

## ABSTRACT

TITLE OF THESIS: DE FIDELIS

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DE FIDELIS is a collection of poems that examines domestic life and the ways that domestic life comes undone by the challenges of contemporary culture. The content of the poems is drawn from a wide range of personal experiences—a kind of travel in which the customs and ideology of “home” are explored and challenged, the home where domesticity is embedded with fidelity and the specter of infidelity, death, and the world that remains when the dead continue to engage with the living. What unites the poems are the close observations of relevant objects and memory.

# DE FIDELIS

by Julie Ruth Enszer

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Advisory Committee:  
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For Kim, with love and thanks

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**I.**

## **IRIDESCENT BLUE SATIN BOWER BIRD**

1.

First he builds a bower  
on the forest floor  
gathering and grouping  
parallel walls of twigs  
he adorns the environs  
of the amorous arbor  
with everything blue  
blue the color of his eyes  
picked and placed  
he decorates blue  
seduces with his lure

2.

You have done it too  
you have gathered  
small beautiful things—  
a piece of cut sandstone  
a large round brown marble  
a pear, hand-hewn,  
from Australian hard wood—  
you have gathered them  
placed them beside your bed  
leading to your pillow  
admit it—  
you have built your own bower

3.

Down the path outside  
the fence beneath heavy  
wet eucalyptus trees  
follow the Australian woman  
talking about cleaning  
the land in winter burning  
the bush there it is  
plastic doodads enshrine  
the ovoid breeding boudoir  
a blue key chain a blue ink Bic  
bits and bits of broken plastic

4.

Imagine the Iridescent Blue  
Satin Bower Bird before  
the planet was polluted  
with blue plastic:  
building a bower with  
blue flowers blue feathers  
blue pebbles berries and shells  
searching then swooping  
for bits of blue  
either way—plastic or  
organic—I am enamored  
by bird by bower by blue.

## DURIO ZIBETHINUS

You smell it first. It is unlike anything you have ever smelled. Your hosts tell you: this is an acquired taste— if you were in Europe, it would be bleu cheese. You are not in Europe. You are in Kuala Lumpur pronounced LUMP-er. It is your first time in Asia. It is your first time in a Muslim country. You've always known the importance of a Palestinian homeland but you understand, for the first time, the urgency of Palestine. You talk to a bookseller; you try to get a copy of Nadia Anjuman's book, *Gule Dudi*, which means Dark Flower. The bookseller wants to read your palm. He wants to read the indentations in your skull. He holds your hands and your head and asks you, *Are you married? Are you married? Are you married?* He suggests he could be a good husband for you. He confirms from the lines on the soft side of your hand that one person is destined for you. He questions more and more, *Are you married?* You finally tell him that you actually do have a husband but she is your wife, a woman, you are a lesbian. He goes slightly crazy. He tells you, *Your body is a temple*, which you already know. He says, *It takes 4.5 million years to get a human form*, which you did not know and you are not sure you believe. He says, *Why do you waste yourself, your human form, your body, your temple on this gay mess*. For the first time, here in Malaysia, you realize Muslims are angry. About Palestine. The West. The war. You despair. You know you are not going to get your book. Your hosts give you a white piece of fruit. It smells strong and pungent like sweaty socks that have sat too long. It feels like phlegm on your fingers. You eat it. It warms your throat. It is not like anything you have ever eaten. You bite, then suck its flesh off the pit with your lips. It is the king of all fruits. It is Durian. You are a Jew.

## **ABSOLUTELY NO CAR REPAIRS IN THE PARKING LOT**

Three people are working on old, American cars.  
One man with a white van—his mobile mechanic's shop—  
has pulled the engine out of a black Monte Carlo.  
Another crawls from under a Sunbird  
rusted and battered tail pipe in hand.  
The third, an Escort, hood open, unattended.  
Owners ostensibly inside the auto supply  
searching for the proper replacement part.

Although I don't need one, I've brought a man.  
Newly minted. Nine months ago, breasts removed—  
scars from the surgical drains healed quickly  
now the only skin rupture from needles  
delivering daily hormones, he refers to as T,  
and the resulting faux-adolescent acne pimpling his face.  
He's more of a man than me. Still, it takes us two tries  
with a return in between to find wiper blades that fit.

## MY MOTHER'S VANITY

Visiting, I need to wash my hands.  
She replaced the vanity with this *au courant*  
oak cabinet just as Ronald Reagan became  
President. There is only a small space

for water to drizzle into the faux marble sink—  
the bathroom is packed; pots and palettes,  
powders, compacts, and applicators  
stored ramshackle in plastic containers.

I want a trash bag to empty it all:  
counter, small shelf, back of the toilet,  
the entire medicine chest. I want to throw  
it all away. Give my mother a clean

slate, but I wash my hands. Rub soap  
from a pile of four half used bars  
then dry on threadbare hand towels  
and walk downstairs. There are no new

beginnings, no fresh starts for mother.  
Only a lifetime collection of make-up—  
mauve, purple, burgundy, silver.  
The many reasons my face is bare.

## MY FATHER'S PORNOGRAPHY

One hot July day when I was thirteen  
my best friend and I snatched the mail  
from the carrier as he inserted it  
through the slot in the front door.  
No penpal letters, no catalogues,  
no real correspondence but carte blanche  
from my father to open his junk mail,  
so I tore into a thick, black, plastic package  
and found glossy paper with small  
squares of color popping up from the dark  
background. Inside, pictures. Things  
I'd never imagined. Men with penises  
in their mouths, men showing their asses,  
men with what I would later learn to call  
long, hard cocks and hairy balls.  
For the first time, I saw outside the triangle  
of my house, my friend, and the local 7-11  
into a world where people didn't marry  
collegiate sweethearts, return to hometowns,  
and teach at their alma mater, a new world  
where people watched something  
besides television, lived as adults  
without children, ate at restaurants  
with waiters, bought gourmet groceries,  
traveled to places without shopping malls,  
and wore watches that didn't say Timex.  
There, desire was telegraphed in public  
with tattoos, silver, and Levis, and sex  
happened outside cotton-poly sheets;  
it was the world I wanted to enter and  
holding those pictures I knew  
I would not stay in Saginaw  
for the same reasons, twenty-five  
years later, my father could not escape,  
then, my horrified mother yanked the photos  
from my fascinated hands, cursing me  
and my very best friend and my father  
and we never spoke of this again.

## MEETING THE DICTATOR

“I don’t believe they have any rights at all.”

