
such things are of this world.

Gray sky, faded mind, lost in something,
not this.

My mother first began to lose her faith in family,
left alone with a man in a Cadillac's back seat,
her parents in front, ignoring everything.
Is this my memory now?

Her father driving her always fast and drunk
and now my fear of anything fast.
Her brother writing obscenely in lipstick
on her sister's too old body.

Why is this for my mind?
Why remember this? Memories holding what
or why or for how long—

A slip of gray sky falls—

To find what isn't reconstructed
from old photos, other people's stories.
Not to find with closed eyes picturing the past.
To feel. To feel it as early as it was felt.
Was this always me? Was it always this?

I'm naked on a plastic bike
with a boy I don't know. That's from a photo.

My aunt painted red, a dead featherless bird,
and the imagined futile act of cleaning pigment
with old dry soap and cold water, some of it
staying, a refusal of forgetting—

These things my body remembers
that I don't. In the way it moves,
so absent, so hungry, what holds it here?

Things that aren't important, so much as
permanent, vanish like ice on every branch.
Beautiful and daring, the rain fell so quickly
and on everything.

If my muscles move a new way—
what's forgotten? The way those dead flowers
looked back at me. I was so sure I'd forget.
And in my parent's closet, a first kiss,
unseen for years, does it still hang there?

Maybe nothing's forgotten, maybe
not fully remembered.

Maybe before speech, I'm standing
in the narrow entry to the pale, paint-peeling
kitchen, listening to tall adults talking,
talking about me—wanting to be part of this—
what they didn't want me to remember.
Now afraid to ask what they thought
I would forget.

Struggling to find earliest thoughts
buried in this mind, this separate thing,
to know whether my mind was always this.

To feel again
if I was happy then.

WHEN SEX WAS PEEING

I have a broken memory of strutting,
back when I was eight and thought sex
was peeing on each other, with my
two-years-older best-friend Becky,
in scant sexy outfits—as small town kids
imagine them—multi-colored bandannas
as skirts. I don't think we wore tops.
Swaggering like we were twenty years older
and in Times Square, with cloth boas
strung around our bare shoulders,
down the aisle of an old school bus.

It was her bedroom, in the hippie camp
of her parents' home, a conglomeration
of old trailers and buses. Her brothers,
one older and one younger, dirty stocky
country boys, waited for us, their eyes
glued to our impressions of sexy walking,
in the bed at the end of the bus, where
the last three rows of seats were removed.

I don't know if we ever had sex,
just that I was usually with the younger boy,
that we couldn't tell anyone where we were
when we played, and at some point, we stopped.

BANCHA

There is a tea my parents make
that's hard to explain. No one has ever heard of it.
They make it every day. Reddish brown, twigs settled at the bottom.
It tastes like guilt. Not at first. It's an accumulation,
every talk, every day, watered with this.
My throat drowns in it even now.

RAIN LIKE THIS

Thunder shudders, collapsing
somewhere past my vision,

a scattering of voices
behind it. Alone, I've been

sitting on my screen porch
waiting for rain, or

something else altogether.
Flashes of light behind

the houses, hardly even
distracting. All summer,

the sky would not open,
pressed down and down,

I couldn't get out
from under it,

couldn't ascend in mind,
could only remember

the so-dry summer
he died, the way the grass

burnt up by the end of June,
how everything seemed dead,

how that hasn't left yet.
When it finally breaks—

rain like this
doesn't do anyone any good,

running down the street
like that—

TSUNAMI

Bodies. There were bodies in the trees after the water fell back.
It rose so slowly, no one saw it. Retreated first, so the children
followed it, filled up with it flooded inside.

And when I talk of this, my father leaves the room, as if something
wrong has been said. His leaving fills me.

This is a man who found out about the Holocaust as an adult,
my mother saying, Can you imagine? Leaving high school, later learning
that about the world?

What a thing to know,
what my father didn't. What he couldn't handle hearing.

Any undivided attention is prayer.

