

ABSTRACT

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Drinking Water Out of Streams is a collection of poetry that plays with lyric and narrative form. The collection is arranged with lyric poems surrounding a series of linked narrative poems in the voice of a suburban high school French teacher. These are poems with a subject: both poetic forms weave dark humor, a sense of survival, and joyful social observation through themes of gender, the body, self-destruction, family, and obligation.

DRINKING WATER OUT OF STREAMS

By

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Apple-picking

It was fall, of course.
We were in New England.
Maybe we still lived
in the salt-box house with the slate roof.
He had taken us along the river road
to the Pick-Your-Own farm.
We were picking apples.
He gave me my own basket
though I was six or seven
and he had to carry it for me.
He told me don't pick
Macintosh, they're baking
apples. Their flesh turns to
mush in the mouth.
He nodded at other trees.
Eat from those.
He didn't talk much.
He had large hands
and knew how to pinch
the branch free of fruit.
Farmer's hands, our mother had said.
There was a dry leaf-star
on each apple bottom.
This is where the apple is sweetest.
He pointed to the deer nudging
over the fallen ones.
The sun went down on one side of the barn.
On the way home, you touched me.
I didn't like it, I don't think. Some cool air
grated my skin. Maybe my knit cap
fell to the car-floor. We could see
his eyes in the rearview mirror.
Stop, he said, which was more
than anyone else had said.
Later, at the house,
he took you by the forearm
into the den. I don't know
what came after that.
I had settled by the window
that overlooked the neighbor's horse
paddock, counting what I had picked
into smaller and smaller piles.

Siste, viator

West Texas, Spring 2003

On the nipple, a light
cherry-blossom
discoloration.
She checks one breast,

then the other, thinks
of their ache & swell,
the hard-egg
on one breast-side.

She puts my hand
to that topography,
the tumor beneath
strata subsiding into a gland.

This is the cancer
she won't call cancer,
though there's already
surgery for a growth

above her right temple.
Blood seeps under
her eyelids though
the surgeon tapes them

shut. In her bedroom,
pictures of the red-brown
mountains. Construction
leaves the desert

a flat, dark scar.
She fingers the oval
where building slabs
were cut. From the tops

of other mountains, she says,
in the good light, it's
almost, but not always,
a lake.

Feminist Health Collective

It would be a lie to say
sometimes she didn't enjoy it,
this, the crowding of her body
by way of his.

There is excitement in it,
and she has yet to let go
of the tension that tightens
the pelvic floor and the unease

that heightens arousal.
Even so, she has already fixed
her way out, a torso twist under
the band of his bicep, down along his back.

The feminist health collective
says during intercourse
all women at times find it difficult to relax,
and therefore, to orgasm.

There are things yet
to worry about—
what, without sex,
they'll be able to talk about later,

how best to hide the bruises
at the gym the next morning,
how to re-assure herself these
were as much her doing as his,

and whether the sperm soon to release
into her vaginal tract
will break their heads upon
the barrier of her diaphragm,

their shells deteriorating
in a cross-spray of spermicide.
But now as he shifts alongside her,
she catches scent of him,

the same scent she remembers
back from underneath the magnolia tree.
They had climbed to the top:

Why? And he could have slid a hand

or two under the cutoff of her shorts,
but no, perched there, he talked of
other things, constellations that they
couldn't see by reason of leaf-cover,

the lowered booms of sails on the bay,
and what he had learned on his last visit
to the college's farm, the cow sick with calf,
his gloved hand opening her tear.

2nd Street Intransitive

Iamb in flight re-arranges the clause. I diagram
the noun phrase, the whole a string of words fitting as one:
adjective made from preposition plus noun.

Then Tense, Aspect, and Modality unmold time.

I must have gone means *I may have gone*, or, I didn't go at all,
but spent all day slotting paper clips into chains.

I miss the simple signs, the tented triangles
breaking clause into phrase, phrase into smaller phrases,
until, at final glance, always a subject, a verb, an endstop.

Every question an inverted statement. Every statement
a spliced skein of meaning. *Synthetic buffalo hides*.

Or, facing the steel-brick skeleton of an old manufacturing plant,
you and me and the flurried snow of Philadelphia, up on a rowhouse deck.

Parse this: Beneath the covers, I fold towards the pillow.

After Dinner

She thought that night he would approach her
the way he approached the lobster they ate for dinner;
one sure reach and then his palm heel against the lobster's
spine, guiding the live carcass to the pot.

Instead he throws the pots and plates into the sink,
turns around to face her, and waits.
“What do you want?” He keeps his clothes on
but has her strip hers off.

“Don't make me say it.”
She blushes beneath her skin.
He stops his hand mid-arc to her breast.
His other hand, she is aware,

five pinpoint on her collar of neck and jaw.
“I want you to say it,” he tells her,
and somehow she does, her mouth gap-jawed
for breath and suction as she is down on her back

on the linoleum. He examines her there,
her breasts flattened on the horizontal,
her stomach drawing back from her hip bones,
her pubic wire resting beneath the dull button of a birthmark.

After a while, after he has found her faults
and claimed them, only then does he touch her,
having her again say what he wants her to say.
If she remembers this later, she will stop what she is doing.

But now even as she feels she thinks
she hates him, the grey-red gap of her cervix,
the contours of vaginal walls, the tissue that makes up her,
opens, and accommodates.

Edison

It took more tries
than expected
to kill the man
Edison was trying to kill.

There was the charred,
pig-roast flesh
under the earlobes,
the short, coarse head-hair

singed to bristle,
and smoke from where
electrode conducted
to scalp and back again.

It was to be proof,
this execution, of direct
current's superiority.
Edison was wrong.

The man cooked
yet remained alive.
This year at Christmas
for the first time

the family gathers
in my little apartment.
They are all here.
I have invited them all,

even him whose form
sometimes still chokes
the container of my sleep.
My youngest cousin,

at least, likes my antique
Christmas lights,
the fat, multi-colored
globes on heavy-gauge

wire. I undo the top
of an old bulb
to show her the filament,
the then carbon,

now tungsten,
wick Edison chose.
She asks me to string
these lights around
her dinner chair,

and though
she will break one or two
bulbs in her usual
table dance of plate

and cup and fork and food,
I do it anyway.
Filament wire, direct current,
colored glass, —happy thought

in the end. He maimed
and maimed, but could not kill.

