

ABSTRACT

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The poems in this collection dramatize a tension between two worlds: an interior world, in which places and events are used as correlatives of personal conflict; and an exterior world, that is seemingly separate and indifferent. Within these tensions, the poems move by indirection, irony, and injury. The poems' project is to confront the literal with the surreal, symbol with the absurd. The overall movement of the collection is a proposed narrative in which the impersonal is accepted, transformed, intensified, and valued. This narrative is illustrated by way of recurrent themes of childhood memory, romantic separation, and cultural loss.

HOLD YOUR FIRE

by

Elizabeth Katherine Countryman

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Table of Contents

I	
We Were Filled with Longing for the Previous Night	2
To Helplessness	3
Fort Tryon Park, Washington Heights	5
The Man Whose Life I Save	6
Truncated Sestina for the Next Ex	8
De Kooning's <i>Woman</i>	9
At the City Art Museum	10
To the Limitless Unknown World	12
A Clean Poem	13
De Kooning's Women (Myself Included)	15
Withdrawal Method	18
II	
The First Time We Felt What Was Later Diagnosed As _____	20
Summer Vacation	22
When You've Forgotten the Pervert, He's Forgotten You	23
Weathercasters	24
Hold Your Fire	26
To Jeremy, on a Holiday Weekend	28
Hot and Cold Aubade	29
III	
Poem to Be Chopped Up and Cooked	32
Elegy	34
Fugue	36
The Botherers	37
Similes in the Dark	38
Letters to the Guy Who Dumped Me, Who Lives on the Gulf Coast	39
Illumination after a Swim in Texas	41
Return	42
Girl in Little Falls, NY, Recovering from Delirium	43

I

WE WERE FILLED WITH LONGING FOR THE PREVIOUS NIGHT

When the pot roast filled us in December, the color seemed dry
and wine drained into our shag carpet.
Plaintive music was thrown out across the airwaves.
Hadn't we made the trip and done it right?
We longed for the bus ride; we made a mess of it.
Remembering our legs dangling in lake reeds,
we blamed each other for not remembering.
Until we whispered in sex, "I admire your *cruelty*."
Until our faces made two sides of a pissed off mirror.

How weeks pass with energies of spring and hair shaved off.
A naked guy with a beard salutes from a poster
and sometimes I talk to him, other times I don't feel like it.
Every morning the birds want something so loudly
it makes everyone get up. Gray sky, enormous,
my sleepy body abuzz with you. How big, that slip
before the dim radio reporters orient and reassure,
wearing me in like a catcher's mitt. You're not here.
What time is it, March? Since you left, entire cities

have gotten fucked over and been lost. People,
pushed out, have blown dandelion seeds as symbol,
thrown fur into the air at Christmas, decided suffering is personal.
But they run into each other under my recurrent eyelids,
where you roll over me, and everything is fluid.
We're as bent as we can be, waiting.
I spit out my gum, you drool in my mouth,
you tell me, "I'm rolling you over." I burn
under you like a library. A whole civilization goes.

TO HELPLESSNESS

after Kenneth Koch

There were plenty of times without you,
but they are hard to remember.
I forgot you driving in cars,
reading maps and inserting eye drops at the wheel,
forgot you on speed-limitless desert roads,
until one Friday in the left lane of the New York State Thruway
you sent my way the large,
bouncing tire of a semi.
When I pulled over to the left
you pulled over behind me and said,
Only testing.

I've been in love once;
you were there at the start and at the ending.
In dreams, I'd look behind him
and see you eyeing me, and I
loved it. (That was cheating.)
When B. and I broke up, I jumped
right into your trenchcoat.
For months, we had romances
on commuter trains, remember?
I thought it could be an artistic endeavor
to cultivate you like a drug.
For a while, all I could envision was
a hummingbird hit by a bus.

But Helplessness you can't be cultivated
or addressed without your odd existence
disappearing like vapor. I recognized that when you left:
I was ridiculous in the office
with the door shut
and my head between my legs.

I see you now in planes, at takeoff, distributing erections
to sleeping teenage boys
when they turn up the cabin pressure.
(You love airports and transports.)
From boners, you proceed to
deeper indignities, and the living moment
before death.

I miss tripping around you in the city:
gap by which I peeked into
the chests of strangers.

You are a reaper in a mask and flippers.
Half of you is true;
the other half doesn't matter.

FORT TRYON PARK, WASHINGTON HEIGHTS

Three Amish-looking passers
handed me a pamphlet.

