

## ABSTRACT

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Sarah Wylder  
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Directed By: Stanley Plumly  
Professor  
Department of English  
Creative Writing

“Seen from Above” is largely about being out of place and being an outsider. Settings for these poems range from laboratories to city parks. A tropical hummingbird gets lost and finds its way to Wisconsin. A pack of coyotes moves into an urban cemetery. A clone of an extinct species paws at the glass of its cage. The humans in these poems are as uncomfortable in their own skin as on the streets of a foreign city. The fat woman dreams of being someone else. The fake saints, even in the afterlife, still struggle with ambiguous roles and questions without answers. A young woman sees a dead body and an extinct bird, but no one will hear her alarm.

SEEN FROM ABOVE

By

Sarah Wylder

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Advisory Committee:  
Professor Stanley Plumly, Chair  
Professor Elizabeth Arnold  
Professor Michael Collier

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## Lone Chick, Seen From Above

The lone chick, seen from above  
sits in the shape of a perfect heart.  
Her feathers, all stubble and damp,  
indicate she will be emerald green  
with just a tinge of orange.

It's hard to make birds breed in zoos.  
But both her parents hatched as well  
on beds of heated cotton.  
So when they sleep, they do not dream  
of the homeland they'll never see,  
like refugees raised in a camp.

Her parents reject her as though  
they, stately in their display,  
just can't see the point.  
They sit as still as the stuffed  
pair downtown whose leathered feet  
are glued down for all ages.

So the chick is raised on syringes  
and hands in latex gloves  
who squeeze a paste of insects  
onto her tiny tongue.

A cage has been prepared for her  
at a zoo in the Midwest.  
They've sawn her some maple branches  
and affixed a plaque to say  
"extinct in the wild."  
They hope she will produce a chick  
just as soon as she possibly can.

## Coyotes of Chicago

This is the city where I was born,  
though I remember little of it.  
I have come to escape briefly  
to a friend's apartment  
near a cemetery that extends  
for chain-link wrapped acres  
all the way down to the lake  
where coffins settle slowly  
to meet the water's level  
where the ventricles of embalmed  
hearts are filled again  
with lake water--bloated bodies  
are pulled slowly down and out  
through the aquifer, out to the cold  
blue lake, and where the coyotes,  
the coyotes who, pulled north  
by hunger and garbage,  
live among the tombstones  
and eat the geese--the Canada geese,  
migrating north now--  
slinking after and swallowing them,  
decorating each tomb with feathers.  
This is the only space for them.  
In this city they are not wanted.  
I must return soon, to another city,  
where there is no space for me  
and where I am not wanted.

## Sora

Perhaps you aren't a sora,  
But certainly a sort of rail.  
What are you doing  
In my neighbor's backyard  
Scurrying over dry leaves?  
You're only the second  
That I've seen. The other  
Lived in a drainage ditch  
Somewhere in Missouri.  
He built his nest among  
The sedge beneath  
A plastic drain pipe. His water  
So viscous, a yellow green,  
He scurried unsinking over  
The surface on his spindly  
Stick legs like you do now,  
Lost bird, only the cement  
Does not tremble beneath you.

## The As Yet Uncanonized

There are more things in heaven than on earth,  
(At least we like to think so).  
And there are more saints than we could know  
Or name, the unattributed patrons  
Of unknown scientific concepts,  
Unnoticed constellations, the patron saint  
Of things we got wrong, and insects  
Wiped out during expeditions  
To discover them,  
Their green wings forever lost to us.  
They say there is no time in God's understanding  
And we and everything happen all at once.  
So pray to saints unknown and yet uncanonized,  
The saints we never noticed,  
The saints who intervene for us  
On behalf of our lost wonder,  
Who sit and read the poems  
Words were never enough to make.