Robert Mugabe, Prime Minister of Zimbabwe

Well, we must have some rights because here I am standing next to you, shaking your hand. Somewhere I earned the right to have this brief, uncomfortable conversation. The wife of the former Malaysian prime minister has hastened away after her introduction of you and me. Even she, your hostess, didn’t want to talk further. We are uncomfortable.

What do you, an eighty-year-old African, and I, a thirty-five-year-old American, have in common? Little. But our brief conversation is prolonged because I am the only person in the room talking to you. Let me amend: I am the only person willing to talk to you. All of these peace people are angry about your presence at this conference.

You: evil African dictator. Them: benevolent, peace-loving, white westerners. Which I am too, but I’m also curious.

I’m the oldest child—I always fancied being a dictator to which one sister will still vociferously attest. Is it fun?

Do you like controlling an entire country? Do people bow in your presence? Does everyone defer to your opinion?

Do you never defend your ideas? When you speak, do actions happen? Do you never have to convince or cajole? That’s what I would want out of being a dictator.

Complete compliance. Still, it seems like there are problems with the paradigm. Like today. You leave your country and are alone at a cocktail party standing next to a white, western lesbian. Yes, it’s just you and me, Robert Mugabe.

If I had known I was going to meet you, or any dictator, really, I might have chosen something different to wear.

I’m wearing an old, well-worn, worsted-wool Jones New York suit. Does it matter to you that I bought my clothes from an outlet? Does it matter that they are not new?

I’m wearing a silk shirt my wife chose just for this trip.

*Silk will make you look wealthy and important*, she told me.

I am neither. She didn’t anticipate I’d meet a dictator. I didn’t anticipate how lonely you would be. Even with fourteen attendants.

All fawn every moment by your side. Still I look into your eyes, and I know you are alone. Holding this glass of guava juice, I think about what I will tell my friends back home in the States.

*I met Robert Mugabe. Yeah, the dictator in Zimbabwe.*

I’ll play it cool. Casual. They’ll be impressed.

I can hear them now, *Wow, I haven’t met one dictator yet.*

*What did you say? Oh, no, What did I say? What did I say?  
I grip my glass of guava. I'd like to be witty and wise.  
Mr. Mugabe, I understand you think queerness was imported  
from the west. Is that true? I'd wait coyly for his reply.  
Then that must make queerness just like your religion: Catholicism.  
I'd like to be confrontational. Try to kill me, Robert Mugabe,  
Kill me like you killed the queers in Zimbabwe. I'd like to be  
provocative. Are you hungry, Mr. Mugabe? Food is everywhere,  
but you, you must starve. Our conversation never gets that far.*

## TESTING ABRAHAM

Perhaps he fancied himself Abraham, the father of nations, but he found himself the father of three daughters, one now long dead, the other two with no plans to propagate— I can't help but believe we were some sort of cruel disappointment until I learned, had my Dad been born ten or twenty years later, reached maturity, say post-Stonewall, he might not have found himself with family or at least not with our family, my mother, my sister, and me, he might have been with a family like my adult family, only it wouldn't exist because I wouldn't be which is really beside the point because this is the point: when I was running the gay and lesbian community center there was one group I didn't understand: the bi married men; they met once a month, there were literally hundreds of them and for the longest time they were the only group to meet on Saturday night while everyone else went to bars or concerts or out on dates, they gathered in relative secret, albeit at the gay and lesbian center where they would never tell us their last names or even a telephone number to contact the leader— they always said they would call us to check in, resolve problems, which they did, regularly, quietly; still I don't understand, they had over three hundred and fifty men gathered— who were these men? why did they stay married? were they really bisexual? or just waiting to be gay? what did their wives think? did they have children? so many questions and no answers, not even after my sister sneaked a peek at my father's email on Christmas Eve and found, well, I don't know what exactly she found—I never asked—she just called me crying and accusatory did I know? did I know my father was gay or bi or whatever you call it when a man has a wife and an apparent erotic interest in other men? did I know? did I know? I told her no, I didn't know, which I didn't, and I told her I was angry that she read Dad's email, which I was, and that begat a familial schism of Biblical proportions in which I am just a scribe who will bury this book and deny, deny, deny all knowledge – I'll pretend I'm Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel, son of Nachor, whom Milcah bore to him, a stranger in a strange land until I am drawn into this drama once again.

## SISTERHOOD

### 1. FEET

Whenever I see my dead sister  
she is barefoot. It was fine  
this morning at the swimming pool,  
but wintertime, wrapped up  
in a parka and scarf, I shudder  
to see her feet completely bare,  
but the funeral director said  
shoes and socks weren't necessary,  
and it had been hard enough  
to find a dress that fit.  
The mortician failed to fix  
her up enough to leave the lid  
open, so before the closed,  
public viewing, we gathered  
in private to see her face,  
lacerated, abraded, sort of smashed  
and, thanks to the artistry of  
mortuary science, caked in make-up.  
My mother screamed,  
grabbed her baby's body.  
My other sister peered  
behind the satiny drape.  
She looked up, pasty.  
*No shoes and you should see her legs.*  
*They look horrible—contused, twisted.*  
I said, *It was a car accident.*  
She said, *Look, look.* I never did.

## **2. DRESS**

When it was time that Monday afternoon  
to choose a dress for her for the funeral  
I wanted sweats and a t-shirt—the outfit  
we'd all eventually remember her in.  
Instead, I picked a black and white check  
with a Peter Pan collar. It made my mother  
happy, but for me it was too formal.  
Laid out, she looked like a child,  
not a young woman: tall, lithe, and hip,  
a dancer who favored simplicity.  
Besides, the dress was too small.  
Now when I see her walking away from me,  
there's a sliver of her back showing—  
hardened from desiccated skin  
with no circulation and yellowed like  
a cheap paperback novel. The dress,  
cut down the center, held together  
with eight or ten safety pins. I always  
call out her name; she turns, smiles.  
Facing me she wears blue sweats,  
a plain, white T. No pins  
pressing waxy, dead skin.

## **3. SHE AND I**

We were never close.  
Never dyed our hair together.  
No tandem manicures.  
No joint shopping excursions.  
We fought.  
Earlier, in the back seat  
of the Caprice Classic  
on family vacations  
and later on the telephone.  
Before she died, I told her  
no one could take her seriously.  
It was the way she talked.  
So fast. And breathless.

Ending every declarative  
with the intonation of a question.  
She dismissed me, angrily.  
She said, *You don't understand  
my artistic personality.*  
I didn't. The dancing.  
The boyfriends. The alternative  
music. I disdained  
them all. This is the truth:  
I've loved many women  
more than my sister.  
Had she lived, she would  
have been nothing more than  
a familial correspondent—  
treacly holiday sentiments  
and Hallmarked birthdays.  
Occasionally, I might have  
called her; late on Sundays,  
with an obligatory update.  
But now we're closer  
than we've ever been. Dead,  
my sister is finally present.