A daughter skipped ahead of them,
in lemon yellow. One of the men said,

“I’d like to give this to you.” Saint
John’s gospel. They nodded with the demure

assurance of horses. “I’ve read it,”
I said. Breezes hit other

breezes overhead and the leaves
left tiny abrasions. A bonneted wife hung

behind them like a willow. When they’d left—rebuffed?
—I took to whispering, whispering

consolations. I had my
head buried. I was already shaded.

Old people half-filled the benches.
The George Washington Bridge stood like two

stiff men wading. *Enlist me for a cause,*
the girl willing to be in love.

Sometimes, I ask them for favors. When I feel
the hesitations of all these tired walkers,

and that I ought to be in prayer.

THE MAN WHOSE LIFE I SAVE

It's always a man—what does that suggest?

That a man's more likely to step too close to the edge
of the sewage trough called the F track?
Or that the idea of him teasing me by tottering there's just a part
of the perennial wish, reborn every morning,
to be teased? Whatever the meaning,

the scenario is a recurring dream, alternating daily
in urgency and speed: the train approaches
through the one-eyed tunnel, honking like an ambulance
about to deliver. The man leans forward like
a wilting daisy; I rush up,
tip him back like a jar of pennies. Or else—on mornings

when the wait is longer—he has a seizure, a fit of panic,
trips on a lace, he goes over! He flails, his feet
slip in the rain and loogies, then he's clinging to the edge—
I go up when it's clear no one else will help. My heart
flits like a pigeon's head; I take his hand,
and it's sweating. I hear it first, then see

the letter F growing larger in the uptown tunnel;
he knows it too—starts howling like a baby,
repeating the name of the Virgin. No one large enough intervenes
to life him over. But I heave, as hard as I ever have,
as the train comes in—this is a life!
At most, he loses a limb.

Now, the train really arrives; I feel a little guilt
having wanted someone
to be terrified. But the consolation is these other faces,
shoved in, waiting for air. A dream in every head,
like loads of socks in driers—
something that, not looking, carries us along.

A three year-old's face over the hill of plastic bags,
musing at the window. The woman in snakeskin heels
who ignores her loud boyfriend. Or this kid, with whose fist
I share the pole—fifteen, maybe, and handsome.

His jacket says *Valvoline*; he is a long way
from home. Hair close-cropped and sweaty,

the lights reflect off his earlobes.

But it's too hot for a flashy leather jacket like that.

What an idiot! He looks flustered and timid.

I smile and stare and he doesn't look back,

so I take it personally.

Later I realize he was a runaway.

TRUNCATED SESTINA FOR THE NEXT EX

Your sophomore year of college you wrote a song
your circle of listeners insisted was touching.
The loose-shirted half-stoned girls leaned their mouths
closer, in postures nearly as deliberate
as the ascent insisted on by your hard hands against
nylon strings paid for by your father.

When you talk to me, you talk about your father's
Presbyterian endeavors in Japan, or the songs
that set the mood for your first attempts at touching
one mouth or another mouth.
The laying down of such backdrops seems deliberate...
then again, they are what I like you against.

Your head is so close I can nearly taste it. Against
my shoulder, it smells just like my father's.
I tell you the story of how my parents deliberately
hid their anniversary; you go hard into that song
about disgrace—the girl whose mouth
was wet and watery when the two mouths touched,

but she was a liar. So what if your eyebrows are thick and touching?
I picture us in five years: driving hard against
the Indian wind, air thick in our ecstatic mouths,
and the moment I say you're going to be a father:
you start your list of baby soundtrack songs.
(When I'm trying to sleep, these notions are deliberate.)

The breaths I take next to you are shallow and deliberate.
Even though our legs and arms are touching,
you rise with the compulsion to write songs.
This one's about your first love, the one your family was against,
but when you met her, you knew. Just like your father.
As you sing I follow silently with my mouth.

DE KOONING'S WOMAN

the hatcheted up lady is a crash
done (!) or happening.
animal of the park, protectively
she spreads apart her
claws to help from breaking
the pigeon (!) whose body
she bloodies (!) the grass with.

every organ on her is a jaw.
and her torso loose
a sopping ream of paper is
the center (!) of
a confederation at war.

(but is she the murder's
aftermath or agent?)

house of mouths
a tongue angry in its bed
unbraids—

she moves (!) to keep
her s h r e d d e d parts
from slipping loose
a hurricane!