## The Fat Woman in Bed

The fat woman hates her husband now.  
At this point, she is certain  
That he is a closeted homosexual.  
How long has it been?  
Twelve weeks? Fourteen?  
And then without kissing.  
The fat woman in front of the mirror:  
She bought the nightgown  
Thinking it was sexy enough  
With its sateen polyester drape  
To make her sexy, too,  
To smooth out all her body's lumps.  
But the fat woman's husband  
Laughs at her and asks  
If she still has the tags.  
So the next day she returns it.  
She tells the clerk it didn't fit.  
She will go home to her side of the bed  
And when she lies down  
All her rolling hills of skin  
Will spill out around her  
In a wide floodplain of sorrow.

## The Patron of Agnostics

The patron of agnostics filters out the prayers  
Half muttered with half hearts, unknowing  
And takes them to God on a silver tray.  
In his state of knowing now, he wishes he had not  
Spent so much time doubting while on Earth.  
God takes these a bit more seriously.  
When one does not believe exactly, only the greatest event  
Will cause one to turn to an act of faith  
And say "Oh, God, what have I done?"  
The agnostic does a lot of reading  
And feels only a small guilt. He was lucky,  
He thinks,  
He planned for all contingencies, ready for all  
Possibilities.

Se Cathedral, Goa

Inside the Se Cathedral,  
a group of men in baseball hats  
take photos and laugh  
though the “keep silence”  
signs are painted in Hindi,  
English, Konkani, and Marathi.  
They pose for a picture near the altar.  
The young nuns in gray and white  
kneel in the first few pews.  
I am too distracted to pray here.  
Above our heads, on gilded wood,  
Saint Catherine spins on her wheel,  
Stranded forever in that moment  
Of fear before the wheel bursts beneath her.  
On the floor, one of the catacombs  
has been laid open for tourists  
to see the crumpled bones of some Portuguese sailor.  
A naked bulb illuminates the grave  
And lizards have gathered around it.  
The noisy men leave at last.  
Above each exit, St. Catherine’s wheel, again.  
Outside, where Inquisition fires  
once burned, three feral dogs  
sleep in the long afternoon shadows.  
Out here, no marker for the dead,  
only the heavy brass bell  
that rang for every execution  
hanging silent in its tower.

## Compromise

To them, it was no unkindness  
To make me pile up basil leaves  
Before the bust of a goddess,  
To make me pour milk on idols,  
Toss flowers in turmeric powder.

To them, there was no cruelty,  
Though I said “Me Hindu nahi hu,”  
To hold me by my wrists and pallau  
Until I made offerings  
To the gods in the kitchen shrine.

And to them it was only right  
That I should sit and ladle oil  
Into the coals while smoke rose in  
Greasy clouds around my face, and out  
The iron window grills through which  
The house crows watched us.

And while I prayed another God  
Would see fit to forgive me.  
The aunties scolded me when I  
Cried, they egged me on, you must, you must.

I said I did not mind that this  
Was not what I had in mind in  
Childhood daydreams of wedding days.  
That much was true, but I always  
Stood back from these gods  
With respect.

So it is terribly lonely  
To not understand a word or  
Know what has been agreed upon  
Or what I’ve done that was so funny.  
But I did spend weeks beforehand  
Searching for a pair of white high heels  
Big enough for my feet, pale like wedding dresses here.  
So I packed them in my carry-on  
And put them on when I was allowed,  
But the aunties sent up an English speaking envoy  
To tell me “those make you look taller than him.”

## The Patron of Human Evolution

His body was not made to work on Earth.  
Every recessive trait is revealed in him.  
Polydactomy, hemophilia, albinism,  
Darwin's ear pits, webbing, a tail.  
He lived only long enough to learn the name  
Of God. His miracles came in the form of fear.  
The villagers cringed from his cradle.  
That man's body evolved is doctrine.  
It was designed to fit a soul, they say,  
Though not all prototypes made it.  
The Neanderthal a martyr to natural selection.  
In the proto-human wings  
Of heaven he sits with Wallace and Darwin,  
Making designs, charting alleles,  
Tossing chromosomes across the table.  
There are possibilities to test, modifications  
To make the brain more amenable  
To the troubles of the soul,  
Things to run past god. Wallace lifts a paper  
From the stack, the design he has posited for years.  
The patron lays a webbed hand on his,  
And whispers "they're not yet ready."