On the radio, I hear one man's story: He lost none
of his seven daughters. So, an obligation, he said, to help others.
Gratitude, happiness:

I can see his hands on his spade as it lifts soil. Soil I know I'll never see.
Imagined then, my arms lifting—

Like my father digging trees, lifting so much soil in his life, his spade
deep in northeastern dirt. Imagined lifting.
Imagined, the hole deepens. Readies itself for bodies,

not his daughters, but someone's, maybe known to him. Deepens,
his thoughts only of his daughters, his luck...

Until it's too much—
I try to release from his mind, climb out of this grave I'll never dig,
stop myself from traveling farther than I ever will,

to every depressed place, unable to stop thinking until I can *feel* it.
Feel him. What I think he feels...

You, and I, same God. All, same God, a Sri Lankan says to a reporter.

Gathering in shrines a month later to pray, stilt fishermen, spared because that day was a *poya*, a full-moon day, a monthly Sabbath forbidding killing, even fishing.

Some of those who went to their morning prayers on that day, the imam cries, Did not pray in the afternoon.

This is the lesson for everyone.

The tsunami picked up everything, called everyone by name. Decided who would live and die.

Egalitarian damage, the reporter wrote, to homes of those of all religions, *puts paid to the notion of a God who takes sides.*

But shrines in every town—Crucifix, Buddha, Shiva—spared.

White flags everywhere: fluttering from phone lines, dancing above fresh graves in the local cemeteries.

A Buddhist symbol of mourning.
Something I've known only as surrender.

AFTER THE FLOOD

A woman is forced
to wrap her husband,

dead not from
but during the storm,

in their bed sheet,
even his face covered,

maybe especially his face.
Forced to pull his body

onto plywood, float him
down the drowned streets,

until a driver, yelled at
and paid 20 bucks,

threw the body
on a flat bed truck,

with downed limbs
of ancient oaks—

Her drenched face
focused skyward,

her sheet-wrapped
husband behind her,

unburies for me
a long-forgotten face

worse than raw,
half the skin gone.

The way we felt that day,
driving that back road,

in the back of a pickup,
our young butts

bouncing in the air,
smashing down again

against the metal bed.
A man down a ravine,

down there for days,
his car fallen from the road,

caught by trees at the bottom,
his orange sleeve flapping.

My mother slowing
and stopping, seeing

his arm held out the window,
fingers grasping the roof.

The way we felt after that,
barely able to be there

with his face. Will she
ever feel other than

she feels now, what we felt
for only a forgotten moment?

UNWINDING

This day, I may not make it.
My restless mind might break me.

The wind stirs so slowly, leaves
wind down, give in to cold ground.

Wet sinks into bones, doesn't
let go the chill. *Let go.*

Death has come close
to tell me it's not giving up.

Let it happen. Let go.
The bare nonbearing branches

need to be left alone awhile.
He was not at peace but did die.

Quiet comes. Cold comes.
Rain falls. We go inside.

THROUGH GLASS

I'm inside. The outside,
the temperature of its air,
chills my skin.

The forgotten outside,
stuck, for a moment
unsure, the last breath

that doesn't know
it's last and waits too long
so there can be no starting again.

Two little girls look through
the window at me, but
they stay outside.

Inside I am
drowning in late-day light,
objects all around rushing,

bypass my eyes
for the back of my head,
pull everything backwards.

I can't tell the difference anymore
between calm and not calm
but one is louder.

The sun—in my eyes—
sets. Soon
something will break.

SUICIDAL IDEATION (2)

Do you remember
the beginning,
the way we ran down that hill together,

hands finally entwined,
the way you looked
when you saw me

and how we stood so still?
There was no solace between us,
though I admit

I felt it there.

You lived only to teach me later
how to feel this unalive,
how to lose days, days, days like people.

Your face felt like a reflection.
Only later did I see it—
you were so close to death,

you made me feel it.

Only later did I learn
more women try, but men succeed
in dying every day.

After you tried,
after all the stories your friends told—
of you in solitary

only getting worse,
of no bathrooms, no food
and no one would let you out,

stories untrue only in detail, not in despair—
after you disappeared,
after you left what was left of me?