Drinking Water Out of Streams

Epilogue: Summer Incinerator

Next to the compost heap and the poplar trees, the neighbor's shed of plywood I-beam, oak girder, fuel of drywall and spackle, smokes the August sky. The ChemLawn grass is dead; the cicadas burrow back between layers of tree bark

and the evergreens dip their crowns away from the smoke. Plastic watering can in his hand, eyesockets shadowed by soot, the neighbor tells us of the brush pile he burned too close to the shed. With his blistered hand, he traces the burn's trajectory.

But I, at the upstairs window with my father's Army binoculars, because it is Saturday and spying is better than grocery shopping, know different. It was the arrival in the middle of the day of a man in a rusty car, midnight blue, but with silver rims,

who let himself through our neighbor's front door with the spare key hid beneath the plaster garden rabbit itching his ear amid the petunias. He disappeared inside and tugged closed the front hall curtains. I don't know what much he took besides the Sunday offering money

clipped to the fridge or whether or not he spooked the family tabby catatonic beneath the loveseat, whether he left all the sterling silver spoons but took his father's gold retirement watch, the few family necklaces, his great Aunt's diamond-and-pearl ring from the safe.

When the fire is out and the shed not more than a cement basin and a few two-by-fours,

and you and our neighbor douse the brush with spigot water I climb back upstairs to the window to see what's there: a cul-de-sac, ten houses around an asphalt circle, concrete-form curbs,

brass door-knockers, foot plates on off-white front doors, green hydrangea, and Black-eyed Susans threaded through beds of orange-plated marigolds.

1. Isabel

In the calm after Hurricane Isabel, when the power's still out,
but the water's been restored, and once again
there's the lumber of pick-up trucks and mini-vans
up and down the development's main drag,
I snap the leash on the dog's collar. He hasn't seen

grass in days, and had squatted for relief under the sheltered
corner of the back porch. I nod good-bye to my mother
busy plucking branches from the first-floor screens.
Now, at the early start of her dementia, she makes me
a daily to-do list that I daily recycle, cuts my lunch sandwich

into quarters though I eat salad with bread, directs the dog
as he moves about the kitchen. Seems, to the rest of the world,
normal. Everywhere is mild destruction: an oak trunk caving
the roof of a car, the fray of downed power-line flowering
the sidewalk, or brush, that, breaking through the cellar window,

dams the intake filter of a sump-pump. And so the lives
of a few families' basements are hung out to dry: carpets black,
frothy with hurricane mold, laundry browned by garden silt,
the vacuum-packed contents of a downstairs freezer.
They'll eat well tonight, what's been sealed.

Rounding the cul-de-sac, the dog pulls our way towards
four and five and seven year-olds, a ten year-old or two,
who make a scatter-plot of the backyard in their bright
super-hero t-shirts and downy jackets as they shuttle
from their fathers to the woods and back again,

twigs in hand. This is what they'll remember: the setting of beach chairs
in a horse-shoe on the back lawn in September, the fallen
façade of their friend's house the brick of their barbecue.
Tonight they'll chew steak, lick marshmallow from emergency
chocolate bars, and someone, a new scout mother, maybe,

will start a round of Kumbaya as she sips Bailey's and camp coffee
from the thermos of her across the cul-de-sac neighbor. I'm tempted
to join them, to spend this last surreal day among open carnage,
broken trees, white-foam storm litter, but there's pills
to dose and grind into powder, and the way the bed needs

to be tucked in just so, the room laid out with the water
glass near, but not too near, her pink, ballet-weight slippers
tucked beneath the bed frame, while the bed lamp casts
the glass's rippled blue out over the sheets the way
an aquarium does, in sloppy, melodious waves, before

she can settle into sleep. I'm young to know this,
how my mother courts ease from sleep, but then
she's young to have it so, that at night the ping of acorns
on the house siding culls storm, flood, surge, rattlesnakes
& rooftops, how the Southern copperheads had

nowhere to go but the house peaks, bellies on fiberglass
shingles flexing toward human flesh—But no, *maman*, we're days
and days north of the people you saw on television, I swear—
I'm young, too, to know the best way, in her panicked nights,
to position my ear far from the door, close to the flank of the dog.

2. Wandering Orbit

In the end, after an hour or so of deliberation, they call me.
“We weren’t sure you’d be here,” one my mother’s friends
says. There’s a jolt of phone static. None of us speak.

They’re imagining a silence transported
by tons of fiber-optic sub-ocean cable,
cadences of the not-said shuffling across sand bars

and sea floor, tickling the hulls of oil tankers,
sting rays, but it’s not. I’m on a land line, an hour away,
folding laundry on an American afternoon in the American way,

as liquid fabric softener spills an electric baby blue
against a white plastic agitator to the click-roll of the dryer drum.
“You’re not in Paris?” a different friend asks.

No, I’m here, in an apartment complex basement,
with the air unit’s condensate bubbling the Sienna paint.
Upstairs and outside, the city: the pedal of high

and low-top sneakers, the soft sugar-smell
of pretzels and cherry blossoms, the friable,
filled-in swamp land a patchy ornamental lawn.

It’s only a question of packing a bag,
herding the dog into the car, for what the doctors
call a light, early-onset stroke. “I’ll go,” I say.

And there, the tether of strip malls and subdivisions,
post-war, pre-fab houses, striped, chemically-enhanced lawns.
Her’s is the house at the foot of the cul-de-sac, beige

with caramel shutters, a chain of morning glories
working its way up the light post, white mouths
leeches from violet color. I park, get out, jiggle

the key I’m surprised I have, and open the door to not
the usual dry, cool air, but the smell of burnt edges, seared
house paint and drywall. I let the dog go first, to hound the scents

of kitchen—the regular banana hook & bread box—the new,
ruined backsplash above the stove. There, a paisley pattern of smoke,
char, from the moment when blood and blockage

shunted in her brain and the tea towel she held
slipped into the hottest, bluest part of the flame.
The split face of the oak-lined cabinet door—

what she grabbed as she fell. I could choose
to stay here just a while, deal with the lawyers,
set up a visitation schedule, pick a place for her to go.

