

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: STRANGE CAPACITIES

Melissa Suzanne Nyman, Master of Fine Arts, 2009

Directed By: Associate Professor Elizabeth Arnold, English

The poems in this collection draw on various events, ranging from a family member's violent death to natural disasters and phenomena. The speakers here repeatedly confront how one unique experience can permanently alter the psyche. As such, these poems often rely on an intense curiosity about the natural world, as well as the mysterious yet infinitely documented realm of the human body.

STRANGE CAPACITIES

By

Melissa Suzanne Nyman

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
2009

Advisory Committee:

Associate Professor Elizabeth Arnold, Chair

Professor Michael Collier

Professor Stanley Plumly

Associate Professor Joshua Weiner

© Copyright by  
Melissa Suzanne Nyman  
2009

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| I.                                |    |
| Documentary.....                  | 2  |
| High Resolution.....              | 3  |
| Radio Silence.....                | 4  |
| Subway Magic Act.....             | 5  |
| Viewer Discretion.....            | 6  |
| The Amber Hour.....               | 7  |
| II.                               |    |
| Houdini Upside Down.....          | 9  |
| Protocol.....                     | 10 |
| Beginner Lifesaving.....          | 11 |
| Mid-Ocean Ridge.....              | 12 |
| Vignette.....                     | 13 |
| “Clear History”.....              | 14 |
| In Situ.....                      | 15 |
| The Heart Sounds.....             | 17 |
| A Different Kind of Speech.....   | 18 |
| Houses.....                       | 22 |
| Abracadabra.....                  | 23 |
| Letters to the South Pacific..... | 24 |
| Happiness Spread Outward.....     | 25 |
| Seven Generations.....            | 26 |
| Lavoisier.....                    | 27 |
| Shalimar.....                     | 29 |
| Fish Your Wish.....               | 30 |
| Amtrak.....                       | 31 |
| III.                              |    |
| Then What.....                    | 33 |
| The Storm.....                    | 34 |
| Strange Capacities.....           | 35 |
| Water is a Blue Shape.....        | 37 |
| Opacity.....                      | 38 |

I.

## DOCUMENTARY

Shattered like a dish, the river fills the screen with ice and around the scene, everything's frozen: cars on the 14<sup>th</sup> Street bridge (some smashed into place), bystanders on the banks of the Potomac. Only the tail remains visible; beneath, the body broke, and deeper, people

still safely buckled inside sank into black fish beds. Survivors propelled themselves toward the January air that would surely kill them were help to come too late as help can do. A pregnant woman swam atop her belly, a life preserver. I thought how, states away, I'd been

swimming in my mother's as she watched, with the waiting world, for signs of life. Flight 90 bobbed calmly while its six survivors clung to the surface, almost freed from the river's grip. But survival, like distance, can distort perception—how, once, I learned

the blue whale's heart is the size of a car. From certain angles, my fist, the size of my heart, can cover the moon. How I imagine the plane, dwarfed momentarily by the open sky, then enormous in its sudden plunge. It took days to find the engines, longer still

the map of voices buried in the dead, blank cold. The splintered wreck splayed out under the ice-choked city, its remnants flickering as divers' lights sliced the water, searching the silence for every unknown shard, every sliver of life pocketed in a place where, once, there was none.

## HIGH RESOLUTION

A flat, low singing next door. You wake  
to the closed window, locked doors

and the thin, dark snake coiled on the floor.  
There are no entries you can bring yourself

to find. Wrapped in a band of light, the snake  
loosened into a series of S's, disappeared

into some other passage, until this story  
found its way into your coffee, long distance

phone calls and hand-written letters. Because  
their mouths cannot inject venom, Garters

are innocuous, like the Daddy Long Legs  
that bloomed all over summer camp

and which we killed—because  
away from home we feared cruelty a little

less, pulling legs out like petals,  
tossing handfuls into fires, drowning them

in cold washing sinks. Innocuous,  
like the murmur beneath my chest

that bloomed before birth, the hole  
an invisible mouth rasping between beats.

I thought a name could explain its presence  
and reassure the following chain of events.

How constantly we protest such infestations,  
the way the body tries to—as if

to destroy something is to defeat it, as if  
to know something is not to fear it.