Sitting on a slightly slanted roof alone,

realizing I had nothing
because I had you,

knew what you knew,
what could never be severed
and what could.

REST

There it is: the first shock.
Only one turns but
it turns completely.
All orange. All at once.
Today I do not brace
myself as usual,
against the remaining
green. They need to rest.
These trees put forth all
they had. Nothing now
but the internal turning.
Just enough to make it.
Don't ask for more from them.
The cold, an invitation
to sleep. My organs
shudder. My skin barely
holds me in. I'm tired,
want to rest, to let go,
leaf by leaf, until, naked,
the cold sleep comes.
Is this death-longing,
this refusal to wake to it,
to what remains?

FLOWERS FOR THE FAMILY

We prefer to keep the dead ones around
than have no evidence of an offering
from the gardens outside this stone house.

The ones in this room, a small bouquet as most are,
a delicate touch, are so far gone, the moment
the stem gave into the bud, fell down on itself,

is held in stiff repose. Water long-evaporated,
they're not rotten but dried accidentally,
would crumble, dust to my touch, fall evenly

in every direction, some touching the table.
I think they were mums, shades of yellow, red, orange
cling to once soft petals, hanging on to faint green arms.

Sometimes letting go is not the right thing, sometimes
we can't move on. So, if you enter this home,
don't ask us to discard the death in every room,

we're waiting for what no one can yet see
and should you bring us flowers, don't imagine
they will replace the remains of the rest,

we can always find another window sill or table
to fill as we wait to know how long we will all last.
Fall descends, summer lets go. We hold on.

HEAVY GOLDEN NAGGING

The color of water after a week
in a tin mop bucket shades my eyes,
until I'm no longer angry at anything.
I banged my head earlier and cried.

Light seems yellowed these days.
Not illuminating or pure.
At best, a heavy golden nagging,
and always against a blue backdrop.

There are some I would have stuck around for
but never did. I'm always addressing things
to other people, but no one thinks it's for them.
Why is everyone always leaving?

Warm and dark, pale white and frail. The sky
has distanced itself, is not touching
the gray trees. Nothing is touching them.
So stark, it's embarrassing.

It's the dullness, the physical feeling of falling,
of being held still, that releases. The tone
of his voice was so nothing, it was hard to breathe.
My squinting eyes and sinking throat

demand something. Then it goes away
like nothing, like everyone. Don't let me
talk about people who have already forgotten.
It's not about them.

HONEYMOON BATH WATER

Crying and scared in a bathtub in Paris,
deep as my shoulders and short as my knees,
mourning every ending, as my new husband
rubbed my skin under the slowly cooling water,
I felt the bathwater as if it was inside me,
sure it was there—
something that could be sensed and touched.

We could see the Eiffel Tower from that room
but barely walk around the bed.

There was nothing
in that room but a bed. Nothing to fear,

no space in which to fear, no space to be inside.
He was so patient. So with me.

I'm so easily
astonished. His patience— some things, I forget:

how easily I can bury myself in water. Others, I can't:
how the light from the tower couldn't reach me there,

how I can be so far from birth and still fear it.

Crying in a bathtub in Paris I realized I try
to live my life for a daughter I don't yet want,

so when she's the age I was when I discovered
my mother's art, drawings she kept no one saw,

she won't uncover how much I buried myself.

BLOOD STAINED, LIKE MY MOTHER

She never thought she was beautiful
until she had babies.
With me she thought,

*At least I'll have a piece of him
even if he doesn't stay.* He did.
I came first, not last.

Why do these thoughts come
with menstruation, at the very moment
of the connection and the pain?

•

She was the one in the waiting room
that day, so far from birth,
when the bleeding began again,
and I was 19 and she was 20,

nineteen years before that,
and I waited in recovery, not ready
to face her after saying without words,
we want such different things,

not knowing what I wanted,
not knowing, like she did—
what being a mother
even has to do with wanting.

•

She was always there, always.
No memory argues this.