She's got friends, church; she'd be taken care of.
But there's a jangle of collar and tags. The dog's finishing
his rounds of trash can, pantry, the mud-room's bagged, sorted laundry

to come back and sit awhile on the small, woven yellow carpet
I've never liked, but he doesn't seem to mind, returning again
and again from his wandering orbit to that prickled sun.

3. Playground Rules, Summer Bible School

Outside the lollipop red doors of Fellowship Hall,
the fourth and fifth graders we have brought outside
scatter along the meadow of the parking lot, basketballs and children
spinning in concentric circles over gravel-puckered asphalt.

Your son, by the patch of dead grass under the jungle gym,
inserts elbow macaroni from the class art project
into his nose and ear openings, leaving the curled ends out
so he has two lines of hard snot to show the girls.

In your twinset and bluejeans, you smile as he pulls
a ten year-olds' hair and grinds her purple Powderpuff scrunchy
in the mud behind the swings. You settle your hands
in your jean pockets and say *Isn't he smart?* This isn't a question.

After this, I'm supposed to declare *Oh, MIT would be lucky to have him!*
but for Pete's sake, he's eleven and has no social skills.
He doesn't read because you've told him children are molested behind library stacks.
So I say *Yes, he will do very well at community college before he quits.*

To this, you wait only a second before you call me a bitch, a stuck-up whore.
To be irritating, I point up to the roof of Fellowship Hall
that's casting a soft shadow over the playground. *We're not technically
inside the church, but we're under God's umbrella, and He still heard you.*

But now Cindy, a second-grader too old for regular accidents
tugs my shirtsleeve and whispers the breathy secret of an eight year-old
who knows better the feel of pressure that builds down below.
She stops and leads me into the catacomb dampness of the basement hall

where I will find her a new set of pink pants, hang her soiled ones up to dry,
and wonder if I should perhaps, apologize—really, I think, Amelia's not that bad—
as Cindy hovers the toilet-end of the stall, flushing, then flushing again for good,
saying she knows, her Mommy told her, what she chooses not to learn.

4. A Strip Mall Love Story

Today Andre from junior French class scans through my tampons at the CVS. Snapping open a plastic bag, he blushes the way he does when he tries but fails to round his lips and tongue when saying *un fouq*. *Mme*—have you been to the grocery store yet? *En français*, Andre, I tell him as he thumbs the magnetic strip of my credit card. *Est-ce que tu*, he starts. I mean, *est-ce que VOUS allez au super marché... déjà vu?* I sigh, motion to the receipt he has yet to give me. No. I haven't been. Ah, he says, ah. Andre, I say, thinking of the shopping I've left to do: *revenez aux moutons*. *Oui, Mme*, he replies, and on the back of my receipt he scribbles something, then seals his note with a fold and a dab of spit. I don't have the heart to tell him I keep and collate my receipts, so now after picking out lemon asparagus and fingerling potatoes, marinated pork tenderloin for dinner, I'm off to the floral department to buy a daisy from Ashley for Ashley, to slip under her lunch bag when she's not looking along with Andre's new, non-receipt-backed note. This one he spent ten minutes re-drafting on clean ticker paper where he chose to quote not Baudelaire, Voltaire, or Rilke, and definitely not *Mme Bovary*, but Sir-Mix-A-Lot, to tell Ashley she's got nice back. Forget those other girls, does she want to hang later?

5. How This All Got Started

As he glides into my classroom just after the break bell rings to tell me his marching band, no—excuse him, his *bande de promenade*, won first place at Miss America last week, I don't congratulate him the way I know he wants me to with one of those hugs where my breast bunches against his bicep and his tie gets a little askew before I offer to buy him a drink at Friday faculty happy hour. There, he will protest "no, let me" and buy me a Malibu Bay Breeze instead though really what I want is a Jack & Coke, a shorter skirt, stilettoed heels, and better company. But since he is here in the foresquare of my classroom smiling such an earnest smile I incline my head and smile too and he smiles back again before he leaves, no doubt to return to the sub-terrain of the band room.

This is where he will tinker with his marching pattern software, and if they make it to Seaworld next year, the tubas will form a nice whale waterspout. And once he has arranged and re-arranged the winds, the percussion, the brass, with his syncopation of computer mouse and keys, he re-tapes all his batons while reading the freshly arrived scores with which he plans to win State,

but now a tenth-grader, his second-worst oboist, slips through the terrarium doors of the band room to ask him how to wet, fold, and carve her new reed, and he stops, marking his place in the score with a Miss America guitar pick before he takes the instrument from her, gently, palms up, as if she has offered him an incomplete, but valuable child.

6. Cette classe est merde

In the last few days of bomb scares
Margaret who has a deaf sister
teaches the class sign language during lockdown.
They ask permission to sign—it isn't French.
I lie and tell them *le mouvement est universel*.

Between the rattle of locker doors
and the *whump-whump* of police dogs pouncing on weak, institutional steel,
Margaret teaches us the usual things: *girl, I love you, no,*
yes, fuckface; but then, too, *sea turtle*, hand on top of hand,
both thumbs down in the tandem rotation of sea flippers.

For my part, I tell the class about the Quakers, how their motto
is “swim upstream,” which to most of us means rebellion,
but to them is submission to the will of God, a calling to turn around
and do things differently. “Think about it,” I say, and pause,
as if I have told them something significant.

As the dogs and their handlers enter our room
to sniff for fertilizer explosives gluing together the pages of Molière,
José, my favorite minor trouble-maker, rolls his eyes,
though I can tell he has pulled his hands and legs inside the frame of desk
and that the nervous tick of his pen cap means something—

This tick isn't because he has just finished paring his desk with a Army knife,
laminat curls delicately scraped away to form *Cette classe est merde*,
Mme boît le pipi et elle l'aime. No, this tick means something more,
something most likely about the code red we're under right now
and the friends he used to hang with before he joined the soccer team.

Though it's probably a mistake not to, and bombs are serious things
with serious consequences (me fired or all of us dead), I say nothing.
Weeks later, when mid-October has grown unusually cold
I take the dog for a walk around the school. The oak-line that separates
school and subdivision is down to its last under-layers of leaves.

He's there in front of the goal, shaking the cold out of his fingers
though they're not what he needs right now.
The second-string defensive man has snapped his ankle
and so José, bench-warmer and Gatorade-fetcher all season,
faces the offensive line.