## RADIO SILENCE

Because it wasn't a hospital they swaddled us  
in a cocoon of heat, so that your baby, a month late,  
could learn the heart's proper rhythms skin to skin.  
I kept the murmur as a reminder. Ten years later:

walking through St. Christopher's cardio unit, I learn  
the genesis of the word—*cor*, meaning *of the heart*—  
courage, literally *to have heart*. Mine plays like a kazoo.  
The doctor gives us this noise, a child's. A murmur

is either dangerous or innocent. Like a submarine  
gone silent on the ocean's floor, no lines out, they  
must decipher one from the other. In the examination  
room, my heart became a screen of slush. Having

wanted to please I said I could see the shape  
I thought for sure I'd know. Fold and cut at the seam,  
so one will match the other, a sort of blind symmetry.  
Then, as now, I never admitted to reading the signs.

## SUBWAY MAGIC ACT

This, our caged luxury,  
the dove pulled from a lock box  
which appears in a hat.  
Everyone stares like it isn't  
the oldest trick in the book.  
We rattle through the city's  
busted gut. The dove flutters,  
rustles her wings as if ridding  
a chill. Imagine the astronauts  
shuttling around earth,  
how they need time away  
even when there's no place  
to go. Gravity-free poker,  
boundless somersaults,  
sunrise and sunset cresting  
every hour. Time is less  
of the essence, at least  
in terms of its passing. The sun  
isn't moving as they move  
through Space or as we move,  
elbows pinned, wing-like,  
through the ground, guided  
by steel to whatever it is  
we call a destination.  
In the magician's steady hands,  
the dove waits, each of us  
eyeing the exchange, tense with worry  
she'll fly away. She never tries.

## VIEWER DISCRETION

Like yesterday's graffiti claims,  
*you're the still point of the turning world*—this world  
rooted in the earth's first layer of flesh, soft above  
indurate layers of sediment. In a flooded quarry  
a school bus sank past each one, its giant metal hulks rumored  
an accident, a statement on the changing world.

The water might systematically rust its bones,  
like the bearded bronze husks in images of the Titanic:  
illuminated in loss, lights sweeping the dismantled frame,  
too huge to be anything other than what it is.  
Some say the wind is never for the sailor who knows not  
to what port he's bound—and someone said recently

“there is no terror like the open ocean.”  
I was thinking of other paths, of the long-armed squid  
*never before seen on film*, or the man who insisted  
Jonah truly was swallowed by the whale.  
Faith is simple. You just believe.  
This season turns violently, our ocean

pocked by storms that graze the continent's tips,  
the Gulf of Mexico fat, a warm belly  
waiting to be filled. We name disasters we long for  
as they fume through August, the eyes ringed  
by wind and rain, both sharpened and calmed by madness,  
wasps released, one by one, from the nest.

## THE AMBER HOUR

The aperture contracts and expands  
like a pupil to understand what there is to be seen—

the weight of the old Nikon  
heavy in my hands as I crank the dials,

shutter speeds whirring round. Now,  
we wait for the right combinations. The lens

roams across buildings as light creeps into dark,  
the way steam from a hot mug spreads across my face

or blood trickles back into our cold hands.  
In these old cameras everything's white noise:

shutter window snapping shut, static ticking  
of the aperture ring, the clanks of rewind.

Still, I can't help liking the noisy buttons,  
the *shush* of blades alive inside the frame.

Here, in last light, as long shadows  
are combed into the world, each sound

calls out to peeling bricks and half-lit alleyways,  
or the deer leg we found split

on a bed of leaves. I angled shot after shot, the road  
and the trees wholly silenced as they were,

as we were, with nothing but the camera clicking  
at the life so taken, just behind us—as if

born in this moment—the deer's half-open  
bright red carcass, freshly laid, waiting.

II.

## HOUDINI UPSIDE DOWN

Mahogany, metal and glass. Built to fit,  
cage sank into cell, and, locked in stocks,  
the great escape began. Water torture begins  
not in fear, but madness—but then,  
such explanations are only theories.  
This trick is an illusion in three parts;  
for mine, I imagine Houdini suspended  
as fish are when caught and prized,  
like the picture of me as a girl—the fish  
so small it's hysterical, except to me—  
on my face, only the joy in having taken  
what does not belong to you. Not  
so much a trick but trickery, bait and switch  
if you will—nothing like Houdini's patented  
magic. But I think of his body—pores glutted,  
nail beds softened, fingers pruned, lungs  
filling slowly with fluid somewhere between  
drowning and escaping, the heart surging,  
legs fluttering. As each tooth of the clamp  
unhinged, someone must have wished  
he would not survive. This is not to scare  
but reassure, because it is never one thing  
or the other, but the combination of horror  
and pleasure, everything the way it seems.