Think about what you are creating,
she said, *with every breath.*

I said I would do something
If not that something.

OUT THE WINDOW AND DOWN

Six stories up—the rain blooms
below, puddles where
the ground resists.

Water's dainty muscle
slowly wearing even pavement.
It's called muscle memory:

Rats being tested
run along walls, even after
the walls are gone.

MY MOTHER'S WISDOM TEETH

My quiet father calls to say,
She's really feeling the loss,

but he is speaking of my mother's teeth,
not even all of them, only two.

It goes back to the first time—
he's telling me a new story,

one he only just today heard himself
back to when her parents just left her

at the dentist alone,
didn't explain what would happen.

He's saying this like he can't imagine,
can't stomach such a withholding.

It was just a cleaning—
she waited all day before the dentist

made her leave, pointed the way
for her to walk in the dark.

And because this is my mother's life,
or her story, her telling being told to me,

my father says, impossibly,
Also, it was Halloween.

There was a man in a white sheet,
later found to be a neighbor,

who tried to help her. But she ran
all the way alone, back to her parents.

They were perfect, she would
tell me later, *Do you understand?*

Do you know this kind of loss? Can you feel
my grief over this, such a small thing?

Although I'm only now being told,
maybe I have known it all along.

The way if our mothers were hurt,
in our bodies we know this.

TEAR JAR

As if an inheritance, as if sadness
with us could be untold, bottled.
Absent tear jar I share with my mother,
as if we were Jewish, in sorrow beholden,
to history, to harming each other.

In stories she tells, my father drinks her tears,
absorbs her sadness freeing her from it. And still
it is something she always wears. But for him
a refusal to transmit. His youngest brother died
of heroin at the kitchen table. It was his fault,
he believed, his obligation undone. His own judge,
he waited days in an open field by fire for reprieve.

In all my mother's tears, nothing like this,
its nothing shared and nothing to dismiss.

JUST ENOUGH

A sudden slip of sky falls through,
a black and white night fails.

We have not always been like this,
so exposed, so blown-out

at the edges where the light hits.
Nothing noir but more than this

is needed—more than a quiet girl
who leaves just enough out, holds

just enough back. How we all
envy her strong calm arm.

How we wish this night held less
harm for her, for all of us.

BELONGING

If I could let gravity push my body down

I could be here, under this bright moon
with you who I love

in our small house,
as if the wet ground was melting

into our separate skins, through the frame
of this bed.

The first time my parents made love
was under a sky of fireflies.

Pressed against ground,
they are at home outside,

as if they belong.

Inside tonight
the moon lights our room

and I know not even in death will we melt
into the earth's uncaring dirt.

This refusal to be taken by anything,
our ridiculous objection

to one another
to the ground that holds us.

Even in death, under shallow ground,
our velvet-lined, mahogany refusal to admit

we belong to anything.

IT'S A GOOD DAY

when your eyes &
mouth seem big &

it isn't all
about the smell

of remembering,
it's not thinking

as you move through—
How long can you

hold that?

JOHNNIE COCHRAN JUST DIED

And I remembered
years before, when Geronimo Pratt
was released from prison after twenty-five years for a murder
he didn't commit, we arrived late.
Three of us, standing in the gym of the Girls & Boys High School,
my only trip to Bed-Stuy,
where one of us lived and had been mugged.
Black Panther bodyguards along the back walls
made us find separate seats, all that were left.
Only shooters would stand,
I guess. One by one
we sat alone.

I thought
the woman to my left was glaring,
so I edged unnoticeably right, I thought,
sat straight tall in new black jeans, purse on my lap,
like a white-gloved lady. A fool.
So, unexpected from my right, from a man,
*Why are you here? I know some
think it's okay, but this is a celebration for black people.*
Nowhere to go for another hour but *sorry*,
and all around, the excitement.
He was free.

THE DIGGERS

When she finds out they are sleeping on the floor,
my Mom asks the Mexican guys who work for them
what they have. Cups, one says. We have cups.
She starts to gather things for them from friends.