#### **4. WASHER**

At twenty-two, in her rental apartment,  
she owns one.  
I, in my newly-bought house,  
find a behemoth left behind.  
Twenty years old, drab, olive green,  
it hulks in the corner,  
outsizing anything  
I've ever owned.  
The previous owners knew  
it could never be removed,  
and who would want to?  
For the first time, I clean without quarters.  
Gathering laundry in large plastic baskets,  
I carry them two flights down  
to the dank as a ditch  
Michigan basement.  
When filled, it clunks and grinds,  
swishes and swirls, then spills  
dirty water into the drain

or drips, drips, drips, until  
a drizzle runs across the floor.  
Then, I never asked  
how she saved for her machine,  
how she moved it to each new apartment.  
I never imagined front-loaders  
in my future kitchen,  
how after her death my parents  
would donate her washer to the Salvation Army.  
I never asked her,  
do your clothes pile up,  
do you ever forget to remove them so they sour,  
where do you dry them?  
In the open air?  
When you put them on,  
how do they smell?

## **5. HAIR**

Hers was never like mine. Blonde and thin  
with ends that split in summertime.  
As a teenager, she dyed it with Sun-In;  
harsh chemicals turned her platinum.  
To wrap her hair she cut sleeves  
off old, battered, white Ts,  
while I wove a thick, French braid  
or sported barrettes, large, handmade.  
Now I've cut my hair. I hear her  
constant tuts and tsks. Long hair no longer  
binds us. But I still dream her,  
hair, thick and lush, long at the sides.  
It curls and waves in ways  
it never did when she was alive.

## **6. CARS**

My sisters and I swap stories.  
Sordid encounters with mechanics,  
stock-piling engine oil,  
indignities of not-classic-just-old  
motor vehicles—detectable emissions,  
unmuffleable exhaust,  
an array of meaningless  
or once significant broken parts.  
My Mercury Sable ticks miles

beyond one hundred thousand,  
broken sunvisors slapping passengers  
with each sharp turn,  
almost like my old Tercel,  
abandoned freeway-side  
when the engine gasket blew  
spewing steam and smoke  
at seventy miles-an-hour;  
its window seal,  
decayed by sun,  
leaked, spawning mold  
beneath rotting seats  
and when I had to drive  
the dog to chemo,  
she wouldn't ride inside,  
just sat on the curb  
and cried until I called a cab.

## **7. CHARIOTS**

In Los Angeles, my living sister  
drives an old Volvo,  
nursed or jerry-rigged  
each year to pass  
the California emissions test.  
The driver's door only opens  
from the outside—  
she cranks the window,  
then reaches out to release;  
in her mind, that Volvo is gilded,  
drawn by stallions.  
We romanticize our cars  
in spite of our sister  
who died in hers.  
The sun hit her eye.  
She pulls forward.  
An unseen semi down the empty  
morning highway  
smashes her side, crushes  
her against Oregon igneous.  
I imagine her wearing a seatbelt—  
we're all good that way—  
still, her head hits the windshield  
and the enormous engine  
of the 84 Mustang—

if you've never heard it,  
it roars, not a horse,  
but a lion, landlocked,  
ready to run  
when the key engages—  
destroyed on contact.

## 8. RETAINER

It is lost at lunchtime  
in a McDonalds  
on our way to Florida.  
Wrapped in a white  
napkin, set on a brown tray,  
then forgotten until fifteen  
minutes down the eight lane interstate  
past Valdosta, from the back seat,  
my sister meekly says,  
*I can't find my retainer.*  
*Are you sure? Are you sure?*  
We rustle around looking  
for what my sister knows is lost.  
Back at the arches, we look in disbelief  
at twenty bags of rubble. We rummage  
through. My mother cries  
about the six hundred  
dollars the retainer  
will cost if we cannot find it.  
She screams, *We don't have money*  
*to throw away.* Then, pawing  
through styrofoam, splotted  
with special sauce, single servings  
of squeezed and sprayed ketchup,  
hundreds of stray French fries,  
I do not know that in twenty years,  
I will make a joke graveside.  
*Pity, her dying so young.*  
*If you had known,*  
*would you have paid*  
*to have her teeth straightened?*  
Then, picking through soiled paper  
for my sister's corrective,  
I do not know that when  
I sweep my own floors,  
I will pick out pennies  
from dust and dog hair—  
usually, but not always.

**II.**

## **SIX CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CANCER**

-for Nikki

### **I. THINGS DONE CHANGED**

I am listening to Biggie Small's *Ready to Die*

*I've been robbin' motherfuckers  
since the slave ships/with the same clip*

and I know cancer  
is something our mothers  
and grandmothers get.

*Gimme the loot  
Gimme the loot*

Sure, this album has been digitally remastered;  
that old cassette tape was stretched to distortion.  
True, I'm driving a new, blue Nissan Maxima  
a wretched four-door, family sedan,  
but my beloved Toyota Tercel finally died.

Yes, I've gotten older, but listening to Biggie  
I am twenty-three and we are carousing late at night and  
driving down Michigan Avenue and  
playing our music really loud and eating coney dogs  
and rapping with the Notorious B.I.G.

*You chronic smokin', Oreo cookie eatin', pickle juice drinkin'  
Chicken gristle eatin', biscuit suckin', MUTHAfucka*

and we are laughing so hard we are crying and  
there is no cancer in your breast.

### **II. ONE LYMPH NODE**

Both rounds of dye  
and the MRI  
showed nothing  
no metastasis  
from the tumor  
in the breast tissue  
to the lymph nodes  
it was good

something to celebrate  
then a shadow  
on an x-ray  
hardness in a manual  
examination  
small concern persists  
so the doctor insists  
another surgery  
a small one this time  
to remove one lymph node  
you tell me *it is nothing*  
*the doctor thinks it is nothing*

### **III. GOLD DIGGER**

You have a six-year-old daughter  
and breast cancer  
and I am listening to hip-hop  
because it is loud and honest and crass

*Met her at the beauty salon  
with the baby Louis Vuitton  
under her underarm*

and because I want our old life back,  
but I can't get it back so I just  
sing into your mobile vmail:

*18 years/ eighteen years  
She have one of your kids  
Got you for eighteen years.*

You ring me back :  
It ain't all that—  
you and your ghetto-ass gangsta rap  
not just the men are trapped  
Click.