AT THE CITY ART MUSEUM

There is little
room for you here.
And any cleanup you catch is

coincidental or displaced:
a band-aid is lifted
into a manhole by the wind

or the friend going through a divorce
tells you every time you leave,
“Be safe.”

You’ve learned to live off happenstance
as well as air.
You chase sex

based on the luck
of others in your demographic.
And you do okay,

but standing on the subway platform,
you feel both
looked at and ignored.

You might as well
be tearing away
in strips, wet, from a board

reading “Post No Bills.”
The first time you saw porn
you were raking

and a page
had landed on your lawn.
A woman opened her teeth

with her lips pulled back, the way
your mother did
when sampling just one bite,

trying not to muss

the lipstick—an expression
that looked for an instant like anger

but was closer to not paying attention.
Today it's De Kooning's women
teasing you

and your misunderstanding.
You've interrupted them up to something.
Hungry and full,

shrewd, insane—
contradictions have made somebody
want to act upon them.

They shake like saints on fire,
like horses in barns in reins.
They make no sound,

no room for you.
After enough, you go
back, strip, and turn on the water:

your skin,
intact, holds you in.
You call that home.

TO THE LIMITLESS UNKNOWN WORLD

Like the Japanese sweatshirt says,
IN QUEST OF VIGOR!
your rippling headwind
has departed the cork fume of my palm;
your van of wall hangings goes
to decorate another state;
and the vacated room is full of its limited past
in which your leaving is a breath, one swallow.
In Malcolm X Park, Jeanne D'Arc
raises an empty fist. Her virginal blade
has been sawed off at the base
by hoodlums, her sculptor's integrity flattened
and dumped. To the little circles
the bad element makes, and the desperately larger ones
of the gainfully employed, the clean,
cycloptic police car parked in the trees
is the only spectator. A Swede in shorts leans forward
to see the Capitol. Toddlers pulled by in wagons,
six apiece, grab at a storm of petals.
What authority grants meaning to these efforts?
Even today, many have left their residences
to dig ditches in poorer countries, or
to live with a girl. As you continue northward on the Turnpike,
unidentifiable leaves press upward
from the dead text of a high development wall, going
like you go, pushed from the rear by everything
that's ever happened.
What colossal motivations in your forehead sweat
slip the glasses up and down, what struggle
against decay? And here as I imagine you
lost in the map's soft crease,
where the road unwinds hard ribbons around a stadium—
what kind of quest is this, to picket a vacant room,
arms up, limp-fisted?

A CLEAN POEM

perhaps you are writing someone
special a letter.
your hands above the keys,
you keep seeing and trying to see
what's worth reporting
on the rainwashed street.
they've trapped a man
under the leaves,
their little glowing oversides
dividing four ways each:
one cop behind and
one backed in, with
lights spread
along wet windows
silent, as
they handle him.

you write all this, but don't
know what it means
to handle bad elements.
depositing
a damp paycheck in the tail-tongue
of a hurricane
while your mother's umbrella
turned concave, you swore
the item earned remarking.
wet records
in a bag outside
the apartment
where a man had died.

opening up williams
to the word *rain*,
you shake your head above the leaves.
it is a clean thing
to say,
the orange pin-like dots
of shine like
the eyes of weepy preschoolers

something, or
 these socks should be dry by morning.
but examples in piles start
 to yellow the way
old news turns false.
 and the street is dry.

DE KOONING'S WOMEN (MYSELF INCLUDED)

Today I turned over the living room table,
and the papers
and napkins were so upset (!)

When Willem De Kooning
went to work on those paintings
he took to those ladies heads

a hatchet (voracious), and Elaine, his wife, tried not to be
included. She was
weary. I was also one of those

ladies on Fourteenth Street. I was
trying to be public. Literal *and*
abstract. I amounted to an assignment:

trembling like an owl in the floating shreds,
with a rabid smile, pulling
the ponytail to tell it

be more optimistic! and while I was at it
hold with semblance of pride
jaggedy cut up big bad breasts!

Poised like an intellectual
flamingo in the museum, I see
thru the monocle that it's

by all these eyes I'm dressed:
while the security man wiggles apart his secret balls and stares
dully quiet, the room

is purse-fatted bat-vampire blood-loud with no eyelids.
Okay, they're just reacting.
They have the apple figure,

bad armpits, excitedly
dropping hankies. And it was mean of Willem,
but true, his assuming

he knew where they were all going.

With little mystery in the plot (they have
no lips left!) of asking for drinks, and other
treats, asking themselves deep into other people's stories
where they weren't unwelcome but
unwieldy and unhelpful:

old Pop at the batters' box back in '06
seeing his fate play out in force and physics, dares that went bad
and deserve communal regret, free sex.

