

ABSTRACT

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The poems of Fields and Bridges focus on how one person's emotional landscape and those who are part of it can connect memory, loss, and a sense of identity. The main subjects--the speaker's dead friend and her twin brother-- are ones which the speaker both distances from and acknowledges exist in herself. The meter varies from mechanical and quick to mostly blank verse, allowing the speaker's meditative tone to speak through the poems to the subjects she addresses. Both the speaker's fear of disappearance and sense of isolation are interrogated through the range of her subject matter, from her childhood experiences to city homelessness, from her twin's struggles to a factory to a common office work environment.

FIELDS AND BRIDGES

By

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Funeral Poem

My friend is an exquisite exhibit.
Her mouth has the certainty that seemed
to escape it, her curled hair stays set.
The dried rose in her hands is her hands
and is the fist of her laugh in my mind
before what must start, starts.
Her parents and I sit in stern postures,
gray shaking in her father's face,
her mother's hair flat on my shoulder.
look in again, feel like the white
of her casket—formal, exposed,
the paper program in my hands.
Her name reaches down from my head
to my feet—three syllable tornado.
Seen from above, white roads cut these fields.
The highway she'd turned onto is close,
is how we arrived— passing the cornfield
that sighed in front of her and after us.

The Funeral Dress

I bought it the day I heard, when I couldn't stop moving,
when I paused and saw the cut of it,
the simple line. It is thin, was made for
just past three on a hillside where mourners
and stones got small. It's the point
I went into, made hot by the sun.
It smells of sweat, of my fist
shoving it into my suitcase before dawn,
before I looked down to clouds
and felt I could fall twice--
Home, I take it out, straighten seams,
make sure lines are right.
I hang it up in the space I made for it.

On a Monday Night in Winter

Click of the light switch, black windowpanes
and white walls, slick city streets below.
I think of glass jars in cabinets, washed clean
of moths, of thick bodies and soft antennae.
My brother and I'd caught them, let them go,
stood over a flowering shrub while fields
turned flat and black around us. Tomorrow,
I'll fly back to see him dance ballet on a stage
that appears under him, black paint wearing off,
pale wood underneath. Lines where panels meet,
like thin crosswalks. He'll make shapes,
extend a line past his hand, and the air around me
will feel like someone else's. He'll move
and I'll feel still, part of a field watching,
until the house lights come up and let me go.

Ex-employee of the paper label factory

What I remember
now that I'm
gone: the symmetry
of cigarette smoke
and dusk,
twelve-hour shifts
framed by the same
faces, shelves
packed with cans
of ink across from
the clock;
a focus on edges,
the corners of
borders cut
by the thousand,
colors measured in
half a glance,
sharp dust on palms,
the edge of sunset
sliding down
the conveyor belt
to boxes we made
and filled and
made and sent.

The Table

It's set outside on a rusty square of metal.
Pieces of wood interlock to make the top,
then the four legs come down to meet four blocks
of wood joined for a base. There's a chain
from the base to my gray wooden chair,
chair made of slats and invisible nails.
Each time I rock back, the chain's
black-orange links shift under my heel
loosen slowly, and the wood of the chair shifts.
On the gray tabletop and my hands,
leaves' shadows move in little circles.
I write one line, write another over it.

Three Tibetan Monks

1. Walking by the Sala Thai
Behind the plate glass
their robes are light orange,
lighter than I'd thought,
tan bald heads in two rows.
One sits at the head
of the table. The one closest
as I pause my walking
has cheap eyeglasses,
almost square, watches
his friend across the table
take a little bread
and eat it.

2. Waiting for the Metro
On the opposite platform,
three wait patiently.
One has a red hoodie,
one a crimson sash,
one is tall, arms folded
over orange. No light
on their faces. The one
with the hoodie
offers his sashed friend
what looks like money,
gestures are made,
fingers point to each other,
and the one giving
holds his hand
to his forehead—
this high—white line
of a smile on his face.

3. In a dream
Three were leaving,
filing out after
a big dinner
I helped make,
and was still making,
dough heavy
in my hands.
Each bald head
bowed and left,
ducked through

the white doorframe.