## PROTOCOL

Were this house a castle, I'd be the mote,  
endlessly patrolling but unable  
to change course. Instead, I roam each level,  
grazing the kitchen, making beds. I comb  
the attic where the old Singer rattles and  
banished costumes hang like skins. An evil eye charm  
surfaces in the body of a mothball box—  
like other superstitions, it feels at home  
with me. If we were religious I'd cover  
the mirrors in opaque cloth and we'd  
remove our leather shoes. But we're a gala  
of flowers and casseroles, each day  
turning slowly, like an odd key in a lock,  
the evil eye warmed by touch, its glassy,  
azure rings a small lake in my clenched hand.

## BEGINNER LIFESAVING

Audrey taught us in the attic—the dummy’s plastic lungs holding and withholding under our spongy palms. Starting with revival, we worked backwards towards drowning—someone volunteering to go down, another assigned to save her. We memorized the drowning chain, each link wound with logic. *Because drowning is conditioned, not inevitable.* How we’re taught to know it: not by screams but silence—the victim disappearing the way a balloon floats slowly into deflation. We forced our bodies downward, limbs suspended, Barbie doll stiff, our hair dark algae above the pool’s pristine floor. Aegeus tried to follow his son into death the way my father once followed my brother into water—the child having toddled easily, then my father fully clothed. It felt like a phantom limb going numb. I’ve never saved anything. In staged accidents, we know what’s asked. Because the story has no ending we jump faithfully, the world full of warnings, like highway signs on a long drive home: *Stay Alert. Stay Awake.* Here’s what you’re meant to see coming. *Stay Alive.* You don’t.

## MID-OCEAN RIDGE

The theory was *Continental Drift*, but because few could imagine the world having cleaved, having ever been whole, the idea was lost.

Under the sea swirl: entire basins of life—the world's longest mountain range, where ocean plates met, marked their meeting with a scar.

Coral, sponges, tubeworms, the monstrous Dumbo octopus all pulse along this seam in the planet's skin. Like my father and his twin in utero,

a whole language is fused in water. In any language, everyone wants something they can see and name. And every ocean holds evidence, where the gates

of the world open and close beneath continents' teeth. Submerged in the darkest depths, seismic creations go unnoticed for years—the earth

cured in the brine of its core. A myth is born. As a child, I dreamed about Atlantis, lost city of the sea. Terrified, I scanned the surface

of my brother's globe in search of distant waters—a language long forgotten, liquid turned to stone, stone to liquid, hunted through centuries of silence.

Plato said of the sinking: *A single day and night of misfortune*. The way Vesuvius petrified Pompeii in one spell, or how melted iron is poured into casts—suddenly

seared into permanence but distorted by endurance, like blind fish scanning the sea's unseen floors, blessed by such darkness.

## VIGNETTE

Because everything remembered  
comes back in a dumb voice,  
haunting in its clarity—it must  
have been, it could not be—  
I choose to count your visits  
as mistakes. Not that we speak.  
Not that we even see one another  
or exist in the same room.  
But what you give me is less elegiac  
than absurd, under-your-breath funny,  
no reassuring laughter like a hand  
on my back guiding me from room  
to room. Once, a man chased me  
for the bag of pennies in my hand.  
It wasn't you but I'm sure you were there  
as I woke myself with screams. Silly.  
Outside, summer deepens to a low groan,  
everything fraught with stillness.  
I see you the way you must have been—  
death by murder, murder by hammer—  
these things creep from books  
discarded in childhood. In those stories  
there is nothing but the cunning. In yours,  
there is nothing but what I make.

“Clear History”

Ripped to ribbons, what’s left is unidentifiable.  
Their word, not mine. But what remains, remains  
persistent: the doves’ love song, the carpet’s

plushy stain. Anyway, who am I to remember?  
The stories I like are never good for telling.  
Consider the vanishing twin, who exists and then

simply does not, its essence usurped by the sibling  
or the mother. Such a presence must feel like  
humming a song you can’t, for the life of you,

remember hearing but that percolates  
along some code of memory, sends the sequence  
through nerves, through fields of muscle,

so that your tongue plunks out the notes by heart.  
It isn’t harmless. What remains is lasting: there’s *before*  
and there’s *after*. One stays while the other goes.