Willem, if you are free,
then I am unwelcome!
Ladies, keep it up, keep those branches
apart! It's the same gesture if
you mean it or not; the caricature's the same dirty trick
if I chuckle

or if they all pile up badsmelling and I yell *I submit!*
I am always like sunlight,
jiggly on water.

Academics say Willem had
anger toward his mother.
But his correspondence tells us, *Dear Joe*

and dear Olga ---- today
the weather here is glories!
--- I thought I take adventance

and write you both sweet
people a letter.
How much
I've asked for, this steak with teeth.

I've been in the middle of crowds beneath
so many bird killings in Tompkins Square Park.
A pigeon hit by a red-tailed hawk—

I was the gawker, the bloodthirsty one,
because I was the pecker picked apart.
See here, Willem, ladies

abstract and literal—vociferous oracles (I don't know
who's thwarted the worst)—it was
difficult. It remains difficult.

WITHDRAWAL METHOD

There is always the professor
of an unpopular subject waiting at the back
of the classroom for his AV equipment—

maybe at least I could ask and
ask him his opinions, lotion his annoyance,
and make him fall in love.

His home is near a lake. His mother
drives a rusted truck. And nearby in town,
men with coffees, fresh from break-
ups, watch me and want a healthy tryst.
Drifters. After,
they laugh at me for thinking I'm a slut.

The rain begins its sweaty pace again.

All day I crave the paths
of people I don't know
and open my mouth on them
like a tattered dixie cup.

II

THE FIRST TIME WE FELT WHAT WAS LATER DIAGNOSED AS _____

It felt like lust. It felt like August. It clung hard in the bowels. It bore down. It was the first time we used a tampon. It was the first time we put the sidewalk on our face. It was like rubbing knees on a mat. It felt like being a dog. It felt like the wisteria bushes were tackling us. It felt like getting raped by the truth. It was understated. It was like the bus driver's face in the rearview when he wasn't ready to yell yet. It felt like love. It felt like getting left in the bulrushes. It could have been anyone ever anywhere in the street. It explained an attraction to inanimate objects. It consisted of slow experiments on ourselves that lasted days, eating and not eating, trying to fly while dreaming, trying to have an orgasm while flying. It explained Nietzsche. It explained acid. It explained chat lines. It explained the principal's holiday sweater. It explained the pin that made it look like a cat was crawling out of her pocket, but it did not explain why she was so disappointed in us. It did not explain the dentist yanking so hard. It did not explain the car locks, but it was like the car locks. It was like the car passing by the Purdue chicken factory on our way to the beach. It was like the jellyfish all over the gray beach like boils. It was like biting into a jellyfish expecting it to be a gummy bear. It was that hard conversation staring out into the black waves with Dad. What death was. It was all wet and hard and it never dried. It was like an accident. It was like our assholes were eating themselves. It made us wish we were bulimics. It made us wish we had some kind of problem. It made us ride our bikes like madmen. It made us pester our parents into going somewhere big. It abated at Niagara Falls. It made oblivion seem close and important. It made us want to be handled

like posies. It made us want to be fucked
and fucked into full health. It made us go
forth across the ground, extend it
like time. It made us wish we could leave
a trail on the lawn like a finger dragged
over cat hair. It made us wish we could be
the head of a French royal still living for a moment
before landing in a pile of heads. It was like the blank wake
left by a head. It was what wasn't there
when we stopped and turned on the stairs
expecting some sort of cartoon inspector
who knew everything and was always laughing
and who always walked with his dick out
and a brown suit on and a paper bag over his head
when we came in sweaty with the
sun down and the house dark.

SUMMER VACATION

The hard damp keeps them
still in threatening postures: the strange,
putrid flower bush bends like Snuffleupogus;
a squirrel with a rat's tail in profile on the fence-top
is ready to jump and will not jump.

All over my skin, the gentle film
of the same place all day, itchy watercolor trickles,
imprint of hot pebbles. The diving board is low
and does not bounce; the chlorine never clears the dim green cloud.
It's hard to say what's missing.