I tell the dog to sit so we can watch awhile
from behind the chain link that borders the field.
I think of José's composition two weeks back, one of the
rare ones he decided to turn in on time, how he explained
he had decided he was going to the Naval Academy;

He was tired of all this juvenile bullshit.
But to get in you have to make it at least one year on a Varsity sport
and no, *faire du bowling* doesn't count. So that's where he was,
playing soccer because they needed someone on the team.
He hated it, but he was staying.

It isn't quite what I expected from José, who, last year, spent more time
"chatting" in administration than learning his particles.
He'll need sponsorship by a congressman, letters and letters of recommendation.
José possesses a fluent understanding of French for his level of study.
He is not afraid to test his language skills in unfamiliar and diverse settings.

The ref blows his whistle; it shrills. The other team in dark blue
skims the ball across the bank of dead turf towards the goal,
towards José scratching his socked calf with his cleat tine,
towards me fiddling the yarn loops of my mittened hands
and the dog dragging his ear wells in the dust of a leaf pile.

José is slowly moving now, his legs captured in the movement
of real soccer players, the lithe cheetah-run in which flesh and fabric blur.
He is headed to intercept the players he knows will pass him,
knows will leave him waving his arms after the ball in the wrong quadrant of the
field—
a fish caught in a shrinking tidal pond, snapping his body in faith of a rogue wave.

I turn away now. I don't need to know what happens.
My mother is at home, alone, like she often is, and I cut short our walk for once
to scuttle back from the brisk, open-aired path the dog and I would have chosen
(broods of squirrels, sap-ready trees, molted pine needles), to the asphalt path home,
the plastic shutters, the dry, humid-less air my mother prefers to breathe.

7. Rue des ordures

When in February the school hermetically seals
in three inches of Mid-Atlantic ice, the upstairs science wing bathroom
clogs; what follows is a light brown outpour that trickles down
through the vents and into the school's central hall,
past the blue lockers, to where the foundation has compressed
into a holding reservoir just beyond my classroom door.

On these days we learn the words for excrement and urine
as we wait for the janitor and his wet-vac to arrive
to suction a pathway through the sewage. Otherwise,
we're here for the long run, quarantined though the rest of the school
has already been sent home and I have already told them
all I can remember of Rabelais and his giant, so tall

he could fill a courtroom, and that would be useful now,
to carry us out and over what the janitor by now has labeled
Caution with one of his yellow plastic signs.

When I have run out of stories, I teach them instead,
dialogues that begin *Maman, j'ai changé mon avis*
à assister l'école Catholique, and letters, *s'il vous plaît*,

Monsieur le Superintendent, corrigez notre situation.

We hear the bang of contractors upstairs, and my students cheer at the sight
of toolbelts on those workers who have ventured down to see the hall.
But as the ice-sheets crack away from the window, the pool only gets larger,
and the janitor leaves to fetch his tallest pair of boots. We are back
to where we were, talking about Rabelais and his indiscrete, bureaucratic monks,

and when that subject's exhausted, I let them spear the cork ceiling tiles
with their graphite pencils, bulls-eye if they hit one of the black indentations.
And when at last the principal appears to tell us we can go home,
it's finally all been sucked into plastic barrels and the county hazmat team
has sprayed bleach and microbes, I leave only to come back again,
this time with the dog, leading him along the tennis courts for his afternoon walk.

In another few years there will be a new school on a new site
and this middle school-cum-high school-cum-cesspit will be razed;
this will be what it once was: a field mosaic—broken green and blue glass bottles,
the shiny red and silver foil of condom and candy wrappers, dull aluminum soda can
tabs,
and sprouted among this all, the white sepals of chickweed canopying
the cooling feces of neighborhood dogs.

8. Morning Announcement

When in one of those few before-school hours
faculty/staff meetings they say *counseling will be available*
you know, for once, that this is not a question
of breaking your *talon* during post-Columbine terrorist training

or inspecting the irises of your honors students' eyes
for prescription drug dependence, but death.
And as our principal passes out Kleenex and mourning policies,
I imagine the red-blue aspirate of squad car lights in the cul-de-sac,

how the neighbors would have gathered on their front porches
with old army binoculars slung around their necks,
how they would have directed their young children
to stay inside and lock the windows in case there were guns.

Then there would be the splatter trail through the first-floor,
the path by which he bludgeoned first his mother,
then his sister with the flat of a cast-iron skillet.
The blood coagulated into the tile floor cracks.

The legs of the table chairs his sister pulled into a makeshift fortress
would have splintered from battery; the sheetrock cleft
where her mother's head had hit the wall. The knife
was an afterthought; they were already mostly dead.

And his arrest—a patch or two of white t-shirt must have shown
through the branches of the ornamental pear,
the late-evening shadows patterning the plain cotton
that shuddered as he dropped to the ground.

During class, my students ask how it happened.
I know nothing.

9. The Yet-Alive

This morning, a long short-burst buzz
from the intercom. There's a message waiting
at the front office in the middle of my particle quiz
(*proposer à, demander de, prête à porter*).

I want to ignore it—so far, there's only been
a light shuffle of pen and copy pages, and the class,
on the whole, has sunk low to their desktops, minty,
8 a.m. breath phosphor on inexpensive notebook paper.

I wait and hope this is the last buzz, that the secretary's
made a mistake, that none of my students' cars
block the red-lead line of fire lane. It's not a mistake.
The buzz comes again, and louder. This time,

someone in the back row groans as the rest of the class
throws down their pens. I wave them back to work,
pick up the office-to-classroom phone. I hear Cynthia,
the frank front office switchboard attendant,

then my mother, in rare form. She's cheerfully raspy
as she tells me she's at County General, as she back talks
the young male nurse easing a butterfly needle into her vein.
She wants me to come get her—it's a pain, she knows,

but they can't release until I've come. You mean won't,
I think, but I'm off the phone, and already Mr. Wizard,
my student's favorite white-haired sub, makes his way
down the blue-tile tunnel from the faculty lounge

to my classroom where my French 3's scan the walls
for particle clues, hoping that somewhere on the *Astèrix*
and Snoopy posters, there's a hint of what preposition
follows what noun, and what rules order this language.