The Scarf

The edges show her expertise,
no dropped stitch,
none added later on,
the wavy purl stitch
exact in its curves,
in its effort to make
a straight line.

It keeps the wind away,
catches light in its soft design
like a word or an address
on an envelope.

It came in the mail
double-folded like a letter,
the long division of miles
to days spent arriving
neatly knitted into
this purple pink blue scarf
from my mother,
from that little strip of land
between two great lakes.

The knit is thick and specific,
is known by its knots,
by its ability
to be made and shaped,
given and carried.

Gift

After school one day my brother knelt
in a corner of our backyard, set down
matches and the free Bible from TV.
I'd quit pleading. I stood on the deck,
felt like the place where flames meet sky,
invisible. The smoke was small, stray grays
drifted toward our neighbor's house.
The sky was blue as a jewel, as blue
as I could have wanted for August.
I left, opened the sliding glass door
and my reflection to go to my room.
My Bible, a gift from our mother,
lay useless, unbothered in a corner.
It's spine set against one wall.
I touched my full name pressed in gold,
letters in the square script of a declaration
or tombstone. My brother had hidden
his own named book, embarrassed.
His door slammed shut. I snuck out
and down the deck's steps to the site,
to the charred book, black edges of pages.
Orange and yellow leaves stuck to the dirt
around it I held it, hesitated. Half the words
were half-gone. Black paper crackled off
in my hands. I carried it to the garage,
the air smelling of cold cement.
I put it in the trashcan between bags.

The Dress

She puts her fingertip on the fabric
and turns it, makes waves with one direction
like a hurricane's, then smoothes and measures
on the inch-by- inch plastic grid beneath,
marks in pencil from her chair at the head
of the table. My father is mowing.
She grips scissors, clips shapes, sets the flat waves
in a pile. I follow her upstairs with
the pieces, sit cross-legged on the floor
and watch her make her favorite: zig-zag,
a double-stitch that rubs my skin. The tag
is last, my name in square shapes while hers scrolls,
will scratch the back of my neck. She nods
with her foot as it pushes the black pedal.
Fingers guide the fabric through. She says once
her hands strayed, the thick needle sunk into
her fingertip and stopped, stuck in bone.
A small v marks where it went through her nail,
where my father pulled it out with pliers.
I wonder what she was making, the color
of thread. She keeps her hands out of the way,
walks them backwards to her foot's rhythm,
snips the thread and turns the dress right-side out,
against stitches. She slips it over me,
pulls it down past my knees and stands up to
straighten the awkward collar, fingernail
nicking the side of my neck. The fabric
is stiff from stitches, billows and holds still.
I'm quiet while she puckers, pretend-hems,
chooses where to thread her ribbon roses
along the bottom. Looking down, the dress
hangs like a storm over a beach, her hands.
The roses are like pebbles in her palm.
The straight pins between her lips move
each time she pauses, takes one down.

My father, driving me to school

My father, driving me to school
He wears what he can see: browns the color
of pinecones, a few scattered yellows.
My father is colorblind, but only half so—
well, maybe more. What he can't see is
anything tinged with green or red; blues
usually fall on one side or the other,
making invisible teals and purples.
Our house and car are both brown; as often
as we move from state to state, it's from
one dim place to another, inside a car
the shade of burnt chocolate. But what
does he do once he's inside what he knows,
in these safe brown places? I wonder what
he saw when my twin and I, in our crib,
had our matching blushes, and laid in our
identical pink and blue outfits;
I picture my father standing above us,
his yellow, perplexed face, one tan hand
jingling the change in his right pocket.
I don't know where I got my blush; my father's
face is so plain, like color was a ghost
that stepped through him, went straight to his kids.
He says he had color when he was younger,
when he served in the Navy, before sunscreen.
His back was covered with blisters on blisters.
Now it's dark blotches of freckles, strange
continents. When he was on deck at dusk,
the plum-colored sea and sky must've looked
the same: nothing. I'd be afraid I'd disappear.
I ask him what he sees now, point to sunset
painted on a billboard: White, with a little
wrong color; where there's purple, any kind
of red, it's pale green, but mostly just white.
I think of before we left this morning,
when I helped him pick his clothes for work.
I picture him seeing me light green, maybe
the color of green grapes, when he asked if
this (pink) shirt goes with his yellow tie.
His wardrobe is mostly autumn- colored,
shades of an old stew, but there's a few
lost colors thrown in, pinks and indigos,
Christmas gifts from well-intentioned kids.
Winter is his season, where there's no
discrepancy between the white of snow