Is one silver and the other gold? Like whatever exists  
between constellations, amorphous stars that cannot take  
proper shapes, their bodies unnamed, unknown? I say unknown

and remember forgetting—shorelines curving towards  
invisible destinations, arms draped across me like old vines.  
If it were possible to clear history, those dense, blank

distances between what we search for and what  
we don’t, so that whatever’s left couldn’t leave us  
this way, trying to recover something—

## IN SITU

First, the bones. In situ,  
perfect as teeth in a small mouth.

Next, the story: scientists  
name the first act of love.

Immersed, strange fish  
found each other and began

in water as today everything  
begins there, or will end

without it. By a lake,  
two teenagers, stoned and

afraid, drove into blackness,  
save the snow alight

in their headlights, which  
covered them endlessly.

Dispatchers could not  
track their calls, growing

distant as the night grows  
distant. Morning

understood their delusions:  
the boy mistook field cows

for people that would not  
hear his pleas. The girl believed

dead branches were arms,  
so she wanted to be held.

Searching, rescuers knew  
to look for death. First, abstract:

lumped snow, black soles  
bleeding through. Then

exquisite features, rounded,  
sculpted, beautiful under

sheets of clean, thick cold,  
that perfect preservation

which took them,  
kept them whole.

## THE HEART SOUNDS

The room teemed with parts; plaster casts and plastic molds. You could break the heart, then rebuild it. It's okay if you don't understand what I'm saying. What I mean is, I don't understand what changed— the heart not a problem, then a problem, then a problem solved. The stethoscope's cold mouth on my chest. Wires a web against my skin. Maybe something was missing, like Mr. Potato Head's nose, rattling among lost socks. I was ten. The EKG was normal. My sounds are innocent. The heart sounds like movement, like a tongue flipping against teeth. What you heard is really blood. What I had was not "true disease." The heart resizes inside us and sometimes it leaves a hole. That day opened and closed like a fist over an egg.

## A DIFFERENT KIND OF SPEECH

*For Kate*

We'd been cooking;  
assorted unwashed knives  
around my kitchen,  
rust-encrusted stove, both of us curved  
over cutting boards. Each blade ensures  
a different cut. You say *my brothers*,  
sometimes forgetting, then you reverse,  
as if to comfort *me*, and continue speaking  
only of the one still alive.

There were many times, before,  
when I would explain that it wasn't the gun  
my grandfather carried that got him killed,  
nor the sounds he could not hear—  
no warning would have stopped  
the hammer tamping bone into bits,  
his head pushed in like rotten fruit.  
Years will pass before it is you who tells me  
how I might understand what has happened,  
what has only begun to happen, to you.

\*

Always separation—stem from root.  
The splinter floating between skin and skin,  
flick of pulse beneath—flesh pulled taut  
across frame, drum beneath flesh  
beating and beating. Before a child is born,  
parents speak through the body. Last week,  
at the doctor's, a new mother learned this,  
and through thin walls, alone in the next room,  
I heard the electric tamping of her son's  
insistent pumping: the voice he's given  
without saying a word, heartbeats radiating  
into the world like a warning. Walking home,  
I wondered if stories were told, right then:  
that mother to her mother, wife to husband—  
mother to child? *Feel my belly, see that bulge  
moving across like a satellite? That's him,  
your baby brother.* And you, having watched  
your brother come into the world and  
watched him go out, whole cycles  
locked in your head—what was it

you wanted to know? How anyone  
can really know when flesh becomes separate  
to become whole? If we could stop  
the next blade, should it cut too deep—  
the body's blood roads doubling back,  
but too slow—the blood you would've given,  
if you could, to keep him screaming?

\*

Once, I told you how our TTY machine  
gave my grandfather a different kind of speech—  
how it made the lights flicker, so he'd know  
someone was listening, waiting for words.  
The thing itself was too loud, bleating randomly  
as each sentence ticked by like a centipede.  
It was useful, of course, but I was too small  
to see, and instead, heard nothing. This is the story  
I remember as the car hums along I-95, pulling me  
past Delaware, toward the cities we were born in,  
closer to you now than where I came from.  
Your younger brother is dead and no one  
knows what to do. I imagine your face  
at the door, what you'll look like even though  
only weeks have passed since I've seen you.  
I'm not afraid of what you'll need, the motions  
we'll have to go through, but because I know,  
already, that I won't be able to get out and walk  
into your house this way, careful and small,  
having nothing to speak of, and everything to say.