At the hospital, I find myself outside her curtain
practicing the speech I feel I've made a hundred times before—
Maman, no, Mom, I know you're trying to help.
And yes, those leaves that you wanted to rake

before you tripped on the aluminum spokes
and the dog wandered into the neighbor's yard
should have already been bagged & brought to the curb.
I will never, can never take care of things the way you did.

There will never be another compost heap of eggshells
and onion peels, a front hedge so carefully pruned, or freshly
stenciled numbers on the mailbox—it's enough that every year
I sand and spray it. *Mais Maman, vous avez les années plus.*

Here, she'll scowl. Tell me, speak English. But enough of this.
I open up the curtains, step inside. There she is, propped up
by way of hospital bed, ribs bruised, ankle wrapped in a pressure bandage,
abrasions tinting the pale skin of her forearms. Her body's tilted back

against the bed, neck extended, shoulders back—what effort
it must take right now to keep her injured ribs aligned. I sit down on the chair
beside her bed and there's a moment in which, before I take her hand,
my mind goes back to my classroom.

Mr. Wizard is opening the textbook, cracking its spine;
post-quiz, they'll read François Villon, the poem where
the picked-over carrion corpses of dead prisoners
speak to a man who's yet to hang. It's a dreary text

to assign on quiz day, but I wasn't thinking when I left.
He'll draw them into a circle, then do what he does best,
mispronouncing all of the words he reads out loud. They'll laugh,
and correct him, and the class period will pass much easier

than if I were there, except for just before the bell rings.
What does it mean? Mr. Wizard wants to know, marking
the page with a neon-colored tab. Someone gets his eyeballs
pecked out, one of them will try. And another—No, there's more.

They're *suspendu* (It's *pendu*, you idiot, comes the call from the back).
And *Madelaine*, the most accurate of the bunch, taps her pencil
against her binder rings. They're dead, she says, and the only guy
who cares is about to die, too. If I were there, I'd correct her,

Criminals, *Madelaine*, not guys, and I'd feel as though
I'd pointed out an important distinction. But back in the hospital,
my mother turns toward me, quiet and a little pale,
the triplicate release form in her hand. She points to the signature box

at the bottom of the form: *patient or patient's guardian*.
I take out a pen and sign, trying not to imagine her
there among the leaf piles as the gulls from the north
catch the draft-wind of the house, their flight feathers

raised high to carry them down into the helipad
of the yard, where the dog, hunched low and close,
foot-pad on her shoulder for protection, or perhaps
for claim, sniffs the yet-alive scent of her body.

10. The Church Window (La Vitrine)

This Sunday I'm not quite sure what to say
as I'm surprised to find my hand raised in the air
during this, the prayer-concerns part of service.
The congregants have all shifted in their pews
so that they are half facing me, half facing the altar,
their shoulders twisted, but their torsos planted forward,
the way all of us learned how to look backwards
in church as children, looking away from, yet facing God.
I take a moment and cough; I don't know what it is
God thinks I should say, why it is I've been called
to put my hand in the air. I've got nothing to say
that won't cause scandal, because, Christians
though we are, we are people, too, and people thrive
on gossip as much as on sustenance, even more so than on prayer.
Yet I'm brought back to a few days ago; we had a day off school
for teacher in-service. For the first time, I ducked out,
played hooky to drive out of the county, into the city
where I parked and filled out the necessary forms,
noted the sign on the ward door: *elopement risk*.
There she was, at the group therapy room window
with a bunch of other girls, smiling.
Her hair was shorter, cropped low and harsh around the ears.
A few staticky hairs poked out from her cowlick.
Her form was bulkier, too, more square—
they must have stopped the hormones.
She's here for the usual reason: she swallowed
a bottle of pills in the school bathroom between classes.
But after drinking liquid charcoal she's hale and whole
except for a lingering stomach ache.
Mme! she calls as I walk closer, her friends parting from her.
I have Mille Bourne. She smiles. *I've been teaching everyone French*.
She shuffles the deck and says a few phrases:
of all my students she's got the best, most precise accent
for someone who's never been outside the U.S.,
and even before she started skipping her hormone replacement therapy,
she always sounded different in French; her voice dropped, got low.
It was strange to hear a girl with long hair and pink sneakers
speak that way, but it happens sometimes, a new person
revealed in a language not their own.
I sit down at the table she's beside and she shows me how to play.
I'm a car—*un petit Citroën*—tearing up the cliff roads of the Côte d'Azur.
She chats as she deals for both of us, telling me about the books
her therapist gave her to read, stories of people like her

who have their gender re-assigned at birth
when no one's sure what gender they should be.
Her therapist looked over her sealed medical records.
At one time she had a small penis as well as the uterus
and ovaries she still has, but this was when she was an infant.
Her parents probably felt they had to make some sort of decision.
They try, she tells me, cutting the deck, but it's hard.
Each time after they come she thinks
of trying to kill herself again, how many Valium
she'd need to steal from the nurse's station
to put herself out for good. They mean well.
Her Mom brought her some of her favorite stuff from home,
but it was all girl stuff, and they're scared
and she needs them to not be scared right now.
I can't help but think of her in a couple years at Marseille
on study abroad. It would have to be Marseille—
she's always been a Comte de Monte Cristo
sailing after his Mércédes, though this time,
it isn't Mércédes le Comte needs, or even the harem girl,
but himself, and I hope this stay in the hospital
is the beginning of the end of her pretending.
I try now to imagine her as a him—a re-emerged Adam's apple,
ragged, bitten fingernail beds, shoulders that haven't changed,
but seem broader, the whole streamlined, amorphous cut
of a teenage boy. I can't quite do it;
the way I've known her for years, with the mannerisms
and stoop of a girl, comes back to me,
but someday, somewhere, I tell myself,
some girl won't mind his not quite completeness,
his extra, useless set of ovaries.
The hem of my pastor's robes brushes against the chancel.
I sigh. I've taken too long. People will ask about me
after service if I wave the pastor away. To be honest,
they will ask me anyway, but if I talk now,
I'll be able to say less to satisfy them,
oh, you know, my mother's illness instead of
I'm worried about a student at school:
she's a him, we just realized.
Judy nods me on like a good pastor should,
letting me take my time as she does with the feeble and the old,
and those who don't talk publicly to God.
But drawing it out a little longer, I look up at the stained glass,
a lighthouse soldered above a craggy shore,
an odd choice for a church window,
but here we are, turning sideways, facing forward,
Beacons of Christ to the world.