## The Fat Woman at the Weight Loss Meeting

She weighs herself in and notes that she has gained  
Another pound. The trendy women in the front row  
Are talking about what they eat for lunch,  
Since it's important that the whole room know.

Every diet begins the same way: this time will be the last.  
This time I'll get it. This time she will show she is a marble slab  
Ready for Michelangelo to carve, her sculptural bones  
Revealed after a lifetime beneath the heaps of flab.

No, not marble, she thinks, a stick of white lard  
To be peeled back with a silver butter knife.  
But she knows that after she leaves the room,  
And goes back to uncontrollable life,

And her packets of instant diet lunch, that image  
Will melt away in moments of need.  
The participants tally this week's calories,  
Their brains rumble with the urge to feed.

## Outsider

Tonight the Taj is on fire  
and Café Leopold, where you drank after class,  
is all broken and blood strewn.

On the TV, your city, across the sea,  
is under siege, so you are on the phone  
saying unreasonable things.

I may not know many of your words  
but I know curse words, political parties,  
and the name of the man

who praised Hitler and said:  
"Yes, I am a dictator. It is a Hitler  
that is needed in India today."

There is a man in my living room  
threatening to donate to the BJP.  
I take your wallet and hide it.

I go in the bedroom and call a friend—  
a Muslim friend who once said I must  
have tea at the Taj's stained glass hall.

Our talk, briefly, is reasonable:  
But he too soon falls away:  
"Two years ago in Gujarat.  
Two-thousand dead and no one gave a damn."

I have no place in either world  
(and sometimes am grateful for that).  
Your city seemed to spit on me.

But last year I bought shoes in Bombay  
At that shop where they throw down  
the boxes from a hole in the ceiling.

I told the salesman:  
"These are the wrong size,"  
when the toes pinched terribly.

But the salesman said:  
"They will stretch, they will stretch."

and you agreed, so I believed him.  
And I walked home in pain  
down Bombay's rocky streets.  
not wanting to think I'd been duped,  
wanting to believe they would give way  
to fit me, or I would give in  
to fit them.

## The Patron of Centinelan Extinction

He has samples of every species  
That ever moved or grew on Earth.  
In four point five million years past,  
And the millions more to come.  
Here, in menagerie, even those  
Left out of the fossil record  
Have names and all their beauty.  
Anthony comes by to speak  
With the fishes and swim  
And Frances comes and lays his hands  
In the deep wool coats  
Of Pleistocene Mega fauna.  
It was so cruel, they all agree,  
The tease of a dozen new species  
That strange day on the coast,  
When the biologists drove by  
To see birds and plants as yet  
Unclaimed by man, only to return  
The next day and find them bulldozed  
To the ground. A yellow bird  
Alights on his finger, what a shame,  
He thinks, that you will only be a mystery.

## Green Breasted Mango Hummingbird Found in Beloit, WI

In laboratory cages, finches  
Hop along their perches  
When the season comes  
In the direction of migration  
As though they could burst  
Through the bars and head south.  
The brain is programmed fight or flight,  
And mine is always running,  
Always unsure where it's headed.

When trains go by, I feel that urge  
To run and not look back  
Like my Uncle Chuck who disappeared  
And resurfaced three years later  
Better off all together.  
The Mango hummingbird  
Was not really lost at all,  
Just seeking something different,  
A change of pace, a change of scene,  
The nectar of unknown blossoms.

When he was sighted at a feeder,  
The neighbors gathered round  
To see the biggest hummingbird  
In the world, as big as a meadowlark  
Only emerald green.  
More than five-hundred miles  
From his northern-most range  
When winter came, it could have killed him.  
The zoo where he was taken  
Says he'll never be released,  
As he lacks navigational skills.

I, too, wake at night,  
Iridescent wings beating  
At the yellow bars of my ribs.

## The Beavers Lived on the Strip-Mine Lake

Perhaps we were cruel to shine the light  
Over the night-black lake, watching  
For the beaver's square brown nose  
Pointing up towards the pines.