\*

Dust caked the greenhouse's opaque windows,  
blotted out glossy skylights and blanketed tools.  
I chose a broom and haphazardly swept  
whatever I saw—a high tabletop,  
thickets of gnarled hoses. It was early.  
Outside, nightmarish weeds  
engulfed the broken wheelbarrow,  
and because of all this I missed your call.  
At the time, I must have been pulling  
the crabgrass' teeth. Thorny pillows  
of tumbleweed grazed over smashed brick  
and petrified pots. Like the time capsule my class  
buried in sixth grade, filled with relics

of a time I lived through but cannot remember,  
I hefted away a once familiar past. That afternoon  
I took you to the train. We knew only  
what we knew. Your brother had been found—  
an accident? We couldn't know  
of the newspaper articles to come or the month  
he would linger, tethered to his hospital bed;  
that the doctors would be wrong, that he  
could not survive what the other boy had done.  
I remember that last morning. I remember  
how, hacking into long-dead life, fighting my way  
to clear ground, I knew what I was doing  
would be easily undone. Nothing was restored.  
And although the ground, for a moment,  
might hold again the colors and the shapes—  
sleek greens and pinking buds, the slick  
inside each sun-bleached stem—new life  
could not flourish in that dry space.

\*

By heart, I followed sloping roads  
to your parents' house, dust kicking up  
angry clouds each time I stopped.  
Everything is breakable, I think,  
if you can see it as a whole. As if, by stitching,  
anything can re-seam. *The brain is so mysterious*,  
you'd said. You had taken the wafer and wine  
in which you don't believe. After, in the park  
you loved when there was no where else to go,  
we watched birds pecking worms, an offering  
from the pulpy, sodden ground. The hospital  
where he died not a mile away, so close  
to where he'd been left—and where you saw  
the brain bulge through its gauze cocoon,  
blood flooding its patterns into a map.  
Months later, we buy cards.  
Sheaths of handmade paper unfurl.  
The disconnected torso of an Elvis clock swings  
as wind-up toys chatter off a ledge  
near stacks of indestructible dishes.  
We read random punch lines on rows upon rows  
of cards before us, a blank chess board.  
*Hello. Congratulations. Happy Birthday.*  
We're surrounded by small isles  
and claustrophobic counters, knickknacks

for nothing you can name, words that do not,  
cannot, say what they mean. The pulse  
of the city just beyond the door, we leave  
what we can live without.

## HOUSES

One I sacrificed to the god of repair.  
For weeks the ceiling buckled,  
fault-lined, peeled substrate skin.  
Looking back, I see the first drops

should not have surprised, the way  
the Rockies do each time I approach—  
driven from sterile fields, surface  
under surface. When water arrived

I had only cups—no bucket, no basin,  
no mop. A tree fell on my parents' first,  
the storm wild above our sleep, each  
slanted roof tipped in wire. I woke

screaming—the way I had before,  
before words, when a socket bled out  
smelted rubber. If I saved us then  
it was luck. In this house, termites

leave Spring quilted in glossy wings.  
Our woods bring them, drawn  
to wood, to earth, to rot. We can't  
protect everything. Some things

are always older, uncemented,  
prone as flesh. Sweaters lost to moths.  
My mother's childhood is marked by fire,  
one home burnt down whole. Mine

was all water: snow-drifted,  
heavy rain coming right for us.  
I remember skis floating  
above the carpet, table legs turned

to stilts. Whole libraries returned  
to source, dark mash of wood  
assuaged until nothing made sense, until  
there was nothing left to do but burn it.

## ABRACADABRA

A friend says *the air is like India—the brushfires invisible,  
but the wind carries their smell*. The way memory clings to scent:

whole lives unlocked with the jar of jam or lilac tuft,  
the body vibrating like a car in winter, tugging at its insides

for warmth. How the museum's paintings are assigned  
more to the days on which we pass than the artist's brush—

but I prefer etymology, which from the Greek  
means "true sense." *Abacadabra*, for example, becomes

"I create as I speak," and this is true of magic  
and of memory. When voices from old radio shows

fill the car with a kind of silk, the static's distant buzzing  
is a lullaby all the way home. Because Houdini was the clue,

tonight, everything's an escape. The plane overhead is not a bird  
but a fish—its wings giant fins that pierce the sky, dense

before the coming storm. We're submerged and there is a way out  
no one can see. Even now, as the sky bruises and swells

with light—fixed to the window I watch the city scatter  
beneath fists of clouds, rain descending at odd angles,

until water becomes familiar, until anyone outside,  
under the sky so alive, stops running.