11. Post-Partum

At home on the couch a month after the birth,
she writes the remaining shower thank-you notes,
her socked feet up on the coffee table,
her hair tied back from her face with elastic.

The baby, sleeping, is in my lap,
her newborn skin covered by a hypoallergenic onesie.
By now the narrow, torpedo-shape of her head has eased,
her nose and fingers less squalid red and more human pink.

She looks good, my friend who has had her body
torn apart, her perineum sliced and stitched back together,
her pelvic arch permanently grooved
where the baby's head forced under.

The post-birth bleeding has stopped as well;
she can walk normally now, though it's other things she hasn't adjusted to,
like all the Mommy talk, and only the Mommy talk,
which is why I'm here on a Saturday afternoon..

I'm trying hard to come up with things
to entertain her—celebrity gossip I don't usually read,
the story of our mutual friend vomiting on her new father-in-law
at her wedding reception, the latest phrase scratched into the chalkboard,

Mme est chaude, but what I've really got to talk about
is how the other day I forgot to move my car
before marching band practice, when left cars are usually towed,
how there it was in the percussion section, blocking their scatter drill.

Before too long, he directed a few senior boys to release the break
and wheel my car down-lot, who knows how they knew
to ease a rag wire along the door shell to unlatch it.
On the note he stuck under my windshield wiper

he asked me if I'd chaperone the next band competition with him.
He put a few smiley faces and what looks like it could have been a heart
except for he was scrawling this note on the uneven keel of my fender.
I think he's been imagining me in one of those band jackets

cheering from the sidelines during football games—
four days ago when I was over he gave me my own mug
and later sent me home with treats for the dog.
I tell her this. She shrugs. Is it such a bad thing?

At least he likes your dog. Ah, I say, but it's only the start.
What if he wants me to carry little plastic water bottles,
pink tubes of sunscreen. I wait for her to respond with the usual,
but the baby begins to mew, she's hungry, and my friend's face goes pale.

She gives the start of a shudder before she stops herself,
putting down the pen and taking the baby from me
as she flips up her t-shirt and down the nipple flaps of her nursing bra,
smoothing the baby's fleece cap as she levels her to her chest.

Of all the things they don't tell you—she shakes her head,
laughs a little—when your milk comes in your arms go numb,
and then she asks me to fetch a tin of ointment
from off the kitchen counter.

I think of my own breasts, swollen and tender today
not because of child, but because of the peak
in my tapered-dose of synthetic pig or bovine hormones,
whichever it is that suppresses my own ovulation.

Ointment in hand, I try to imagine it otherwise,
my body duct and release valve of colostrum,
the shape of my breast precipitating the shape
of my child's mouth, the pattern his teeth later cut.

My skin would chafe from his spit. I'd ply it, I think, with almond oil.
My friend sees me looking, smiles. She nods down towards
the baby. When child's done feeding, she says,
she'll ease a finger along the o-ring of her mouth to release the seal.

12. My Marxist

At the break of today's afternoon faculty/staff meeting, as we swish instant coffee crystals in soy Styrofoam, black-brown diamonds subsiding beneath chicory-colored water, Carl the Algebra teacher parts the air between him and me with his red stir-stick. He's telling me about the time he wanted to quit. Oh, he fantasized about quitting, sure, sometimes every other day when the kids were bad, but the one time it was real was when a student disappeared after a lesson on multivariable long division. He had made his classes learn it the hard way first, for days. There was no reason for what he had them chart across notebook paper other than that he loved the old way, the eraser and pencil smudges that testified work well done. He didn't know it then, and wouldn't for weeks, that it was all pre-arranged: her twenty-something boyfriend pulled into the visitor's lot, her phone beeped, she asked for the bathroom pass, That was it. She was gone. A few years later, he tells me, she came back. She was sitting there in her old seat just after the closing bell. She looked older; her hair was natural brown. She said her time with her boyfriend lasted a few months before he dumped her. She didn't have money or a place to live, so there was the usual dumpster diving and sleeping under overpasses. But after a little while some people took her to live in a house in back of a church. She got a job, things were all right. Still, she didn't call home. It took her two more years—can't say she knows why. Carl pauses before he goes on. He's thinking of my Marxist from French 3 who left a week ago today, a typed note left on his parents' kitchen island and all his dirty laundry pulled into a pile at the foot of his bed. It's obvious he went by choice, stuffing his boots and clean socks into an Army duffel. There's some money missing as well, though no one mentions it, and his father's utility knife is gone. We don't talk about this, though my Catholic teacher-friend lights him a candle; a few of my students cycle through the school counselors—Where is he? Why did he go? Is he dead? They ask, and ask again, but I have nothing for them, and so we go back to reading *Le Petit Prince*, the book we started just before he left. Carl has already told me not to read too much significance into things (though he doesn't say it, he teaches short-division now), but I'd like to think it matters that my Marxist left his Ché Guevara shirt at home, but took his French phrase book. We had finished reading

the part about the bureaucrat and his lonely, number-columned planet the day before. *Mme*, he asked when he had reached that part of the wall guarded by the light-switch, they spoke French in Russia, didn't they? Yes, I tell him, but it was court language. At this, he fumbles the light switch, almost shutting off the fluorescent overheads. I clear my throat, searching for something else to say before he plunges us into darkness. Some of the great Marxist writers also knew French—Trotsky, for one, and his favorite, I think. He nods, smiles the complacent smile of student to teacher, and wanders out the door, leaving me to think about language. The other language teachers make fun of my kind of teaching, old-fashioned recitation and long, drawn-out discussions on literature: Molière, Villon, Rabelais, Voltaire. My students have perfect accents, the other teachers say, but can they order at a restaurant, ask for directions, explain their way out of trouble at the *préfecture*? Maybe. Maybe not. I'd like to think I give them something different, something more. Like earlier today, finishing up *Le Petit Prince*, we learned the word for "to tame," *s'apprivoiser*, which means to care a little bit about one other. I'd like to think that if my Marxist had stayed, he'd have liked that, that we tame each other into survival, and that Carl's student who made it back wouldn't have minded it either. After all, isn't there something in how the question she asked him after so many years wasn't about him or his children that she had once went to school with, but the static field of his teaching— There's a click of chalk on the blackboard range as she tosses her brown hair. Do his long division equations still stretch wall-to-wall? And Carl, surprised at the chalk piece in her hand, pauses a moment, and considers the long-division booklet yellowing in back of his desk drawer.