Beep.  
Another message.  
You're sick and depressed  
but my battery's dead  
so I didn't know  
until the day you go back  
to the doctor after his vacation  
after your surgery.

I call and I call  
I croon into the headset,

*Get down girl go head get down  
Get down girl go head get down.*

You, driving again to the doctor  
for radiation therapy prep,  
leave a message on my voice mail:

The one renegade lymph node?  
Benign.

#### **IV. YOUR SCAR**

In my twenties, women's naked breasts  
were everywhere for my enjoyment:  
co-op bathrooms, joint house parties, my own bedroom.

*I know you want it,  
the thing that makes me—*

I've seen your breasts a million times.  
We wear the same size bra. Yours: pink,  
peach, nude, black, white and lacy.  
Always lacy. Mine: white and white and white and white.  
Lace makes my nipples itch.

Now the only breasts I see regularly are mine—  
viewings usually confined to the shower—  
and my wife's. If I get to see other boobs at all,  
they are swollen and calloused;  
sucked by an infant for their comfort,  
their nourishment, not mine.

*My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard,  
and their like, it's better than yours.*

With age our breasts are contained  
in functional cotton, strapped, padded and underwired,  
but I miss my past—the ease of breast access.

*Damn right, it's better than yours  
I can teach you,/but I have to charge*

I want to see you breasts. Your small scar.  
The uneven shape and size.  
I worry the next chance I'll have to see such a scar  
will be on my chest or the chest of my wife.

I can barely comprehend that you have cancer;  
I can't contemplate the carcinomas of my future.

## **V. ANGEL**

*Life is one big party when you're still young  
But who's gonna have your back when it's all done*

You write, my oncologist, my radiology oncologist,  
and my surgeon are acting like the three stooges,

or maybe it's just my RO and the ultrasound radiologist  
who can't decide between them what procedure to do.

I write, soon you will have had more doctors than lovers.  
You reply, that's a nightmare, although recently

doctors have felt me up more than any lover.  
I type, take action. Change that tide.

*Shorty, you're my angel, you're my darling  
Girl, you're my friend when I'm in need*

## **VI. SURVIVOR**

Less than two months post-diagnosis,  
you describe yourself as a cancer survivor,

*I'm a survivor (What?)  
I'm gonna make it (What?)*

and I suppose you are. They have cut open your chest  
and tested and treated and poked and prodded,

*I'm not gon give up (What?)  
I'm not gon stop (What?)*

but you aren't getting married for another year  
because you're going to lose all of your hair  
and puke your guts out,  
so I am surprised that you use the word survive

*I will survive (What?)*  
*Keep on survivin' (What?)*

because I don't yet feel  
like we are surviving this.

**THE WEEK BEFORE THE SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ALLIED  
TROOPS' ARRIVAL AT AUSCHWITZ**

January 28, 2005

There are only two English-language channels  
on our hotel television: CNN and ESPN.

We marvel at polyglots around us; they speak  
French to the waitress, German to one another,

American to us (I've heard people from Great Britain;  
I'm reticent to claim English as my native tongue.)

I'd happily settle for the moniker diglot  
but even that would be inaccurate.

On the Metro to dinner—our biggest  
indulgence—traditional *haute cuisine*,

my wife tells me about the *Arc d'Triomphe*.  
Hitler marched his troops under the Arc

when he occupied Paris. Parisians, she tells me,  
sat in cafes while he conquered.

They drank coffee. I understand:  
the *café crème* is the best I have ever had.

The award-winning documentary, The Shoah,  
airs repeatedly in French, German, some Yiddish

and another language we cannot distinguish.  
It has French subtitles. We recognize some

words as they flash on the screen. We understand little.  
We know how the story ends.

## CANNIBAL

Split open like the apple missed in the August picking  
and held too long to the tree, I filled with brown, mealy rot  
and fell to the ground. When not even the aphids wanted to consume  
my flesh or leave me to their maggots, I ate my own innards.  
I dined on the delicacy of my liver; it was dense and fatty and  
cleansed my body as it sat in the sun for my consumption.  
I ate through my intestines, large and small, like sausages.  
My lungs nourished me for years. I squeezed them to breathe out.  
Released, they took in air. I ate their fleshy lining, spit out  
harsh cartilage, then sucked blood-engorged capillaries.  
I feasted on my ovaries. Ate them raw and fried and scrambled.  
I splayed the fallopian tubes. Dried and salted them like jerky.  
I ate my own uterus. All muscle, and tough from, not age, but anger.  
When, seeking sustenance, I reached my throat and headed  
for my brain—I knew eating them would kill me—but  
I was all grown and, inexplicably, someone loved me.  
I put my organs back. Contained beneath muscles  
with freshly-wound tendons, a clean myelin sheath.  
I wrapped my body in the same old skin, not supple,  
not stretched, used, but still useable.  
Now when you see me, you don't know,  
I'm half empty inside from eating myself alive.

## A NEW REFRIGERATOR

I didn't actually want one, but after your mother died,  
you, with a big check in your pocket, became obsessed.

I measured. We shopped and shopped. You  
selected and purchased. This one. It is too big—

just barely, but still, —it is too large for the space.  
I want to return it. Get a smaller model, an easier fit.

You refuse. You want this one and only this one.  
You say, *We needed a carpenter*. I say, *You deal with it*.

The electric behemoth sits in the center of our kitchen floor  
for months. I tell our visitors that this refrigerator is

your grief—large and in the way—transformed into my headache.  
Finally, I pay the housepainter an extra three hundred

to put the refrigerator in its place. When she finishes,  
I admired how perfect it is. Drawing a glass of water

from its cool interior, I cry. My anger, never at you.  
I want what you got. A mother to give me

something stainless, purposefully cool and icy,  
something frozen for a reason.

## THE FORMER PRIME MINISTER

*I hate how these women hide themselves beneath head scarves; for once I don't disagree, I sip my diet Coke; I look at the woman two tables away, a few strands of hair have fallen across her face; I want to tuck them in; in twelve hours, I will be at the airport, stamped and ready to leave for Thailand; I will be exhausted and sick. It is ironic: I will have a sore throat, not from my talking but from my silence in the face of the rhetoric of the former prime minister—he wants to incite opposition to the U.S. war so he throws verbal red meat to this largely Muslim crowd. The Jews this; the Jews that. *The Jooosss control America; the Jooosss control all of the banks; the Jooosss control Hollywood.**

Unoriginal.

Misguided. Wrong. But I tell myself, there is not a leader of a Muslim country

who doesn't serve up such pork fat to his people. I am uncomfortable, but I am silent; I get a massage, I buy a Turkoman carpet.