Juan, Sylvestre, Abelino,
whose wife slept with his brother while he was away,
Miguel, who speaks no English, so my brother Michael,
a Spanish major, writes words for my Mom to speak to him.

Some names are new each season.
It's hard work and guys get tired.
They call my Dad "boss," which he hates.
They laugh when he says he's not the boss.

It's almost Christmas and they want to go home.
Though it's cold, the ground hasn't frozen yet,
so for my parents, the season's not over. It's been years
since the ground has frozen in winter.

Longer since they've had a break.
They have eleven guys working for them now,
but don't own a home, may never retire.
My Dad is fifty-two, has worked like this his whole life.

AFTER ANOTHER LATE DAY

Awake again before the sun rises,
dirty again before breakfast,
my mother is obsessed with clean cotton sheets,
tries to change them twice a week.

My parents work together, work past dark.
At home, they work more. There is no
being at home. Work is where they live.
Come home dirty, shower, get in bed.

The driveway is always full of trees
kept alive for other people.
Muddy boots outside the door for morning
and still dirt on all the floors.

They bought a used BMW recently,
not a van, all four kids gone now,
and it's not held together with duct tape,
like the yellow station wagon when I was young.

They love how it rides, not like work trucks.
Maybe it's their way of saying,
We want more than this. We want
something that isn't dirty.

THIS NOTHING

A man lying in a border shelter talks
of trying once again and not failing.
Eleven times and again he was caught,
another life not worth living. Dying
for this is not a risk for him. He waits.
In other places, old men under umbrellas
with typewriters are lawyers. Listen for
their clacking keys. Are we at war because
I can't hear them? Because trying to hear,
to explain that poor people in North Dakota
should care because it's the right thing to do
is beyond my imagination? Because
on my wedding day, I didn't remember
a girl at an altar, marriage arranged?
Maybe we all breathe out and think nothing,
nothing endures, not even this nothing.

TWILIGHT

Purple glow of sheer white
bedroom window curtain,
only as long as a first glance,
gone before wholly there.

That day I was so sure
and actually said so:

I knew the secret of it all,
but couldn't say, wouldn't tell you.
So sure for the time it took
to say it, then it was gone

and I had to fake it, had to
say it, to almost believe it.

ON THE WAY HOME FROM SEEING MY COUSIN, WHOSE FATHER HAS TWO WEEKS

In my head, so
I don't notice at first
maybe five giant bees,
comical, big as cars,
on a flatbed truck, yellow
and black and smiling.
My uncle is dying.
My mother tells everyone
but those we love most
aren't dying until they're dead.
So I hug my cousin,
my sister really,
and tell her I'm flexible
to which she laughs.
She needs nothing
but sleep, can't eat,
wouldn't see these bees
at all. And I'm not sad
for my uncle, he's
given up already,
doesn't feel the dying
like she does.
Two more weeks, more
or less, when no one
will notice big bees
and think about where
they could possibly be going
this Sunday night at ten o'clock.
Who needs bees like that?
Who can be happy? Who
among us isn't thinking
of their own death?
Who has the time
for big silly bumble bees?

DIRT & LIGHT

It's raining on the ground—
the plane I'm in pulls into
then above the clouds to where,
as far as I know, it can't rain.

Distinct puffs of water
in some airy form, visible
below before we pull through
another layer of blank white:

Stratus, cumulous, nimbus.
I don't know which name
to call them, because in ninth grade
I didn't do my homework.

For a week we were to watch the sky.
With his finger in my face, my teacher
failed me, said only the names
of clouds on those days would do.

A play of dirt and light outside
when my eyes go vague reminds me
of when, younger, I told my mother
I could see air, and she didn't say

I couldn't. I saw something, why
couldn't that be it? Clouds and the sun—
no longer seen. Not just dirt and light,
the play of a young mind.

FIRST STAR—FOURTH OF JULY

Blanket in the backyard,
missing the fireworks.
Nothing seen but bugs.