13. Some Sort of Health

At home, my home, your fingers flick
through the music theory class's latest compositions
with remarkable speed, a thumb blot here, here—there,
where parallel fifths have worked their way into four-part
harmony. You insist these pieces are nothing I'd ever
want to hear or sing, but my mother's unusually bold tonight,
and asks if you and she can, and so you both try it
and laugh at the awkward polyphony of the students' chords.
I'm at the stove-top stirring garlic that's softening
in olive oil. It'll be stuffed into lamb with spinach,
maybe some oregano. It's your birthday in a few more days;
you'll be thirty-six. I should be thinking of something
to get you, something personal, maybe an old Credence
Clearwater vinyl, but nothing seems a good enough fit,
and anyway, the image of Matt fainting during second period
keeps flipping through my mind.

We were learning the *être* verbs when his face
hit the desk, the hollow space between his jaw and cheekbone
making strange resonance with the table-top. It was
two days before his wrestling match—he had three pounds
to lose before weigh-in and he had already refused the juice boxes
and carrot pieces his desk mates had offered.
They didn't tell me. Of course they wouldn't. High schoolers
nurse their own back to some sort of health. In the end,
I sent him to the nurse who lead him to the cot in the darkest
part of the office before calling home, before home called the coach
and Matt finally agreed to suck down the blue-gel electrolytes
in that dim wattage. The garlic is close to burning,
and the dog rounds the kitchen island to get at the smoky scent
trailing from the pot. My mother wrinkles her nose. But you, I know,
will not mind if I have to throw away the garlic oil. All things, you say,
that go into your body, change it, and I picture the row
of color-coded bottles on top of your refrigerator,
the muscle builders and enhancers, the protein powder, the turbinado
that is sugar with a longer name. I turn the heat off the garlic,
it's already scorched, and pour all of us a glass of wine,
my mother's glass barely enough for a taste, yours and mine
a pinky-finger deep. The wine I know you will not refuse.
After a marathon or a hard workout, you've told me,
it's what breaks cramp from the groin.

14. Classroom Graffiti, Two Weeks Before the Nursing Home

Mid-afternoon, the classroom empty and cathedral-like,
all the chairs stacked into one corner to leave a labyrinth
of desks and heathered carpet, while the bay windows
cast the colors of courtyard wildflowers out along the floor.

I'm down on my knees, scrubbing crystallized soda sugar
from a desk drawer, a rosacea of pink, purple, yellow-orange
over the pale canary cotton of my Vikings t-shirt.
You've stopped in a moment on your way out the door.

I don't see you at first; the hallway's dark and cool, and,
keys in hand, you've entered quietly into my bright vestibule,
placed your free hand at the juncture of my hip and back.
I look up. You're going, you say. You'll check in on my mother,

take the dog for his afternoon walk. Then, you shake your head
in some kind of disbelief. We've been arguing, you joking,
me serious, about this all week—the maintenance staff sands
and cleans all the desks, the supply cupboards, even under

the bookcase toe-jambes before the start of summer classes,
but I think I slammed a dish or two down on the counter-top
and slammed a pot as well and said, no. I want to do it first
myself. And now, as you stand beside me, though you haven't

asked or commented, I say again that is what I have to do right,
how my mother would want it so, and then I turn my face
towards the concentrated sun of the window, as if it were you
who were wrong, as if it were you who were making her leave.

You might say something as you touch the bare, exposed flesh
of my upper arm. You don't. You leave. I am alone in my archive.
On one desktop there's a narrow, yet strangely wide-tipped
penis pointing it's way towards a blue-ink X of a perineum;

another, two round, good-sized thighs centered on a modest
lotus flower. Then, my favorite, the dialogue rendered
in permanent marker on the metal side of the small supply closet.

Mon cul dans ton doigt. And the response in heavy pencil: *Gross!*
The next after that in black, *Wrong order Asshat.* So there I am,
awash in it all: sun, sex, porn— the body. I cannot help
but smile at the sketch of a woman's vulva on a textbook,

the labor it must have took for the right balance of black,
blue, and red to make a pregnant woman's glossy genitals.
How strange, the habit of the young, to scratch the body
into public walls and doors, while all I have taught them, they avoid,

the obliqueness of tense and conjugation, the arrangement of a *thème*,
the opening of the throat to make the *i* sound in *absinthe*.
None of that is there. I sigh, and let the ammonia-water do its job,
eat its way through ink, flake off layers of desk-lacquer. Maybe

my students do know better. My mother, at home in the back den,
agonizing the barrel end of an arm-chair. You're a few feet away
from the apse of her chair and overhead hang of decorator palms.
You're working on next year's concert-band repertoire, score binders

stacked in a messy tower atop the ottoman, post-its of out-going
and incoming students. Her eyes see you, but there's no connection,
and as you've been quiet for a minute or so, she thinks you're passed out,
or dead. No, you say, as she calls out and the dog raises a whine

to match her shrill, I am right over *here*. You wait and check to see
she doesn't settle before you get up, maneuver away the binder stacks,
ease aside the dog, and go to her—lightly, slowly, as if for the first time—
to take her hand, guide it along the course of your arm.

15. Gardening: Savage Mill, Maryland

When at last your new midnight Toyota
is parked beneath the oak-shade and the wine you have brought
into the kitchen chills on its side so the cork stays wet,

you step outside to find me in the evening haze of the back porch shrub bed
ripping out from the root morning glories, tulips,
the last patch of crocus bulbs my mother argued I should plant.

When you don't speak, but stand there, asking anyway, I point up-yard
to where there is a rabbit den cloaked beneath tree root and soil,
a mother rabbit and her rabbitlings chewing flower buds clean from stems.

Once, I would have tried dried blood sprinkled in a coven ring around the petunias,
or a few barbed crucifixes of chicken wire around the sunflower bed,
even tinfoil tied into rattles on the old clothesline.

But you've seen what tonight has come to:
the garden spade propped up against the aluminum siding,
turf and fur caked into its channel.