The next afternoon he speaks in solidarity with the holocaust denier jailed in Austria, he asks, *Where is his freedom of speech?* Ironic from one who jailed many: children from Australia, his own deputy PM. He asks, *Why can we not question the number six million?* He asks, *What if it was 5,999,999?* He passes it off as a joke. It's not funny. Then he talks about Auschwitz. He says, *There was nothing found there after the war. No camp.*

*No oven.* That evening, we boycott the final formal dinner; I stare at the hair of the woman two tables over. I will go to the airport early the next morning shrouded by darkness. I will keep thinking about Zarina, the woman wearing

a Donatella Versace scarf as a hajib; pink, grey and textured, made from the finest silk. I will wonder if she bought it in Italy. I will wonder if she spoke to the shop clerk with her perfect, British-accented English or if she spoke perfect Italian also with a British accent.

I want to touch her scarf, her head, her hair. I don't. I study the lines beneath her scarf: her ears, her tied up hair, her skull.

I imagine them as my own. I want to believe in some sort of transcendent feminist sisterhood: Donatella, Zarina, and me. I want to believe she isn't thinking about the final solution for the Jews. My throat hurts. I tie my hair back in a knot. I board the plane. I walk away.

## ACCEPTANCE

He was there the other day  
at the reading sitting in the back,  
black cap, gray turtleneck, jeans.  
He was smiling. It was hard  
for me to see him—he's so short—  
but I could see the lunulae  
on each fingernail the entire time.  
Hands, soft, refined; nails, long;  
cuticles carefully pushed back  
illuminating ten half-moons,  
one for each midnight reflection.  
I knew he came because I kept  
my promise from before  
he died, *write our lives*,  
he told me, making him  
my co-conspirator, though  
I'm left with all the work  
while he jaunts in and out,  
a mythic satyr. Today,  
he's pleased with me,  
though he pranced out  
before the crowd dispersed.  
I could not speak to him,  
but I imagine: he's watching,  
smiling, occasionally laughing,  
head thrown back,  
tending his fierce, strong nails.

## MY FATHER'S MIMEOGRAPH

When turned on, the machine buzzed,  
but warm, it hummed. In the corner  
of the basement, shining stainless,  
a basin for water, drum larger than  
my child head, and special paper,  
the master, three pages bound  
at top and bottom, carefully fed by my father  
into the new Selectrix, which I covet for its  
femininized name, once a Selector  
now, ERA imminent, Selectrix.  
I envy it for a while: the time  
and care my father gives it, but it liberates  
the old Underwood for my purposes—  
a play, a series of YA books. Also inherited,  
a stack of once used carbon papers  
to mount between two fresh white sheets  
and duplicate like father. Sometimes,  
the carbons leaves the tips of my fingers black,  
but always I yearn for the blue  
of the mimeograph. I sit in the basement  
corner anticipating the warm hum;  
then, when my father positions the master,  
ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk.  
The magical machine whirs pages  
into an imperfect stack. Warmed by electricity,  
the edges curl as they dry with multiple  
choices for biology and chemistry—  
answers I'll eventually learn and circle—  
for his ecstatic appellations.  
Even grown, I crave his praise.  
The other day he called me about seventy  
volumes of the Britannica Great Books.  
He tells me, *They are bound in leather.*  
*If you have the shelf space, I will buy them for you.*  
I hear the years of his promises.  
*The world is black & white. Good will prevail.*  
*If I read these seventy books,*  
*I will have all the answers I need.*  
I don't have the shelf space.  
I open a bottle of Waterman  
*encre noire*; I breathe in deeply but  
the liquid pigment carefully sucked  
into the reservoir behind my nib  
doesn't have the inky odor I seek.

## AFTER THE REVOLUTION

*Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame – Hannah Senesh*

For Glen Johnson

We meet again by chance at the airport.  
You, delayed returning home  
from the islands—a birthday weekend  
with your partner whom I've never met  
and cannot remember his name  
nor how many years it has been.  
My wife and I snowed in  
all weekend. We chat and,  
although this is odd,  
I smell your breath. There,  
the warm smell when you speak,  
spittle when you aspirate plosives.  
It reminds me of after my sister's funeral  
at the outlet mall a half hour  
south of Saginaw, I collapse  
into your arms at Ralph Lauren,  
not crying—tears had given way  
to exhaustion—but needing,  
desperately, comfort. You said,  
*Buy new sheets, good cotton ones.*  
*Good sheets always make everything better.*  
Then, I remember dinner  
with a prospective donor—an auto  
scion. Two decades our senior,  
we asked him for money  
for the gay and lesbian center  
and after he committed but before  
coffee, he said, *Can I touch your hair?*  
Initially, flustered, then, *Sure,*  
and he touched tentatively  
then gently ran his hand  
through your hair. *I've never touched*  
*another man's hair. Yours is so soft,*  
he said. In that moment, we both saw  
longing. Not love or lust but longing  
for a world where one man can touch  
another's hair, and this makes me  
remember our old friend who didn't  
make partner at the most august  
of law firms—back in '92,

was it? I tell my wife, *It was because she was a bulldagger.*  
I still see her, flat shoes, black pants, close-cropped hair. *No*, my wife says, *she isn't at all.* And I don't know how to tell her, *yes, she is, it is just you are more so*, but it doesn't matter because today my wife is at the pinnacle of her career, bulldagger or not.  
Glen, we made this world.  
Changed what it means to be queer.  
Not you and I alone  
but together with thousands.  
Now I look around and see the results of our labor and at last I am no longer tired.  
*I know we have some difficult days ahead but it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop.*  
Now, I dwell in the valley.  
*Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place* but here at the airport you near fifty, ribbing me about forty, we are both surprised to be alive and don't even ask about those from the past to not review what we have lost when there is so much we have gained. The world has changed since we were friends.  
We meet at an airport.  
Once we were the match.  
Once we were the flames.