on the sides of the street and what he sees.
But so much of his life must be him judging
things by their silhouettes: the shape of
the red-tailed hawk he points out, the odd design
of stop signs, red appearing the same color
as the letters. When they gave us colorblind
tests in school, I hoped I'd fail, wanted the
8 or 15 I saw surrounded by
orange dots to signal that I'm part-blind,
that I see things differently. When we
picked strawberries last summer, my father
had the reddest ones, like the pure red that
he saw as white was a color all it's own,
my basket full of sour, half-ripe lumps.

On the D.C. Metro above Ground

The graffiti is sky blue—COMA—on a gray wall.
Is it initials or a wish? A name? It passes,
or we pass it. I watch a perfect scar ahead of me.
The man has one line in the center of his skull,
it runs from the bottom of his neck and ends
half-way up at a spot level to the tips of his ears,
a straight scar that twists when he moves to watch
whatever he sees out the window-- blue sky?
An absence of straight lines, even in trees and fences,
going up or coming down? We go over a bridge.
I can't help looking where someone else has been—
a doctor, expert at making one line out of two
while this man was asleep, face-down, surrounded
by hospital blue, dreaming. He rises, the Metro's doors
open, and he's gone. The train speeds up, splits
the sky I'm now trapped in, clouds like pale hands
pause over my window. My speed keeps them there,
keeps them here, I can't look at them, stare ahead,
run through the directions once more for when I get there.

Photo found on the floor of my building's trashroom

He grins, bones of his skull
making firm curves under his skin.
You share his hospital blanket,
the narrow florescent light
perfect and thin on the wall.
Your blank face, even under your beard—
he has surprised you, caught you
off-guard, you missed the punchline.
You're too serious for the one
beside you. You look at him.
He smiles at the camera, relaxed.
You hold his arm tight, grip him
like if you don't, you'll fall
through him, land face-up
somewhere else. You hold
a story you'd rather forget.
The close-up makes the walls
ordinary, forgettable, just hinted at.

Elegy for Melissa

Today I thought I saw you standing on the sidewalk,
hunching in as you lit a cigarette. You looked up,
face flat and blank like it'd been reflected
off some pond and come back too quickly.
You were thin, and that laugh—it wasn't
your sharp arpeggios, wasn't a string of small knots.
It was a sigh, these trees spreading up and out.
Later, I wrote a poem about you, but it wasn't right.
The day I flew back, your name didn't drop
from my head to my feet in one long line.
I held it and became part of the shuffling dark,
the eclipses that passed white wood, gold trim.
You'd looked exact, the dried rose in your hands.
You'd looked like someone else trying to be you.
In June, the furrows in fields still fill with distance.
The horizon still thins to a squint.
It is a place we could both be from,
the sky, a blue flame. I haven't been back
and it's since tightened, the banks of rivers
closer together, the fields smaller, less air,
like the compressed poems you wrote
that I didn't know what to do with.
They were full of religion, tense,
a bird's wings drawn tight against its body.
I didn't believe you, kept them folded
when I handed them back. Now I wish
I'd kept them, that I could believe in them for you
without having to believe in them myself.
All I want is for a man to trace my spine,
a finger drawn across water, for things
to fall in place, to know *I am here*.
I hate it, that I can drift, need someone
to place me. But maybe this is what you felt,
why you'd laughed when you showed me
two bruises, one above each hipbone
from heavy thumbs. You'd smiled like it'd been
your choice, and I hated you. You shrugged
and the air cracked like roads in summer,
already there was more distance.
The bruises were birds with their wings in,
they were rocks not yet falling. But how easily
I could've been you, if only I'd stayed there.
In a picture we smile, arms slung across
each others' shoulders. You're in a green dress
I'd lent you, though your shoulders are too narrow

to hold the shape, and I'd been too shy to say it.
But I think we defined ourselves like this,
leaning in to what we thought was the picture,
though I wanted to be one slick line against
your crushed velvet. But my smile is shy.
You grin, proud of something I don't know,
standing taller in someone else's clothes.
I can't help but wonder if after, we laughed,
or if I looked down, relieved there was
still space between us, the flash pressing
blue onto the air in front of me.