My mother left this morning
her perfume through the hallway
and I'm coloring a picture of a T bone steak.
Dad's Speed Stick smells clean on the high shelf. More horses,
more horses belong in this landscape. I think I'll stay

on the roof as long as I
can while the wet wind paints the tar blacker; I
think I'll sit at the window and feel
the storm pressed to the stained glass chinks. Then after,
the big low sun will come and forgive,

its thick mix settling
as cars pull in. It gets later; I linger. They are at the stove,
they are at the desk. My jean shorts are hard in my crotch
as Mattingly lines a single to left. I want to be softer
than I am. I want you to stay.

WHEN YOU'VE FORGOTTEN THE PERVERT, HE'S FORGOTTEN YOU
"There is only experience and its decay."
—Geoffrey Sonnabend

It was New Jersey; my hands smelled.
Eye in the gap of the taught floral curtain.

Then I saw Uncle Baz hit his son's sore ear,
and a chair sank to the pool's bottom.

I went out and pulled up the chair.
I was a hostess of the chaos!

Baz remained in his drunk, pink posture
years after. An anecdote of my mother's.

*

Fog moves through the yard; chimes
swinging in their nooks wear off.

A ballerina unwinds herself
while the stage manager holds her string.

Sonnabend frowns over his dry boner.
Some problems are reborn, like

the problem of a gluey mouth; others obsolesce
like disaster supplies in the closet.

*

The whole gray loaf of January is
fed-up but stylish.

Then one night, we settle on the floor
with our paints, spread out cushions, and serve drinks.

The tussle that follows is inexact. Our torsos
are problems we feverishly handle.

Thank you for your restless attendance!
(I feel it pulling away like a cruise boat.)

WEATHERCASTERS

act so reasonably
so many formalities have led up to their performance
storm field, kristina abernathy
in a conference room years ago producers nodding
it has a ring to it
suits were selected, they practiced pointing
to a blank plane with no map where they gestured
mimicking the fronts with their hands
they played at rubbing the counties near washington
the way the wind rubs up, rubs down
and thought of movements to indicate stagnation
practiced the faces that went with black lung dangers
faces their mothers had made
administering oatmeal to the routine pox

to imagine the map as a kind of interior
is to urge the altering splotches along
in an effort to clean out the country for once and all
but the dust keeps coming
you hurt yourself, but blood is cleansing
see how the sky is bright and still
when the tornadoes have passed
see how the ritual of deciduous growth is different each year
because we have changed it
see weathercasters understanding the change, facing it bravely
in their personal lives
in incandescent bedroom laying out suits
in department stores picking out abstract ties

weathercaster, frank, al, kristina,
I can feel the gulfstream unbending
when I stand on the stoop and look south southwest
past the monument's tip, over virginia
to the dank continuous bayous
of louisiana, the sinking state
what that pit once held is there and still alive
when the air boats skim the heads of alligators
that in the gray humidity raise cautious eyes above the surface
I feel those gray humid motions
the weighty opposition of bodies rolling over one another
the grand entrances and exits made in desperation

hand like yours, mimicking and insistent
pairs of hands rubbing the scaled-down world

HOLD YOUR FIRE

I hope to meet you
after this somber
inter-period—you in a wheat field.

Your hair at dusk:
an Amtrak north
slides through, untangled.

Let's meet in
Centerburg, Ohio,
by the hamburger stand.

I'll check the splintered
holes of my bedroom ladder
to be safe.

I stood watch for three hours
in the grout creases
of our most popular bar bathroom.

I found a wallet and a blue condom
dropped in the gravel
outside the Exxon.

There you are
leaning on a sign
at the Sea City esplanade.

When I woke later,
sweat had sealed my cheek
to a leather couch—hello?

In the high apartments,
pass a stove at night
and you'll see pilots under a field of snow.

Symmetrically
seated families light
silent emergency flares.

Send help,

search the lakes.
If you see a small light, it's ours.

Or a minnow's in the phosphorescence.
Or a headlamp
playing on the surface.

TO JEREMY, ON A HOLIDAY WEEKEND

Your son can't speak yet.
Bound up by silences, you slice
the back roads of suburbs in Tallahassee,
blinding toward the pizza in your Mini.
It's like when we were young, this wait.
I was your sister, you the gummy bully;
our father threw aimlessly toward your mitt.
The dirt patch in the yard, rubbed by love,
covered in spit, was the toe-catch of your dreamy slippers...

And late at night, filled adequately with Todd's Chicken,
behind the green slat shelter of the blinds,
masturbatory dreams of the eggplant-clad hippie
must have ended. The dog slept on your head.
The room was almost pressed against our
thick magnolia, faceless. You eyed
the wall's gray aircraft, wanting to split yourself
evenly with wheels, as if it were a secret.
As if it were the worst thing in the world.