No light in them
like childhood.
Heavy here—

us alone—
I wish I may
I wish I might

Explosions sound like television,
like war on television,
the holiday's origin,

you say:
a show of force
without death.

The crowds,
we do not join.
Quiet nothing in a blank sky.

Lying here
the way we're supposed to
but in the wrong place.

I wish I might
See something here alone
with you, feel something,

fall back to ground,
gaze grounded
on something.

You're engrossing,
you say.
I can't come down.

Keep staring

at the first star
I saw tonight.

Keep wishing I could
fall back, find you
next to me

on a blanket in our yard
star-gazing
on a cloudy night.

LEARNING HOW TO DO IT

So that there's nothing
different in dying
than in every day

so there's nothing
to say
in the end

to be ready to leave
to not fear
my body gone

you forgetting
to not
make you

keep me here
to not hold on
after you

let go
to let
go

FINDING FORM

*What bond have I made with the earth
having worn myself against it?
—Wendell Berry*

Standing in the median
the man offering me flowers
on my way home every night
while I'm stuck at a red light
reminds me of my father.
So much shorter, but quiet
and dark from sun and rough from work
in the same way. I always refuse him,
though he smiles, always reaching out
with flowers, not just to me, to anyone.

At home, petals all over the table.
I always keep tulips too long,
past when they give it up.
From my father, I learned
pregnant women should always have flowers,
just days before I wasn't. In bed after,
I tried to memorize the contours
of later-forgotten flowers, what was in his garden
that September. So many years later,
I hardly remember lying there,
with a sadness sharper than death,
watching his offering fade.

Outside, my eyes find what they always find,
the stump left in the center of this yard.
It brings death down close to the ground
where I sit now, hating it, not wanting it
to be—like intimations of mortality
in Gothic gardens—included here,
as an echo of something forgotten.
No machine would fit through the fence
so they left the stump, remains
of what once towered. I don't know why
I hadn't bothered to notice
it hardly bragged any branches.
As soon as he saw it, my father knew

it had to go.
I imagine its roots still extend
far underground in this small backyard,
their edges mingling with roots of living
trees and bushes huddled near the boundaries
close to the fence. They no longer hold anything,
have already begun to rot, disintegrating into soil.

*Ask it to come back later, my mother said,
when you're ready. Ask it to go away.*
My mother, who thought maybe my father
wouldn't stay, maybe she would have
only me to show for all her love of him,
decided that if that was all there was,
it would be enough. And so got more.
That's one life. I want another:
that's how I thought of it, those are
the words I used.

It's hard not to forget,
even when I stumble where the roots edge
gently above the grass, the network of extension,
the reaching out, unseen underneath my feet.
What holds these trees here. I know
I can't see what makes them stay.
Whispering at their wingtips where they fly
in the wind, it's the delicate parts
that capture my mind. My father is drawn
to the roots of things, honors them, hangs them
above the mantle on the living-room wall.

In a rhythm of arms lifting, boots pushing
down into the ground, his spade hits the dirt.
It was the sound of work when I was young,
this labored scraping against hard earth.
Scraping away surrounding soil, my father
circles a tree's root-base, throwing ground
behind him, snapping the roots that don't fit
as he digs deeper.

He knows how to do this
to keep each different tree alive. Descending
into it as he digs, hugging the edge always
of what the tree is, what it needs to be

to live, what parts that get to leave here.
After laying down sheets of burlap
and pulling intricacies of twine tight
around the root-ball, he begins rocking
until it loosens and gains movement,
is left on its side to be taken later.

After school, my mother would bring us
to those fields my father worked. We sat
together on the sides of empty circles,
kicking our heels against the small ditches,
against the always somewhat wet dirt,
kicking our small feet to feel the resistance
of the earth. The horizon—a long row
of aging saplings waiting to be uprooted.

Those fields my father worked
all looked the same, all used the same
plastic tree tape, absurd neon-colored strips
of red or blue that fluttered in the wind,
that told him what to do. In these places,
where factory-like rows of trees stood,
the chaos underneath the green surface
was endless, held everything together,
me and my sister and our brothers,
our parents, who couldn't bear to be
apart for a whole day, needed to meet like this,
my father muddy and tired,
my mother dragging all of us along.