### **III.**

## ONE EXPLANATION

Elaine's family owned a Chinese restaurant in this dump, redneck town thirty minutes away from Ann Arbor—I can't remember the name—but I'd have starved without it. Elaine hated white men who dated Asian women. She'd see the despised couples on campus—always frat boys with gorgeous Chinese or Japanese women (occasionally Filipino, rarely Thai or Malay). She'd approach them and say, *Do you like Chinese pussy? Is it better? More exotic? Is that what you like about Asian women?* Then she would turn on the women, *You are being exploited. Reject the whites.* It was daring. Uncomfortable. The couples, mortified, but silent as if what she said was true. Elaine was always angry. That's what I liked about her. At first, she only dated Asian men, and then, only Asian men who had never been with a white woman. A friend of mine was Japanese-American, his girlfriend, white. She hated them. Later, he married a white woman; now they have a baby who is beautiful. I send them holiday cards and postcards when I travel to places like Thailand where I walk the streets and, emboldened by my completed Hep series, eat food from all of the vendors even the one woman who offers to kill and cook a chicken for me. She holds the caged chicken with the staring chicken and says, *Cheap, cheap.* I have never been that close to something alive I could eat. I buy vegetable dumplings and pay her more bahts than she asks. This prompts her again to offer the chicken. It is raining. I walk to the international telephone booth, and call my wife. She is angry about work. *They treat me like shit. I'm just another house nigger to them.* We talk, her anger softens to loneliness. I am sick from a cold, tired from jet lag and hours of touring ancient wats. I want to eat chicken but not freshly slaughtered; I want chicken with sweet and sour sauce back in Belleville—that was the name of the town!—at the China King Express—right off the freeway. I haven't talked to Elaine in years. I want her to be angry and fierce and righteous—things I am no longer, but she, too, may be feeding on something new.

## ALTUN HA

You are walking among Mayan ruins.  
Awakened again from incessant American  
amnesia you remember: great civilizations rise  
and fall and rise again and they are not all white  
and they are not all centered in Europe and they  
all leave some remains. You marvel at hundreds  
of steps stacked up to platforms in the sky.  
Here a coliseum with perfect acoustics—Listen—  
Listen—There a room with no windows where  
they did surgeries—then the limestone cooling room  
to manage temperature and air flow  
efficiently in 300 and 400 A. D. You look  
at the jungle. Its edges don't encroach as if held  
by the power of the memory though it is clear  
they are mowed by the local Creoles  
(here half black, half British – not French  
as in the States). Young men gather  
with small crocodiles, snappish mouths immobilized  
with rubber bands. Holding them they say  
*want to touch? want to touch?* and *picture?*  
*picture? picture?* Your guide tells you  
how the Mayans created girls' perfectly round faces:  
two pieces of wood placed over and under  
a newborn's head. The forehead and the nose  
pressed flat, so, too, the skull bones  
as they began to fuse. You are shocked  
then murmur to yourself, this is how it always  
is our: bodies manipulated for beauty.  
Two weeks later, back home in the States,  
you will take your Iranian carpet to be cleaned.  
This carpet you love, made of goat hair.  
The Persian man who cleans and repairs fine rugs  
for rich people will tell you derisively, "It is goat wool.  
Wool, not hair." You will say, *I know*. He will say,  
"These women in the villages just use it  
because they have nothing else." He will say,  
"Your rug is not of good quality or high value."  
You know. All we make in life is from what  
we have around us. Much is not of high value.  
Still we tie small knots on goat hair,  
still we press our faces flat.

## PLUMBING

When the regulator valve  
springs a leak after Thanksgiving,  
I turn off the water main  
and the hot-water heat.  
My wife and I buy gallon jugs  
of water, a bushel of wood  
to bunker down.

In the chill of our house,  
she learns new things about me:  
I can wash dishes in a pot  
with only a half gallon  
of water, heated on the stove,  
and wait until we're out  
in public for restrooms.

I, too, learn a thing or two.  
With small pieces of wood,  
large logs, newspaper,  
a stack of New Mexican  
pinyon, she can stroke  
the fire's flames all day long  
until I become jealous.

For two days, we cook  
elaborate dinners for the benefit  
of oven heat. Then, Sunday  
evening, amid steaming  
vegetables, basting meat,  
rising bread, baking brownies,  
she looks at me and says,

*I miss my mother.*

The household chill reminds  
her of the world's warmth  
when mother was alive.  
Now, orphaned at forty-one,  
she is in our frigid house,  
alone because I was

just enjoying this time,  
waiting for Monday morning  
when the plumber will arrive.  
He fixes everything.  
For an entire week, our house  
smells: pinyon and grief,  
the many ways we make love.

## THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

It seemed like a reasonable answer  
to the macabre question, *How do you  
want to receive the cremains?* Fed-ex.  
Previously returned remains from  
cremated pets were shipped safely,  
sealed in plastic and nestled in mimicked  
McDonald's Big Mac containers.  
We set them on the mantle.  
Three weeks later, these arrive  
at my office—a large bulky box.  
I sign while the carrier dusts  
his hands on his trousers. That night,  
not quite tipsy from a shot of bourbon,  
my dining companion and I heft the box  
to carry it to the car. Gray grit  
on our hands. We open the cardboard  
to see the biodegradable urn, designed  
for floating ashes on water, flopped,  
inside uncovered. Humans are not  
entirely ash to ash, dust to dust,  
our bones, our teeth do not burn easily,  
that's what my father told me.  
He knew more of bodies, of what  
remains from when my sister died.  
Alive she always insisted, *Cremation  
then into the ocean.* My father said,  
*Tell your children,* but as if she knew  
her immature ova would never reach  
conception she repeated: *Cremation...*  
So, we knew what to do, although  
my mother resisted—*a grave, a headstone.*  
In grief, she insisted. So my father  
split my sister in their basement  
and sent one half to the Pacific and  
one half to the public cemetery in Saginaw.  
Although now, my mother-in-laws ashes  
spilled in corrugation with a gray cloud settling  
on the floor of my office, I know my sister,  
dispersed in the Pacific and buried  
underground, also has settled, unintentionally,  
in the basement of my parent's house.

**SEEING ANNIE LIEBOVITZ'S A PHOTOGRAPHER'S LIFE 1990-2006**

When I walk in already I am angry  
about Susan “the long-term friend.”  
Another for whom the study of gay men,  
fashionable, but pussy-licking lesbians  
are to be denied. Even the obituary  
reads only, *she is survived by a son  
and a sister*. Three years later,  
Annie concedes, “Yes, you could say we were lesbians,  
though it is not a word Susan would use—”  
and here she pauses, “or approve.”  
So when I see Susan in the small photos,  
snapshots amid outsized glitz and poised glamour  
enlarged to be bigger than any one life,  
she peers out at me as if from a small  
cabinet or cupboard, cramped,  
not even large enough to be a closet,  
while Annie pins these pictures in a barn,  
listening to Rosanne Cash, crying. She lives on.  
So I soften to Susan. Her cancer-wizened face,  
shaved head, tired eyes. I want her bookshelves,  
filled and ordered. I want her trip to France and Jordan,  
but most of all, I want her to use my words,  
which now she will never do.

## ELIJAHU HA-NAVI<sup>1</sup>

I imagined Elijah a middle-aged castrati  
until I read and find him to be young, virile  
like Ajax—the strong man of the Heebs.