We sent the light in the direction  
Of his flat tail's territorial smack  
On the water's surface.  
At night, I feared the water.

Glass black, obsidian, by dark made deeper  
Than in day, all its snags and broken logs  
Imperceptible from the shore.  
The beaver did not mind.

Perhaps, for him, the cool blackness  
Ringing him round, muffled  
The sound of the coyote packs,  
One howling from the east, another from the north,

Their wet noses pulling at his scent  
As he tried to outswim the spotlight.

## Rats

Today, running through the city park,  
I stop to catch my breath  
On a bridge above the creek.  
Here, trash bags dangle from branches  
And glide in black tatters  
Across the water's surface.  
I watch a wood duck swim  
Through the green water  
And find a perch  
On cool black stone  
By the combined sewer overflow.  
On the water's murky surface,  
I see a furry creature,  
Its naked tail floats behind it.  
I wonder if it's a muskrat,  
Or just a Norway rat,  
Like the ones who gather  
Beneath my birdfeeder.  
But when he comes closer,  
I see his thick brown fur,  
The fat cheeks, the round ears  
Pulled closed to his head,  
And see that he is a real muskrat—  
An original survivor of a world  
That has grown strange around him—  
And I can see he does not care  
As he swims along unfettered  
By anything like sadness.

## The Patron of Invasive Species

She does not have clear guidelines,  
Though Wallace and Darwin have made  
Their opinions known to her.  
After all, she sighs, *Sturnus vulgaris* in North America  
Is just as much God's creature as *Sturnus vulgaris* in Britain.  
For a while, she tried to move them,  
Dragging house sparrows out of bluebird boxes,  
Tearing up purple loosestrife on the river banks  
Moving goldenrod out of Japan.  
She tried to make Catherine of Sienna eat  
Her soup of dandelions and garlic mustard greens.  
Ages ago, God told her there was a plan.  
Everything in its niche, each creature in its place  
They will see someday, Francis tells her,  
The error of their ways.  
The victim of a new virus  
Brought by infected birds,  
She prays for guidance  
As she weaves a wreath of water hyacinth.  
Should she snap the delicate neck  
Of every rat, or, like innocents,  
Send them on their way?

Walking to Work in Galesburg, IL 4:15 AM

On those mornings when I got up  
long before dawn and walked  
down the silent Main Street,  
I used to stop in the gas station,  
a twenty-four hour place,  
green lights humming over the pumps,  
the clerk, always a different woman,  
always silent and bleary-eyed,  
my change clinking on her half-dozen  
gold rings as she counted the nickels back.  
Dolphins encircling opals,  
hearts of chocolate zirconia,  
a name, perhaps hers, perhaps a child's,  
a lover's, perhaps, punctuated  
by squares of rainbow topaz.  
And further down the road,  
the blue light of a television  
spread out from an apartment window  
and overhead, in the summer sky,  
swirling starless, purple black,  
the night jars circled,  
letting out their long, low beeping call  
as they dove unseen through the clouds.  
I saw one, only once, as dawn  
was just beginning, wide-eyed  
and whiskered against a pale blue moon.  
I would unlock the back door to work,  
stand in the empty store.  
In eight or nine hours, I would walk back  
along a crowded main street  
under a hot white sky and wonder  
where it is the night jars go.

## D.C. Deer

We, he and I, like to drive through Rock Creek Park  
at night with the brights on  
and count the eyes of urban deer  
shining back at us.

They gather on the edges of the park  
and gnaw at the leaves of  
ornamental trees only feet  
from Military Road.

He tells me the rangers leave food  
for them here so the deer stay  
within the park.

So that, unlike the fox I saw

the other day, bright orange  
on a mowed green lawn,  
who stared me down,  
and stared down

the small, oblivious dog  
I was walking,  
they will not wander out  
beyond where they are wanted.