Earlier that day, waiting for you, waiting first an hour, then others,
the sun bleaching heat patches in the ryegrass,
I thought of my long-dead father, how he used to deal with the snakes

that curled for sleep in the backyard storm drain.
Noting one or two basking in the cement basin,
he would take the coal shovel from beside the stove and, walking out,

deliver a quick, hard stroke to sever head from spine.
It was not far to go, then, for me to make these one hundred and ten divots in the
lawn,
some as shallow as a few inches, others as deep as a foot,

nor too far to go to make dead baby rabbits, their young, soft skulls broken easily.
But now that you are here and I am finished with waiting, I hand you the spade
in this wake of pollen and blood and rabbit peat, to bury or to not bury as you choose.

On Reading *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*

Maybe I'm just from a different generation,
or maybe I'm too American or too middle-class
but three-quarters into the book where there's the scene
in the sex toy shop with a man (he might be married)
fucking you from behind, and you, your face
in your friend Éric's belly, ask him to use a condom,

but you don't mean Éric, you mean the man
fucking you who is more than a little put out
by your request. And here, I think—a condom—
at last—Thank God!—since there's been group sex,
a lot of it, fifty or a hundred men queuing up to have
their tandem cocks in your palm, mouth, or pussy.

Then there is that line I'll never forget—
“I had a touch of the clap”—and I imagine
a constellation map of CDC infection for all of Paris.
But I'm bored with this book already,
as all the centrifugal force of your sex life
returns to a man fucking you on a hip-height table,

which, you write, allows for the best alignment.
I'll confess—in my mind, you're a whore.
This sexual liberation seems more of the same,
the play-act of virgin or near-virgin in estrus
as the blossoms in Les Bois burst from birch and beech
at the circular boundary of clearing. Then, again,

what was it you said, how you described it?
At all times, available. A party, you're tired. The front hall
bathroom & the milky shells of guest soap. You feel
a hand that doesn't yet touch, hasn't yet settled
on your abdomen or back of an unattended knee.
You say it's not a matter of giving in. I don't believe you,

but I do. How, in that moment, the lock on the door
twisted free—my mind rose to the ceiling,
stayed there, watched. My body, how it held
the heat of something I'd wouldn't want to recall,
cold air from the hallway, the half-light of blinds
shut to afternoon sun, a hand shod under washed, softened elastic.

Hardware City

It was just after the roof collapse,
the subsequent fire, that he started work
at the foundry. He found himself a molder,
a good job, packing industrial-grade silicone
into forms to cast toy truck and train cuts
of amalgamated bronze. He didn't speak much English;
it didn't seem to matter. And, then, again, war.
Soldier belt-buckles instead of toys with bright, lead paint.
He wore a metal button as ID; he hooked a small cask for beer
to his lunch pail. And sand grains whispered
through his bronchia, settled into the soft,
porous membrane of the lungs. He would die
in a few more years. No one would much
miss him, his presence mostly the pole & guy-wire
in the backyard behind the grape trellis.
Mr. Borkowski (he didn't read), the telephone company
writes, may we place a support structure indefinitely in your yard?
We'll pay, \$5 per annum.

This Is What Lasts

My therapist makes a motion in the air.
A man castrated will not rape
because by definition he cannot;
he has little sexual desire and no instrument.

But human beings are inventive creatures—
she looks up at the recess lights,
the stippled foam ceiling—
some have found a chicken bone

from that night's dinner
or the rusty end of a crowbar
works just as well.
She tells me this because

mine was an assault by the body,
and for that, I can be grateful.
We have been talking about me
getting a new room with a lock

a penny can't jimmy free,
and me getting rid of the steak knife
I use to scar my arms. The girl
raped with the chicken bone

was once a client of hers.
When it was over, the girl chose
white, all white. White sheets,
pillows, walls. The best part

was waking up in the morning:
no blood. I want only a lock—
a deadbolt, the kind installed

on front doors and bored into the frame.
And a space heater, if possible,
one beside my bed, the room kept near

body temperature, the night draft
no longer a sluice of cool
from the air duct to where I burrow,
face down, arms anchored in,

beneath blanket, sheet, quilt, & comforter.
I have been reading. I'm always
reading. This time, *Good Wives*,
17th century New England women.

I tell my therapist of the Algonquin, how
the Puritan woman they captured,
then released back into their villages
swore no violation. My therapist

is a good therapist. She doesn't say
most likely, these women lied. No.
She smiles, folds her hands down
over her knees. She says, thank you

for that, for letting me know there are
people who do not rape. We talk more.
It's late. I pick out the last strawberry candy
with jelly center to suck on the way home.

Learning About the Body

When we were young
and learning about the body
our mothers said
squat, and then hook up

towards the small of the back—
blood flow follows this curvature.
You must know this
the way you know to tamp

the rib cage of sleeping prey
with your fingers
before angling under your knife
for a solid kill.

We learned other things as well.
Use softened & bleached cattail
for unexpected bleedings.
Chew the root ends of the aspirin plant

when the pain is too much.
Drink dandelion wine
as it thins the blood. Too:
If at night an unwanted man

loiters outside your tent,
in the morning after bathing,
when your menses run fresh,
let a few droplets spackle the door jamb.

He will not cross inside.
You will be safe.
If he attempts to cloister you
until your urine runs clear,

it is best to leave
and go out on the hunt
when your body yet convulses
and your sense of smell is strong.

When he sets down his bedroll
and tinders that evening's fire
follow him by fractals of his own musk
through the head-smell of oak and maple and pine,

past the ammonia clusters of deer signs.
There will be some crickets
in the clearing where he sleeps.
Do not stop to wonder how music comes

from the friction of their legs
but choose the best ash shoot.
Splinter it.
Cauterize the tip

in the central chute of the fire.
Slip your hand into his mouth.
Hold your fist on his soft palate.
He will not be able to scream.

Sonnet

On the wintered end of North Howard Street,
I back the car in to a metered place.
We're here for you, but it doesn't matter—
Beneath my wool sleeve, there's thickened blood.
Inside, folding chairs with a single cushion layer,
women's magazines with missing perfume ads,
a plastic fishbowl of Christmas-colored condoms.
I build a paper airplane from a breast exam flyer;
offer you gum you feel too sick to chew.
There's a glass partition and a waiting list,
and a stack of information to read. At seven weeks
parturient, the fetus is the size and softness
of a green pea. This is normal. At home,
post-procedure, blood clots the size of a lemon.