I think of my own father—the strong man  
of my tribe. In the basement he bench-pressed  
on a small, red carpet remnant; in summer,

he'd lift weights midday in the cool cellar.  
He'd emerge red-faced, glistening with sweat.  
Wintertime, warmed by the furnace, he'd heft

late at night. Below, his life was fully his own—  
no intrusions from daughters or wife.  
Now far away from my parents' home

the iron men in my life lift weights,  
carve pects, quads and glutes in large, airy gyms.  
They cruise and shower and shave

in well-lit, public spaces. I think of my father  
in our dark basement – building the body  
of a gay man in stark isolation.

For him, I take comfort in Elijah.  
Perhaps with his Elijahic body,  
G-d will give him two tries—

the Phoenician princess Jezebel, then  
an Adamic lover. Maybe after forty days  
in the wilderness, after being fed by ravens

in the desert canyon, G-d will say to my father,  
*Elijahic one, Arise and eat,*  
and perhaps with strength from the second meal,

my father will walk through the desert  
of public gyms, bars, quiet dinner clubs  
until he reaches the mount at Horeb

---

<sup>1</sup> Hebrew for Elijah the Prophet

where a “still, small voice” may ask,  
*Ma lekha po, Eliyahu? Why are you here, Elijah?*  
And he may answer, *I am no better than my fathers.*

But if I am asked of him,  
*Ma lekha po, Eliyahu?*  
I will translate,

*Who are you, here, Elijah?*  
and I will reply, *You are my father.*  
I could want no better.

## FOR JUDITH REMEMBERING GRACE PALEY AND JANE COOPER

You are sad about losing two  
one generation ahead of you,  
and I read your grief on email  
but don't feel it with you.  
Yes, I'm sad—both poets I love—  
but also relieved. This is death  
in its natural order, as it should be:  
women my grandmother's age die,  
and women like me scramble  
to buy black stockings for funerals,  
because we don't keep mourning  
in supply. For me, it wasn't  
always like this, which I can't tell you—  
it would be like last night at dinner  
when I was short with a friend.  
She was outraged about people  
protesting dead soldiers' funerals  
*How can people protest a funeral?*,  
she asked, as if this was new,  
and even though she's on my side  
I was harsh, *Americans are dying  
in Iraq because we embrace the gays*,  
which is true at least for the protesters,  
but my words were caustic,  
they startled her. I didn't care;  
the sudden attention  
because of the soldiers,  
my friend's new-found outrage,  
where was the anger  
when my friends died?  
James, bloated even in the casket,  
skin stretched over hardened flesh.  
I remember his mother's shock—  
two weeks earlier, she learned  
her son had AIDS, was gay.  
At the funeral home—the only one  
in the city that would embalm “the AIDS”—  
we learn of James' brother  
two years earlier, also dead, AIDS, gay.  
Before his final coma, James  
was still working, everyday in our office;  
planning a benefit, attending meetings,

but wasting, wasting away  
so with him we all ate like crazy.  
I gained ten pounds and  
at his funeral, walking behind suited,  
white-gloved pall-bearers,  
the black stockings I'd already worn  
to three funerals that month  
chafed my left inner thigh.

## HAWK SUMMER

I've seen it a few times  
scampering across the street  
to the creek or rushing

back into the underbrush.  
Worried he won't find  
enough to eat, my neighbor

is feeding this fox; ground beef  
on her back porch. Next door  
he is feasting on the herbs,

digging up each plant,  
eating only the leaves  
he desires. Driving,

I watch for his lithe body,  
yellow eyes. I see him  
only at twilight.

Hawks have nested.  
I search the skies to see them fly;  
by mid-August their brood

should be soaring.  
We are warned to care  
for small animals,

confine them inside.  
My summer is filled with wild  
imaginings. I talk to my aunt

on the telephone surrounded  
by deep purple. Her husband  
is having an affair

with his brother's wife.  
There is nothing I can say,  
nothing she can do,

to make this landscape easier.  
I tell her about the hawk,  
I tell her about my neighbor's fox.

## **IV.**

## DE FIDELIS

1.

In Michigan, September dusk is chilly.  
We linger in the parking garage  
of the downtown Millender Center.  
Wind whips through concrete;  
the sun sets. Cars cruise by, we identify  
makes and models from internal  
combustion, the squeal of turning tires,  
running engines. Our ears, expert  
at this exercise. Neither wants to leave  
the other. Polite conversation exhausted,  
we turn to taboo. What we dream,  
secret hopes, aspirations. We've touched  
only once when you brushed my hand  
to light a cigarette—but I tell you,  
*you must stop coming in my dreams.*  
Risky words. Twenty-four hours later,  
each leaving other lovers, we begin life together.

2.

I am wearing a cream, cable sweater,  
cotton with a cowell. It is my favorite.  
First worn from the wash; line dry  
required; often, too eager, I wear  
it damp. Still shapen and knit tight,  
it is formal for meetings and  
comfortable for gathering with friends.  
Two years later, this sweater, a sweet  
reminiscence of our fall together,  
until you spill oily food—salad dressing,  
perhaps, a creamy alfredo. The sweater,  
destroyed. No wash can clean it.  
I never find a proper replacement.

3.

The first year even the best-made  
beds in cold climes lie naked.  
Sheets and covers cast aside.  
Oil companies make profits  
on the backs of new lovers.  
Once we would wake at five,  
talk through sunrise, then rush to work.  
Home again, we resume  
what we regard as our real lives.  
Later, early sojourns turn from intimate  
discoveries to shared anxieties.  
Phone calls pierced darkness  
with bad news and pillows,  
matted or lumpy, absorb  
more tears than muffled screams.  
For a while, our angry cat, Gertie, pees  
on the bed despite constant litter  
cleaning and multiple vet trips.  
Sometimes, between three and four  
a.m. on a break from her game  
of bridge, your dead mother visits,  
I tell her about our life as if it matters.  
She strokes your hair and smiles.

4.

Your mother remembers  
meeting your father  
when she was nineteen,  
just days from prom queen,  
she tells me, *He was stunning,*  
*tall, athletic, beautiful hair,*  
*and you should have seen*  
*his socks—cashmere—*  
Last Christmas, you gave me  
three pairs—black, argyle, cream cable.  
They are perfect. Soft, warm.  
But after three washes,  
the heel is threadbare.  
I imagine your mother  
discovering this early in her marriage.  
I wonder, what did she find

to hold that lasts?

5.