## Habitats

On a cool afternoon at the National Zoo,  
No one was gathered around to stare  
At the pandas who sat outside  
In open view, bamboo leaves hanging  
From their furry mouths.  
In the misty air they appeared perfectly in place.

And rarer it seemed that day,  
A red-bellied woodpecker  
Swooped down into the habitat,  
Stopping for a moment on the fallen tree  
Searching for insects,  
A spark of red bright as a cardinal flower  
Blossoming in the swamp.

## Sense of Direction

I have a knack for getting lost  
For winding up on the wrong sides  
Of no trespassing signs, interstates  
Cattle gates, one loaded rifle,  
And one small mountain.

When the creek branches off  
Or the neighbor's sheep dog leads me  
Astray brambles, honey suckle,  
Ditches and debris force a detour,  
Getting lost is easy, then.

Though I go out to escape my thoughts,  
They always catch me up, like the night  
At the field station dusk turned  
Every deer trail into a path back home,  
And I whistled and sang this time,  
Hoping to be heard.

I worried about the well the farmers  
Always talked of, just a hole uncovered  
Where many pigs had drowned.  
The only light a half moon  
And some dusty clouds,  
I set my feet on dry light grass.

Towards the sound of barking and green  
Garage light, I climbed a nettle-covered hill.  
Two brown dogs were there alone,  
No answer at the door.  
They started at me.  
They would not approach.

## The Patron of the Angry

The patron saint of the angry  
Cannot stand betwixt  
The brick wall and your fist.  
Sometimes he is the wall.  
There, at the back of your throat,  
He holds your vocal chords still.

He carries a burlap sack  
Full of things people took back—  
Diamond rings and resignations,  
Testimony and treaties.

He beats the drum to the chant  
In the streets sung from the bellies  
Of the angry. He disconnects  
The wires of a thousand bombs a day.  
He will not tell you to count to ten  
Or take a deep breath.  
He hides the kitchen rolling pin.

He sometimes stays his hand.

## The Fat Woman at the National Park

At the National Park, the fat woman joked  
That she wanted to see bears.  
And she saw them—on the edges of the road,  
Young and hungry every one,  
Scavenging the thorny edges for berries.  
The fat woman envies them.  
Their frantic overeating justified  
By the coming winter, when  
Somewhere beneath these rocks,  
They will dream for weeks uninterrupted  
Fueled with layers of creamy fat.  
The fat woman meets bear's gaze.  
She does not move or run away  
And neither does he fear her.

## Rock Island, Illinois

Every time my father drove us over the Mississippi  
He took us to the Rock Island Depot, long since closed,  
And photographed the granite monument, commemorating  
The day in eighteen fifty-three the first Rocket trains  
Left from here, and though he has photos already,  
My father always took more. In relief, art deco trains pull away  
From some unseen vanishing point.

I never questioned breaking in. My father was a trainman,  
And his children assumed, invested with the power  
To enter the empty station through any open door.  
He wandered through the station's rooms, the offices,  
The long polished bar, the waiting room with its fireplace,  
Its delicate tiles, boxes of "save the station" leaflets  
Dated ten years past, timetables

For nineteen seventy-three, the year my parents  
Left from here for their honeymoon carrying their avocado  
colored suitcases. As he makes his inspection, he tells  
the same stories as if they were new. How he used to take  
his bicycle down to Iowa City on the rocket, how his father  
used to take him here to watch the trains when he was small.  
But under the high windows,

On the blue and cream tiles, shards of glass sparkle  
Green and gold. In the lime green bathrooms,  
The long disconnected toilets overflow, bottles and old clothes  
Gather in the corners. I used to pick up the old punch-cards,  
Sure they were filled with mysteries, secrets of the past.  
Beneath the mahogany hexagon, the ticket counter  
Bolted to the floor,

I crawled and searched for clues. Out back, trees of heaven  
pushed orange shoots up through the asphalt. Behind the  
Chain-link fence, we watched the freights go by, but who knows  
What long trains wound through my father's mind. In relief,  
A granite engine pulls eternally forward to a glorious future.  
As we stood there, a man came up with a grocery sack of clothes,  
Sleeping bag, and asked, "Is this place locked? I need somewhere  
To sleep." My father held the door open.