It makes sense, then, that where you landed
preserves this ripe imprisonment. You live
with pretermission, in a slip
that belies the loving face of the little squirt
who again and again returns your inflatable globe.
You put him in the tub. You lean him back
and rinse. You leave to get him food. You bring
it home. His dumb delight is visible:
buckling in the suds, he toes your chin.

This is the still wet pit in the heart of home,
outside of which the cars stream by on rails.
Tallahassee: a garden of prepared foods
passes by in disconnected fields.
Our fumes dispense into the muggy air
and wrangling liveoaks toss their beards of moss—
foreign as the fledgling armpit hair,
the temporary emblem of a sweet
and tacit wanderlust.

HOT AND COLD AUBADE

By Sunday, it was as though I'd returned
on Christmas to the house empty and the lights dead.

But it was late July and I was riding a flat bicycle.
The pavement cracked

over its calm long silty spots,
the short grass

bristled all the short way to Elysian Fields,
the sun hid in the porches.

Everywhere people
said good morning to me from across the street—I was going

that slow.
My gut like a wrong word, the bent crepe myrtle

artless. Elsewhere
people brush each other in coats by mistake, or a man

comments,
Your hair is blowing in the wind!

The eave-sparrows
flit in the face of the sun's purple negative:

so many guests I lack the will to enter.
On the walk to the train this morning, the neighborhood unravels

as usual. A construction pit
alive with workers last week

is indifferent and changed:
where the bricks meet the wind

bare-faced,
the building expands its sails. I let it happen—

I keep thanking what's idle when something
is missing:

that façade by the field, its building
ripped out (like it was

when you lived here), held up by steel rods
for no reason,

its wreckage snowed and ogled all over, might
kill itself

just to get you to come.
Or is only getting older.

III

POEM TO BE CHOPPED UP AND COOKED

I try to stand and look at everything
from the sky. All the loves racing away
over a slide of clouds, the music
coming around it like decoration.
The divided highway's tile emporiums
smell like a soft head inside a plastic chute.
The bread and peanut butter don't need
me to live. There are rules about car registration.
Revision's order is boring—governments
smooth over lots; year after year
people sit in diners ordering foods from around the world
as though the stress of a road atlas
could be absorbed on the tongue like a host.
Things things things (the sun turns
on the table) all over even when they're in boxes
I want to be talking to you but there's a lot of things
and the diners are passionless and
Route 10 hates my guts. When the neighbor groans
behind the wall, I make my face polite.
Nobody's here. Interest is willed arduously:
to be an audience is to be lazy. The landscape is flecked
with restaurants ; sparrows peck a buffalo wing.
This road is invisible from ground level. We can stay,
but something in our laughter will have to be thin and wintry.
We'll still need the facilities (we'll still be alive)
but something inside us will have to wait
forever, the absence we clink our glasses to.
I was in a room like that once at a fry place on Second Avenue.

If this could all end, I would talk to you.
We might fall into each other and collide temporarily
like cumulonimbus.
You're a fetish in my head, a circus character, a contingency,
a good way to think about strangers.
You're ageing and the sun goes down on your worn shirts in the south.
Light splits in the melting cubes.
The cubes are always melting, the liquid is always a brown scotch,
you're always tender about it, your angles are always late, late angles.
For every chest you insist there's a spot that refuses
to be held. It's sad like a waiter born the wrong gender.
The waning never stops. We must go on

and on into the dark. Smiley face.
Jet lag from thought. You once had a kind of understanding
with your pony, Lollipop. She had short legs;
you eyed each other warily. When you rode her
to the mailbox, it felt agreeable with your legs apart.
The chicken can die and come open,
you knew. How goddamn real
to cut its blood and see how it can become
something cooked, that its identity is not fixed,
the direct glare of a dad getting older.
Everything about me was cheap even then,
years before I knew you:
transfixed by your costume.

I want to be the adjacent thing to your thing
charged with life, earnest, untrackable,
hopeful in the face of new technology,
new songs, the right ones, the ones
that will save us all, delivered in a swell
by the invisible savior. Shoe
to accommodate the foot and be a pleasure.
Ocean to house and wear well the mire of warm chemicals,
to watch the changing paths of whale pods as
they travel, dots, and the water fills behind them, to hide
and forgive, to educate primarily by existing,
to be so huge as to imply a kind of promise,
the satisfaction of circumnavigation and the pain of the chicken,
to shift painfully so as to suggest your puberty face
in the bathroom mirror or the feeling of the first time
you drove a car alone, an assault of new things,
relationships with objects, the plastic-capped controls,
the body, the anonymity of it, a weird plight that is no plight,
a reason to go to church. A loss.
It happens that at night looking at the stars
prosaic conversations—the obvious questions—can lead your face
into alignment with a warm deep hole in which is nothing
and the nothing is maddening.
You did well that time in high school with the girl who wanted
to undress at midnight in the wet grass,
your worry as thick as prayer. Disappoint her.