This is never captured by Hollywood:  
anxiety after each of you leave  
another to be together.  
We spend years worried  
about each new friend or  
acquaintance. New evening activities—  
volunteering for political campaigns,  
card clubs, poetry readings—  
any late night out, leaves one  
at home to wonder,  
will the day come  
when we rehash the well-trod line,  
*this is the best day of my life,*  
and it becomes the worst of mine?

6.

My anxiety, compounded  
by family history—  
her father's first child born  
six months and one year  
after he married her mother  
(this was ten years before  
she was adopted) and  
a quarter century before she,  
at fourteen, picked up  
the telephone to overhear  
her father's amorous imbroglio.  
Two years later, her parents divorce.  
She declares to me her fealty  
but I worry, what if infidelity  
is passed on in families?

7.

We buy rings on a lark  
near Valentine's Day  
though we do not save them as gifts,  
just get them sized.  
Mine, a permanent resident on my right finger;  
Hers, an occasional embellishment.  
When asked about marriage,  
I hold out my left hand, bare.  
We say, we'll marry when it's legal in our state.  
This makes me feel perfectly safe.  
Then I hear of European tradition  
that adorns the right hand  
with the wedding ring.  
I think of all the continentals  
considering me married.  
Customs are always easy.  
Still, with no band—  
no initials and date inscribed—  
we date our existence like scientists  
testing for radiation emissions,  
dating half-lives.

8.

The hardest year was seven,  
not an itch but an irritation  
that persisted.  
I resented the repeated  
need to shop,  
run a household,  
mostly the way she enjoys these things.  
I wanted time for myself.  
now I see people at this point  
in their marriage, they ask  
how did it pass? The truth  
makes me look bad, but  
I tell them. My lover's mother  
was sick and suddenly her death  
was in sight and I, not wanting  
to be the sort of woman who leaves,  
I tried to stop complaining,  
(she will tell you I didn't, but I tried),  
I cleaned and made arrangements

for over a dozen trips. Easter egg  
baskets for mother and daughter.  
We all knew how the story would end.  
It did. Then I couldn't be the woman  
who left another grieving and by the time  
the veil of loss had lifted  
we were honeymooning again.

9.

When my sister reads  
my father's email on  
Christmas Eve, she calls me  
the next day, angry.  
Her voice, drawn, thin, dark.  
She demands, *did you know?*  
*Did you know?* As though  
we were in some secret fraternity  
with every member carefully  
vetted, reviewed, and approved.  
She doesn't understand  
how capacious the questions of sex.  
How it seems almost accidental—  
you share a cabin at summer camp,  
you meet a woman about whom you've dreamed.  
I imagine it this way for my father,  
meeting someone willing in his sixties.  
I hope for the same virility  
but my sister is just seething in anger  
and my mother in shock and disbelief  
and I have to admit  
I never expected infidelity  
to visit my family.

10.

Growing up too young to be  
a child of the sixties, I am aware  
that sex in the seventies was different  
somehow special, more exciting  
and, aided by powerful antibiotics,  
without fear or precautions.  
While my homosex was always tempered  
by the specter of premature death,  
some recall sex without inhibitions.  
In this tradition, I think of sex in the seventies  
with longing, even yearning,  
until it becomes not sex in the seventies  
but sex in one's seventies,  
a concept I'm forced to consider  
when the beloved uncle  
tells us he's been unfaithful to his wife  
of thirty-some years.  
More than relatives, they were correlative:  
marriage and happiness  
retirement and joy  
lover and companion.  
Now my aunt, reduced to mistrust and misgivings,  
confides, "He's addicted to the oral sex."  
This makes me worry,  
someday the same accusation could be flung at me,  
but for now he's called  
to account for his transgressions.

11.

I quip to friends—  
it's inspiring to see the untamed desire  
that propagates among the retired;  
we'd like to imagine ourselves  
horny at sixty-seven,  
getting it on with a new one at sixty-eight,  
committing cunnilingus at sixty-nine,  
all just foreplay to the wild sex of the seventies.  
Gales of laughter erupt and spill all around,  
but it's not true.  
We're moralistic in our thirties and forties,  
as shocked by their new adolescence  
as they once purported to be by ours.

12.

Now I wonder about Hugh's visits  
to Thailand—R&R from the military—  
I think of the person who gave me  
a foot massage the week I was there.  
He—or she—I couldn't tell—rubbed  
my toes, my heels, my calves,  
proceeded up my thighs  
until I opened my eyes.  
*Thank you*, I said. Then she—or he—  
I confess, I like to know the gender,  
it is central to my sense of orientation—  
stopped. Did Hugh not simply say,  
*Thank you?*

13.

When did we first demand exclusivity?  
Who deemed it so?  
Surely not G-d, the primordial polyamor.  
She loves us all.  
And Adam had the inaugural “starter” marriage  
leaving Lilith to enjoy her later days as a singleton.  
The Torah tells the truth—  
lust and love break down to betrayal—  
it mocks us: you've been forewarned  
as though forewarned is forearmed  
as though there are armaments  
to wage this war beyond our flesh,  
our feeble hearts, minds and tongues.

14.

For years I wanted to be my aunt,  
direct, plain-spoken,  
clear about priorities  
beginning with family but extending to a wide array  
of social and ethical responsibilities.  
And you, my beloved, I fancied you, Hugh,  
enjoying the flurry of activities,  
and even the occasional nattering.  
One year, our aunt and uncle took six cruises.  
They've visited every port on the planet,  
but travel didn't bring them closer.  
We all fear it may never be enough:  
miles, apologies, moral accounting.  
We watch the unraveling of family,  
knowing now we can be neither—he nor she.  
We hold to one another  
though never too tightly.

15.

Everything that has brought me  
to this moment in my life  
every movie I've seen  
every book I've read  
every philosophy I've espoused  
every ideology I've studied  
tells me I should hate  
this uncle, my father,  
my beloved's father,  
but I can't. These old men.  
Ineffably human.  
I am them.  
Each day, I walk out the door.  
It is a choice.  
How I return.

16.

Once I believed marriage was received  
separate from one's self  
a third thing to which two people could cleave,  
something concrete—a large antique chest  
not finely made, utilitarian,  
the kind the moves from the farmhouse  
to garage to a first apartment  
or the long-lasting sheets, part polyester,  
that keep being given to family members in need.  
But marriage isn't like that  
as much as it's shared,  
it's an individual burden  
or gift—depends on the day—  
like this morning,  
I meet a gorgeous woman  
wearing old Levis, a silk shirt  
and I am my uncle who slept with his brother's wife  
and I am my father with a clandestine lover.  
Indiscretion is easy.  
There is nothing to stop me.  
For today, I make a different choice.