Two Conversations with a Twin

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Early February Morning

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Running Poem

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Beach Poem in Winter

It started when I was walking home yesterday on the bridge,
when I wanted to throw my keys over, down into the swift traffic,
maybe to be weightless. Then it kept through this morning,
in the dark sweet rain, running up to the top of the hill & back,
& wondering if this is joy? To have no reason to be out,
hearing the hiss of rain on leaves & low chants from the mosque
that's pale & lit as a moon? If I could, I'd keep running,
farther even than last June when I woke at dawn, snuck out
before my friends woke up, ran slowly past the wild horses
playing on the beach, their dangerous dark eyes watching me,
their little whinnies while they ran circles at the water's edge.

Poem on Lake Michigan

When he died, my grandfather's stomach was full of tumors
because the fish he'd scaled with a special knife—
forcing stiff rainbows into the air—were sick
with mercury, silver secrets in the blood.
He'd eaten them almost every day, so it was hard
not to picture a dark harbor in his body,
even though the lake he'd lived on had no real harbor,
had no visits, just rocks along the shoreline to keep
the lake contained, to keep sheets of ice from sliding
up to the house. He died & someone threw
his freezer full of fish onto the rocks, since the gulls
were already doomed. My brother got the tackleboxes,
their folding levels of knotted fur & feathers,
but when I think of that house, of that water,
I think of gray, of dawn before the sun hits water,
of harsh cold waves & walking on the gravel,
not trying & trying to see the lighthouse nearby.

8-Ball Poem

*I was saddened to hear the magic went out
of your 8-Ball. My neighbor's face is blunt
& open, thinking, trying for the next phrase
in an email to a girl he met online. His arms
are too thick, they make my laptop look
like a cheap toy, & the way he stares ahead—
this can be unnerving when he faces me,
eyes blinking consistently & quick humor
showing in his persistence. I can't offer anything
witty to add, try to keep my head on straight
& don't mention my stupid twin playing insane,
slipping into a valley of his own making.
Now my neighbor has none of my secrets,
we're on equal footing. By the time he quits,
exits the unsent letter & stands nothing's passed
between us & our hug is tight, too tight, at my door.*

Georgetown University Human Resources

Father Schemel's large cake model of our building
had everything: spires, belltower, dragonheads
at the ends of rain-spouts. It was for a friend,
a retiring priest. Here each department has a Father,
& ours sits in his office & fiddles with his new computer—
no Bible in sight, but he probably knows it by heart.
Most of the time he paces, walks in & out of our cubicles
offering suggestions. I thought he was too nervous
to be clergy, but he's loyal, he's passionate.
When he tells me that's Ignatius on one of his walls,
I nod like I know & look it up later. The idea
of him having a polyester black frock seems strange,
but not nearly so much as the turquoise belt buckle.
It's another story I'll hear soon because he loves to talk,
to arrange things. He's bringing a chocolate fountain
to our next staff meeting, doublechecks to make sure
I bring the long pretzels, not the thin dinky kind.
When he asks my opinion about the tiles with Bible scenes
he's just hung on his wall I look at the placement,
not the bent bodies. I tell him the truth of course,
that they're too small, they get lost in all that space,
& when he agrees, I'm relieved & don't know why.