ELEGY

In the park rustle people are saying my name.

Bricks are lined up and reshuffled. Drums darken the sky.

Sun, goodbye; week, goodbye.

Nobody can help, I tell someone who just got her heart broke.

Last night, I was the supplement of a bachelor party.

Are these people walking to work or from work?

I wake up throatless. My ears are flowers.

To push forward through the grass takes guts.

Things are cooling inexorably; things are warming for the worse.

The arms of dawn are strong so that in the morning babies play in a sunbeam on the carpet instead of watching something go away.

A couple is cooking out at dusk.

They think, how long must we keep this up?

Dinner is casual because the pressure of a sinking sun is so much it must be offset.

For a moment, the map was filled in.

The pressure of reality occurred today when I noticed one wrinkle and my credit card got turned down.

Shadows get long and cars follow them back into the boroughs.

To watch day recede generously makes me want to be airborne.

The pavement outside still a little warm at night felt like flesh, so we laid down.

FUGUE

September 2005

As far as you can see if you continue near the river dragging behind a black trashbag of belongings you can see remnants of it: saying goodbye to livelihood and livelihood's attire. Dragging remnants implies a leaving behind.

You see on the left the man the bus left prying open the tanks with a hand wrench. The hard mix makes its leaps out to the sea this close inland. You can shake each dragger out of resentment if you rub them and throw kisses.

Pink girls make their breasts horizontal with a newspaper headline they watch you reading. As many ants as are in an acre. One of you must be drunk then. One must be trying to pry open the other for a remnant to drag.

On the highways you can wait for watertowers to splinter contaminants over the tall pines, lots lined with combustibles, dug out pig pit overrun by beetles' active hardhats. Newspaper strikes less

severe tone in garbage. Domestic organization makes a roadblock where trees once were. You can descend the cloverleaf as far as you can hope to arrive at the old purpose of a can opener

led by your eyes. Look at the lean man in his fishing gloves. There's newspaper on his eyes. You can shake him, try to shake him into love.

THE BOTHERERS

Each of them bothers me.
Each is unwanted.
They pass in ones and twos
that I must smile at and must know.
Their papers must be
of interest. I must taste
their assorted original pasta salads.

They offer to get me sodas.
They open up packs
of cigarettes and stay.
Sometimes they are a welcome
distraction from the difficult
ignored tasks I can discuss, sometimes
I am subject to their

hard moans in sex, overheard
from above. They spit,
they leave flowers for
each other. The dramas
they intertwine are real.
Each is the renegade of
a philosophical quest, shrieks

and swung keys let off
self-affirming from a cliff.
They rattle bicycles loose
from the bench where I
am fretting. Who knows,
in two years, which state line
each will transcend? If we meet then,

will they kick my sole hello?
Sometimes when they knock
and sit I try to see
vast interior fields. Sometimes
when we talk about schedules,
I hear something warm and remote.

SIMILES IN THE DARK

Like the man next to me on the train, adamant
in sleep about the May queen

giving him a blow job under his coat,
little aware of his physical

setting, his visible lap, his eyes
in a fist, lets her sweet wand divide him like wax

as the cold train shudders
on the night line from New York.

In the weather, the track joints switch.
Like blue flames burning where

the steel has to give: the conductor
is looking at something else and says,

It's no problem, the flames are low and beyond us
in the yard. (People turn to each other

when they see something odd.) Like people jostled
like racks of eggs, who cling almost

angrily to the idea of being submerged in hot water,
their closed eyes towed backward

in time by inches...
My dream of you is irritated.

The fire is there so it won't want to stop,
the wall-eyed train going west through night like a thought:

your mouth speaking soft between
my buttons and under my skirt

adamant, adamant,
when the conductor shakes me in Summit.

LETTERS TO THE GUY WHO DUMPED ME, WHO LIVES ON THE GULF
COAST

September 2004

Dear asshole, I'm writing you
from the fifth hour of a barbeque.