## LETTERS TO THE SOUTH PACIFIC

### *For Jules*

I take the day like notes:  
how light changes across buildings  
some evenings, pink and orange lakes  
collecting in windows. A starling's wings  
glint purple in the tether of its nest.  
Since you left, I try to see the city  
this way, as though my life, like yours,  
spans continents and oceans,  
countries I can't name. Nestled  
in the South Pacific, your island  
rides the world map's farthest curve.

There, a rusted tank guards the causeway  
between the lagoon and the sea  
where fishing nets, dried out from their work  
are cast across tree-lines, and above that  
slotted palm leaves pepper each picture  
you send. You say *this is a life worth living*.  
But sometimes I slip and think you still live here,  
criss-cross the subway to your old house  
until the season, finally bitter, tells me  
where I'm supposed to go. In text  
you explain the choice to go or stay,

the inertia of distances  
more important than destination.  
I can't feel the earth sliding under my feet.  
I walk by people and places I mean to see  
with some regret because I know  
I won't get there. But writing to you—so close  
to a place where the world formed  
and is always forming— there are times  
I can almost trace a difference pushing  
through the surface, those raw sutures  
changelessly moving toward how  
we are, how we will never be.

## HAPPINESS SPREAD OUTWARD

Because someone told us  
we should be careful  
because you never know

if someone is your “secret angel,”  
because it made us laugh  
like summer in December,

because *happiness*  
*is like a stampede*  
and I was afraid

of being crushed.  
This means the world is a  
bell chiming. Or that

when our hands part  
a patch of Poppies blooms.  
Because it moves

in concentric circles  
like water around a fisherman  
who has just given himself away,

or radio waves navigating  
the spectrum of light—  
bound for places

you will never see—  
it spreads like a disease:  
mysteriously effective

but only somewhat negotiable,  
like words in a language  
you cannot speak.

## SEVEN GENERATIONS

*"In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation...even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine." – Great Law of the Iroquois*

In the x-ray, a *clean break*, as if  
the bone simply slipped from its hinge.  
When I was young I wished to break  
a limb, a wound that needs no rendering,  
no Band-Aid to proclaim its presence.  
It was easy to want suffering  
to mean something—any attention

is attention, only you can't undo  
the puckered scar that grins years after  
metal lid met finger, the body's rot  
all nervy riot. What marks me now  
is made of letters. The pamphlet says  
the *non-invasive* test probes the chromosome  
for inherited mutation. My mother said

"This is for you, not me." In a way,  
*helix* means *twist*—the spiraled ladder  
I memorized then forgot while breeding  
fruit flies in science class. Tucked into  
blue mush the larvae nested until the vial  
bloomed a forest of wings. But mine  
didn't take—and I still see those few

cocoons as mummies: fragile and obstinate,  
forever tethered between two worlds—  
I see them now while the needle  
roots through seven layers of my skin,  
stationed at the doctor's office  
long after my mother and her sisters  
excised their ovaries because their mother

didn't. If the gene reveals its trick,  
should I do the same or live with the riddle  
unsolved inside? *It's a choice*,  
these differences—a fretwork of nerves  
handed down like fine lace between  
generations, my blood crowding its own  
inscrutable vial.

## LAVOISIER

All night all I can think  
is how everyone I love  
sleeps somewhere else.

Their bodies foreigners  
I urge—like a doomed heart  
vainly beating—to go further.

And I remember Lavoisier,  
who dreamt body and soul  
were wed slightly longer

than a bullet to its charm,  
his eyes blinking on his own  
disembodied head

once the guillotine's blade fell.  
The heart of the matter  
is distance. Like the death of a sun,

all that light refracted  
across space and time  
the way images surface

from the dark, chemicals  
making millions of crystals bloom  
from light long gone, so much so

that it's light that will destroy them  
in their afterlife, in this othering,  
this layer of being so fragile in my hands—

how does the saying go?—  
the sounds a kind of journey  
and what you mean to say, another.

As with Lavoisier, the best evidence  
comes too late. Years ago,  
my friends dissevered a Robin,

its body a nest of worms  
unraveled slowly, for no reason  
and with no signs, no blinking eyes

or tremulous wings—just  
rushed plunges of branch after branch  
through flesh, those sticks

like kindling I'd collect  
whenever it was we wanted  
to start a fire.