Charles

Ten minutes after he's left our store, you can still smell him—yep, Charles has been here. Open the till and you get it again in the damp bills and change he's switched in. In winter, he's huddled up in the little nook outside by the front window, mumbling to himself and to anyone who might listen while the skin on his fingers cracks open—no gloves. In the heat of the summer, his dark scalp has blotches of white from the constant crack-head scratching, ask if he wants a bandaid—no, but he'll take a tissue. I'd like to say I'm not scared of him, that I've outgrown whatever Midwestern fear I had about homeless men, about schizophrenic drug addicts who sleep in the alley that's behind the store and next to my apartment building. I'd like to say he deserves more than I've given him—a Coke or a sandwich every now and then, I'm careful to not touch his hands—but when he snuck up behind me while I was taking out the trash, him so quiet despite his stiff-legged stagger, and when he asked when my birthday was, talking to himself and muttering and in one of his incoherent phrases, probably about his mother again or someone who got cut up, and then him turning as he was leaving to ask if I was into fucking, well, what could I do except be honest, say no and look him straight in the eye as he looked through me to whatever it was he saw and wanted.

2003 in Kalamazoo

It was the year the cops found my stolen car at the dead end of Hazard Street, the seats jacked back and a hip-hop tape in the dash that jolted me awake as soon as I turned the key; it was the year I made and packed boxes of names I barely remember for cans and bottles and jars of salsa and green beans; it was the year I broke up with my boyfriend on Memorial Day and decided to move away from that dead little town whose name sounded extinct and silly and whose river was thick with ink from the label factory where I spent the second shift with people whose fingers had been yanked off by the presses, people who had to have a sense of humor because no one would take them now. It was the year that dawn felt like the lost glove in the street, when I felt like someone else as I strung and tied the labels into brick-sized blocks or when I opened the door to my car with a key that was a copy of the ones that were missing, it was when I saw the red ceiling had new holes burned into it like black stars.

Selfish Poem

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Poem without Mirrors

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Spring cleaning in February

I was drinking water when I saw him
sitting on the roof's ledge across the way
in red flannel and a gray beard. He set
his black shoes beside him, toes to me,
parallel to the edge, but he wasn't
barefoot, he lifted each socked foot up
for a different black shoe, one quieter,
lighter. Another man in red flannel
tossed a plastic bag, let it sail left by
windows. I watched it, but did they see me
set down my water? The right side of my face
felt bare. The first man put hands to knees,
struggled up, they walked behind a building.
Their ladder looked thin through my thin window.
They came back with push brooms, sweeping corner
to center, tap-sweeping glass and old leaves,
black footsteps over lights over working
strangers. A pacing neighbor caught my stare,
he's on a white phone, watching me, talking.
The men swept into shovels, emptied them
off of the roof. They looked up and I ducked,
heard things bounce off the ladder. Then the shoes
were gone. The neighbor was gone, the men left.
At the top of the ladder, a blue spot
at each tip, brighter than sky, to be seen
against it. My face felt clear as the rim
of my glass, turned upside-down in the sink.

Last Night at the Factory

My pulse meets in my knees, thick beats from
too much standing. I watch the machine,
stacks of paper cut smooth as cake by
a six-foot knife. The blade's new today,
date written on it in black marker.
The operator whistles "Moon River" in the key
of the knife coming down, readjusts
his baseball cap. Each cut's a sunset, blue scrap
shaved off, fresh purple revealed. It's my last day.
The cutter he keeps going, ignores the cuts
on his hands. Later everyone sits in their cars
watching sunset on our break, planes overhead.
I toss a few grapes out the window for sparrows
to roll. Gravel whitens between puddles.

The Scientist

In the alley below my apartment, a man
in black gloves and a knit black hat
slits garbage bags with a plastic knife,
sets bottles on the ground, reads old newspapers
like he's waiting for a bus. Bottles are scattered
around him like a laboratory, shapes to be picked.
He chooses, empties each into one bottle
in his left hand, throws empties over the fence.
Done, he puts the last bottle on his left palm,
extends his arm. He glances left, right,
shuffles deeper in the alley. I hide in folds
of my green curtains and grip the sill,
my hands bare in the cool noon shadow.

Poem with a River in It

“It’s not about shapes, it’s shaping momentum”,
my twin explains modern dance on the phone.
I think of water poured, a bullet from his boot camp
four years ago still in the air. Muffled crunch
of potato chips, like tires on snow. “You know,
someone asked me at the studio if I’m gay”.
He laughs loud enough for his roommate to hear.
I join in, chuckles flattening on the line,
wet leaves on the sidewalk outside my new place.
I want him to visit, to know it’s ok if he is,
but he talks about the river going through his town,
ice bits floating down, making sharpened waves.