J. has set up a table for flip-cup;
we are celebrating labor.

Everyone misses you. Everyone has
a burger. S. is explaining the rules of Texas hold 'em

to some secretaries for nonprofits,
circling each other in similar pants.

This party is as wild
as a jeep driving down stairs.

I saw today another hurricane's
coming toward you:

some networks represent it with a moving point,
others as a black eye covering the Yucatan.

I hold my housemate's hair
until she vomits and we find a cab.

*

Dear asshole, I am feeling
elegiac on the train.

The speed and rain make me
want to name everything I see!

Chevy, overpass, gray heron doing
a one-legged bend in the sludge.

It was drizzle like this
that made us climb up 500 Fifth Avenue,

remember?—you opened the roof door, and the city smoked

like a lacerated potato,

the wind lapped us in its casual strength.
But there was still another ladder,

so we tucked our heads down,
caught each other, and from the aerial we almost came unglued—like Yugos

clinging to a bridge in Detroit.
It was hysterical.

*

Dear asshole, the man I was with last night
was a copy of you.

In the half light he was smoother,
rising to take a shower.

He wasn't hoary enough.
He was interested in getting a vasectomy.

He smiled too hard
pretending to know directions.

Still, we got our faces close
and his breath was degrees of difference,

and either you or I was like the daytime maid vacuuming
the long halls of my apartment,

like the presidential limo
moving and hiding at the same time through the city.

The business of the morning is
sweat rubbed in sheets.

Cleaning this place up
is like shaving over a bruise.

By waiting a while longer to send this to you,
I'm throwing it out, slowly.

ILLUMINATION AFTER A SWIM IN TEXAS

It was almost gone, and it continued—
the summer in late March.
Buds steadied themselves and shied back into limbs
that wouldn't have them. It was late,
it was August, the guests
were gone from the grill—
the ascendant lover changed his mind and fell away
as accidental as a limp petal.
Rising and falling at once,
rolling on the outside of a ball—
even as the shade covered a mountain pool
too early, even as an escalator
directed me definitely upward—
I bent my questions to almost-under-
standing, I sought out blank climates
in other people's faces, what wanted
to be broken by love.
They looked mildly around
and wore jackets indoors, they looked
to be directed and distracted,
they were better than me for having created
the aroma of cigarettes by the little league bleachers.
Then, it was a degree later.
Crickets scraped; I held
to the end of a slack leash.
This was when Dooley was still alive,
before I first clicked save. Cars rushed
through greens, and the greens did
something in the dark. But I never walked
into them from the highway, I never
met them the way I wanted.
When I say I want you, this is what I mean.

RETURN

In New Jersey no one is home.
The plate glass reflects the empty room behind me
and the books have been a long time in order,
the liquor cabinet the only talking possibility.
The lit room is the one I'm in. Other rooms
close in, watch me like bums watching
a rich girl seek out her bus: darkness so deep it's hypothetical.
Maybe I face west, with the picture window staring down my back,
into the woods where a few seasonally hunted deer live,
trapped like pinballs in the reservation,
benignly chewing lawns at the perimeter—
mammals that live and perish in Mountainside...
Like the day Zuzu, our dog, died. It was July.
She trembled on the patio mat, and the wind took up her ears;
I looked at her from low enough so that her head
was on the hazy sky, and farther off the Raritan,
and Outerbridge Crossing a wisp so thin
I imagined Zuzu an Indian discovering it.
Maybe I'm set on a sloped overlook
where a city passes as a distant concept—
but the sick towels are real; I rub my legs together like a cricket.
A herd of silhouettes mills around the living room.
Filled with television static. Blank.
From my bed I feel them nodding—
if they're still here, they haven't left themselves behind.
On the deck at night, fingers follow planes
waiting to touch down in Newark, hanging things
that blink and move fast as they move slowly.
Maybe love is to watch them land,
feel them coming, to stay up stirring something.

GIRL IN LITTLE FALLS, NY, RECOVERING FROM DELIRIUM

I guess I walked into my parents' room
this morning saying things about baboons
and dolls in armies marching up the ceiling
or something like that. Later, I was feeling
fine to see the horses but I stayed
because my mother made me. I behave,
and keep the shopping cart from rolling off
all year, and now, of course, to miss the soft
faces of horses nodding to the rail—
their polkadotted jockeys, braided tails—
it makes me want to trip her in the slime
or yank her hair like when she brushes mine.
It's nothing like the injuries my brother
gets—fat lip, ice block. He's under cover
trackside, watching horses, making deals.
The horses here are still and small in fields.