## SHALIMAR

Her voice, too, is sweet, too sweet  
and the scent follows everything.  
Not cloves, anise, mint, but lemon balm,

which bears my name. And May rose,  
iris, vanilla, jasmine, pearly incense.  
Not just bottles of it but the huge vase

imported from France into which  
I once dipped my fingers, the slick  
tinged liquid coating me

in what I'd forgotten: our trip  
to the Franklin Institute when she still visited.  
One holiday I braided long strings

on a pillow that, everyone warned,  
was made of glass. I didn't understand  
they meant beads, meaning *off limits*.

I imagined it stuffed with shards. It is glass  
years later that binds us—her to leaving,  
me to staying—with only the memory

of what we'd done, piece by piece, glass by glass,  
all of his dishes we smashed that December  
after the murder. Another event I haven't yet

learned to name. Laced with Shalimar, a sign someone  
was coming or going, or as the advertisement claims,  
*at the frontier of the forbidden*. It's something

I'm always too old or too young for,  
depending on the occasion, depending on  
whatever it was that could not be broken.

## FISH YOUR WISH

Trash jingles in the schizophrenic's car.  
Plastic igloos of frappuccino threaten  
milky green streams from their crowns.  
It smells like high school, thrift shop  
cigarette mash. We found boxing gloves.  
We found clover. Paul Newman on a shirt  
that said *What You See is What I Want*.  
I wore it down. Half of my head shaved  
one summer, grassy knoll above my neck.  
The rest became drawn curtains. The rest  
my mother begged me to keep. In class,  
we learned debris circles the earth,  
as useful as a dollar. Dead satellites,  
shorn metal, whole fields of it, a belt  
of metallic dust. We learned some things  
have no place as I have no place  
for others' lives, despite hours spent  
sifting through bins of creased shirts  
and costume jewels. It was good to search  
without knowing what we wanted, or even  
how to want at all. Now, I see them  
tucked into drawers long outgrown.  
Sadder together than apart. I hold on  
the way the earth holds discarded vessels,  
fit to withstand the journey, lost as toys,  
disassembled, suspended. No sum. Only parts.

## AMTRAK

Through the window, the water's surface  
is a scalloped field of light. Some people  
would kill for this and it's the killing  
I remember most—Snow White's  
stepmother demanding the heart disgorged,

delivered in a box. Heart-shaped,  
as some things become at random—  
a Croatian island, cactus apples—anything  
but the heart itself, slumped with odd tubes  
in the diagram: muscle and valves

divided in two. I've seen the heart  
as tattoo: mango aorta, orchid ventricle,  
maraschino core. Unearthly colors, as in  
my father's slides from optometry school,  
when I was young enough to love

what I didn't understand—the retina  
swarms with color, all ropy fire, like images  
retrieved from the surface of Mars. How  
the fields I pass now are just as distant—  
random strips of color, a fuzzy blur beside

our heads. How quiet, this movement,  
throttling through towns beyond towns,  
these tracks like veins that blood follows  
under my skin. Another nameless state.  
Outside, nothing moves, and we are always

moving. Once, we were divisible, our cells  
splitting and splitting. Through the window,  
day divides into night—sheared sky and its  
blue-black charade, sliver of moon curled  
as a fingernail left clipped on the floor.

III.

## THEN WHAT

The sky shed its skin. Flakes lace my hands,  
taut and crackled, bled dry. *Tell me a secret*,  
says the sidewalk, my soles wearing a groove  
in its spine while children thumb cabs  
in morning's sugary veneer.

Today a plane will land in the Hudson  
and the world will praise its pilot for knowing  
how to fall without injury, how to squelch fire  
without getting burned. The way skin  
passes unscathed through flame if the hand  
moves fast enough. The way bodies compensate  
for wounds that bear beauty. How the river  
opened its dank mouth to the crash and the crash  
nested perfectly on its tongue. A pearl burnished  
by the oyster's gummy rot. How it happens  
is irrelevant, for it hardly happens naturally.  
Forget water's symbolism. Forget baptism,  
catharsis, forget mother-of-pearl. Whatever you know  
is meant to be forgotten: two languages,  
cotton candy's furry kiss. What's forgotten  
will return—skin to scab once the needle  
bleeds through, my fingers tender in the candle's  
split-second lick. The plane in flight, hanging mid-air  
on camera screens, compressed, falling and falling  
through frequencies, streaming persistently as rain  
that's visible only if you know where to look.

## THE STORM

Strong gusts coaxed chimes into song,  
choppy choruses that climbed gutters,

answered birds clustered in the holly,  
singing a warning into the lavish sky.