Once, sitting with my mother in a field,
waiting for my father to finish another day,
she told me Buddhists believe only
the first tear is real. All the rest is ego.
Vanity. I'd been crying, had just made
what felt like the first decision of my life,
that no life should start with tears.
The horizon dimmed and fell away.

*I'd waltz across Texas with you in my arms
Like a storybook hero I'm lost in your charms
I'd waltz across Texas with you,
he sang her songs between contractions*

as my sister was born. On a scrap of paper
found many years later, he drew a picture—
a round silhouette of a woman calm
like Virgin Mary, sonar markings leading
to a baby, fetus-looking, a series of times
marked down before labor closed in on them
and he stopped scribbling lyrics he was singing,

*And if you find she helps your mind
better take her home and don't you leave her alone,*
So hopeful having found each other,
having found something on which to build,
ground on which to plant something.

Everywhere they lived they planted gardens.
I've never planted anything, not since that one
tiny bed, each of us had our own small plot.
We sorted through seeds, picked too many
varieties. Such hope in this, in growing things,
their hopefulness always.

Why do I hold nothing
like this, this desire to grow something
for what comes next, for us if we stay?
Why can't we find somewhere to stay,
somewhere to plant something, together,
even annuals, something alive that's ours?

When I watch my father pruning away
whole branches, live things, not because
they're not part of the healthy plant, green
and bright and flowering in his calloused hands,
because they're not according to his vision,
I think, I was healthy, it was healthy.
I was trying to shape something—this life—
to train it how to grow.

My husband and I have tried to garden
in our yard, unsure of what's weeds and what stays,
we cut dead branches and left things looking odd,
overgrown or overdone. A bright pink azalea like a bonsai,
a wilderness of unknown green at the fence.

And then we leave it too long alone.

My father finds form in formlessness,

cuts away thin wisps, fearless. In such chaos,
I find something true, something frightening.

It's all highways where I live now.
Straight lines only below me. Hardly a horizon.
I haven't been to those fields in a long time.
Of what was there then, what's left is this now:

My father falling asleep on evergreen branches
brought inside from cold to make holiday wreaths.
Lying on the living room floor, looking like baby Jesus,
but tired, really just tired. My father
standing in the doorway removing his boots.
He sighs. A young girl breathes in
the smell of dirt, a life.
On his white t-shirt a green silhouette
of a large sprawling oak above the words
*I think that I shall never see
a poem as lovely as a tree.*

When I show him poems, my father makes
no comments but, *You don't mess with the mind
of a poet. You can't tell them what happened.
It doesn't matter. It's what you make of it.*
My mother smiles *Sure* and settles
into her kitchen chair for a line-by-line.
It's all in the unsaid. The center—empty.

The center tree was dead. Not birch or oak,
its green moss-covered bark fell away,
exposed the inside. It was no longer held.

My father tried to improve our yard,
to disentangle old bricks from mud and vine,
create landscape from nearly nothing.
His will defies neglect, a chaos
he can't accept. The forms he sees,
creates until his spade is dull with work,
a grace I do not find.

Trees are ageless until their death
when we count their years from inside.
My father's worn out spade still stands,

sticking out of the soil where it was left
last autumn. Bright green points poke
absurdly out of the warm ground into air,
a relic of who was here before
or something altogether uninvited.

Today I cried for all of this—the loss,
the formlessness, the death that sinks even now
into all I am—and tomorrow
when my husband brings me flowers,
I'll try to look at them and let them be
 just beautiful flowers
 meant for me with love.

SLEEPING TOGETHER

I came to bed
late as usual.
You were asleep,
I think.
We didn't kiss.
But still,
you breathed
your body
closer to me,
unknowing.
The fan rattles.
Our breath slows.
Outside
cicadas sing
of lonely love.
In our bed,
we begin
another year,
spines aligned,
half asleep
and too quiet
and not quiet enough
and it's fine.