The Golden Palace Strip Club

Open the cheap wooden door with no sign on it
and there's not as much red velvet as you'd expect,
just metal chairs and long tables like are at conventions,
a bar at the back and a short catwalk to the right.
I sit on a barstool to fill in the application, and a friend
introduces me to a regular: he's my dad's age and pudgy
but more or less dignified, and he supports my decision,
says he just learned his daughter does it and he took it
hard at first, but is now proud, happy for her. I don't tell him
I'm just going to be a waitress, I let him talk, he's given
me a couple of bucks for listening so I try this out,
I try to flirt but it's hard, the light hand on his shoulder
is forced, hesitant. Next time he'll be more drunk,
maybe crying. I'll be in control. Next time I'll try harder.

Twin Religions

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On the First Morning after a Blizzard

In my defense, I wasn't the only one
our running in the snow this morning.
At least five others, one really crazy one
in shorts, were going from sidewalk to street
and back, whatever was clean, and jumping
around deep puddles with slush on top.
How can you not feel joy doing this,
when you're plowing through snowdrifts
and then hit a clear straightaway?
How do you not feel strong like it is sand
you're running on even as snow melts into
your shoes, even as little bits of snow
fall from tree branches onto your head?
When I got back, a neighbor said my face
was covered in frost, that I must be crazy,
but it wasn't a blizzard, it wasn't a storm
I was running through while I passed
shop-owners using brooms to push away
the slush, bit by bit, into slick streets.

Running on an Icy Sidewalk

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Dawn in Winter

This morning as I was running south on Mass Ave,
Mr. Cheney passed by—his motorcade securing
the circle ahead of us, then pulling him on through.
This past weekend, he accidentally hit a friend
in the face with birdshot, and I suppose these things
happen—a friend shoots another, a piece of shot
sticks in the friend's heart, and there's an awkward
visit at the hospital that doesn't last long. I guess
you have to laugh, this make the pain easier,
and I wish I had the talent to write funny poems,
to write people into laughing. But this morning
what I really felt, hearing the first birdsong at dawn
and hitting the top of the hill, seeing the city,
was lucky to be in on a secret, to be part
of a group of people who get to see this.
It's the same feeling as when, a few years ago,
I'd get off third shift and take a run anyway,
having witnessed the cold machinery of the night
and then been the one of the first set free from it.

Thoughts on the Long Walk to Work

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Poem for My Father

Sometimes at dawn or dusk I think of my father,
how he always stops and looks, made me look
at the sky, and I wonder if these were the times
he was free, I can picture him looking out
from another foster home, or from on a Navy ship,
or out the window of the small white house
he and my mother had after my twin and I arrived,
after my mother went crazy. I can see him
being ready for that kind of beauty, even if
he couldn't even see the reds and greens and blues.
I think of my father when I'm walking and hearing
birds I can't name but that he knows, ones I've seen
him nearly drive off the road for in order to get
a better view, and to be sure. My father is
the person I admire most, his patience during
stupid fights, and later, after a friend of mine
attempted suicide again, how my father waited
for me to stop puking in the parking lot
of the hospital, then helped me walk inside.
When a different friend died, he told me the first
death is the hardest, it gets easier, he listened
when I asked how much longer it would hurt,
he was patient. I don't know what I'll do
when he dies, when I won't be able to call him
and hear his peanut-crunching muffled voice
while he's watching the 6pm local news,
when it's past sunset in the town where
I was born and where everyone is at home
and settling in for the cool winter night.

By Key Bridge

Yesterday I watched dirty gulls dive down
around a puddle of spilled soup, saw them
fly in and out, tucking their wings in at landing,
left right left right left right, until both wings
were flat, but it wasn't until today on my run
when I remembered the name of the birds
I was running past—starlings—that things
felt possible, that I looked up and felt strong enough
to focus on form, on where I was going,
moving forward like I was pulling myself along
on two ropes and it didn't matter from what.