By morning the world was matted fur,  
streets combed thick with leaves long fallen,

sewer-risen, reincarnated to the ground.  
Buds fell from branches as bats fall

from nursery roosts before their wings  
grow into flight—the instinct is born

but the body must learn. The way animals  
unearth accident before it arrives—

they know how to run before they see  
what's coming. After each disaster,

experts come to count the carcasses—  
how few litter the aftermath of addled structure,

appliances culled in foundation pools.  
Braced, people gathered water, stormed

supplies, cultivated stillness. The wind  
hit with no way to drown its sound.

I could not see the trees but heard them  
bend through the night, rubbed clean

of their leaves in daylight. One stood  
snagged with bright plastic bags—

fuller than rain and fat with orbit,  
jellyfish floating in the strong, calm sun.

## STRANGE CAPACITIES

When the *great fish* obeyed  
and swallowed Jonah whole,  
when God spoke and commanded  
it so, neither could know that in Latin,

*Jonah* would mean *dove*. But the fish  
let Jonah fly inside his belly,  
let him cry out,  
so that the sounds emanated

like its own whale song. Because  
those *who cling to empty folly*  
*forsake their own welfare*, Jonah stayed  
until his heart was full.

When your father was captain  
and the submarine his own, he recorded  
those songs and tones for you, on land,  
he, in the gut of the ship,

safe from the sea while in it.  
Today it's not water, but flame:  
California burns from a fire  
set in one field by one boy

until his heart emptied  
and he gave himself up.  
Instead of winter's metallic blur  
and its strange capacities,

what I wanted was simple.  
Like last winter in another city,  
when we stood beneath a life size whale  
and the great plastic belly spanned the ceiling

as if it floated in Space,  
our flashbulbs tiny stars  
that lit the universe briefly.  
It was wonderful to be small,

so assured in our limitations.  
Whales have no use for most senses,  
for most are dulled in water—  
but the sounds of their singing

bring them food and love.  
No need to learn: like a fire  
toying with its source,  
whatever comes, comes naturally.

## WATER IS A BLUE SHAPE

*After Ellsworth Kelly*

Someone longed for a reason. Oceans stretched, speckled crystal. So the sky became a reason: blue is blue is blue. But if the sea owed its color to sky, perfect clouds would turn it white. Each summer, the black lake shines like polished leather and if we set fires, its surface is crackled crème brûlée. Of Cezanne's sea, Kelly said water was a blue shape. Today the rain is gray or green, mucked with rot. I notice colors lately, a prism's orb floating on the stairs, the doorbell's rainbow reflection. Everything is fluid, even glass. Inside the panes, I imagine it dripping

slowly, as fondant over a cake's rim, until gravity wins. Someone told me *black holes are the final triumph of gravity over light*—consider how everything competes, even in darkness, where no outcome is certain. How in darkness, one thing easily becomes another—is the shrub a shrub or an animal's haunch? This way, nothing is as clear as water taking the shape of a glass or a tub—we say *become this*, and it does. I tried to win by doing the same, pressing myself into patterns I could never understand. It is always this way, trying to find a reason: the sky is blue, the ocean is blue, despite everything—no number, no name—in between.

## OPACITY

“Living in a state of slightly controlled chaos,”  
you say on the day our horoscopes come true

and we dance, the day of the night I kick you out  
and you kick back. Like the kitchen ordered by its contents.

Or are the contents ordered by the kitchen? Chicken  
or the egg. Regardless, the day moves through me

like a fluid, present but unannounced, the train delayed  
so long I notice leaves reflected in the lake that skirts

the tracks, the soft mutterings of newspapers layered  
like leaves, their bed of words already slept in and left.

And that couple who “lost it all” by stealing neighbors’ checks  
and credit cards—who can say which crimes are forgivable

and which are not? Whatever the outcome, the sky  
still fattens at sunset, still sends on the night and its opacity,

those overlaying moments of orange and cobalt,  
colors defined as complementary because one could never

be the other, because when mixed they can only  
become gray, like the sky drained of its effort,

as in the picture I carry in which someone is walking,  
but away or towards it is impossible to say.

## Notes

“Happiness Spread Outward” : In 2008, a medical research study claimed that happiness is literally contagious, and that it “spread outward by three degrees, to the friends of friends of friends.” See: <http://health.usnews.com/articles/health/healthday/2008/12/05/being-happy-affects-even-those-you-dont-know.html>

“Strange Capacities”: The quoted text in this poem comes from a passage in the book of Jonah in *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, published by the Jewish Publication Society.