## Elephants in the City

In the city, I am at a loss  
For space and quiet.  
My apartment is not much for pacing  
And the ceiling creaks all day  
With footsteps from upstairs.  
Even outside, it is a strain  
To hear a bird and I am smashed  
Between the garbage cans  
And the oncoming herd  
Emerging from underground,  
Unwilling to yield up  
Some of the footpath.  
Even the dogs here  
hide behind high fences.  
I catch glimpses in the lines  
Of light between the boards  
And have to imagine their eyes.  
At the zoo the elephants stand  
On a concrete platform  
Behind iron bars, they eat apples  
From a bucket. People talk  
To them over the partition.  
I wonder if the oldest one  
Remembers something of home,  
Of open spaces. I understand  
Why elephants trample fences  
And break into gardens  
While the villagers beat  
Them with canes.  
I've heard that elephants  
Can communicate  
By sending sounds  
Over long distances  
Beneath the frequency of human ears.  
The sound of danger ripples out  
To other herds and I wonder  
If they are calling now  
Beneath the sewers  
Beneath the buildings  
The low rumbling of danger  
Dissolving into the Potomac.

## The Midwesterner in the City

When my mother calls to say that a year from now  
She and my father will finally have to move,  
All I can think of are the plants,  
The fat clumps of iris rhizomes  
Digging their toes into the surface of the yard,  
The tiny blue squill I waited for each year  
And the snowdrops miraculously breaking  
Through the ice and mud of March,  
The trees we planted, the birdfeeder  
Where three pairs of goldfinches feed every year  
In a predictable, cyclical return.  
I wish I could come and dig everything up,  
Drive it cross country in paper grocery bags,  
But my apartment window ledge is already too full  
With its four little pots. In the city, women crowd  
Their balconies with plastic tubs of potting soil,  
Fat green tomatoes hang precariously off fire escapes.  
In the spring, I will walk around, searching  
For telltale green shoots in other people's yards,  
The white roots of my plants will spiral downward  
Out of their pots, finding only concrete.

## Irises

My neighbor threw away everything he owns, it seems. Amid shoes, clothes, the cable box, I found a bag of irises. A trash bag full of fat old rhizomes. He must have dug them up, rinsed off all the dirt before throwing them away. I walked past them every day on my way to the bus. I have no yard, but I brought them home, sat on the back steps in my winter coat, counted them, chopped off the long dead tuberous chunks, tore off the dead leaves. They wouldn't bloom this spring, of course, it was far too late for that. Their color would stay a mystery, though I guessed they would be purple, lavender, white, or yellow—old colors, the colors people get sick of and throw away. When I lived in a smaller town, I rescued irises from the yards of buildings condemned to be torn down. I ripped the rhizomes out with my bare hands and carried them home in coat pockets, filled my mother's yard with hundreds and hundreds of them. I bought some, too. Shriveled up end of season rhizomes in plastic bags at K-mart. I stole them—a cluster of dwarf irises from behind a garage. They were gorgeous, maroon and deep yellow when they bloomed. Most of them lavender, purple, white, or yellow. When the city tore up the park, I wondered what they did with the native flags on the edge of the pond. "They bulldozed them," my mother said. I thought of the rhizomes buried and rotting beneath heaps of sand and earth, their blossoms forever trapped inside. I gave the trash irises to friends with yards, keeping one in a lonely pot for me. Come summer, my parents will move. It will be too much to take the irises. Perhaps, they too will end up in plastic bags with the trash. Walking around the city, I have noticed where the irises are coming up, spreading their bright green fronds. I will wait for May when they will form fat buds, I will walk for hours looking for the mystery of each new color.

## On a Wet, Black Bough

A cold April night, the rain  
Breaking the surface of the tidal basin  
The water already encroaching  
On to the path, you wanted  
To take a photo  
In the dark of the cherry blossoms  
Without tourists.

Expose the image long enough  
And the white will come through.  
You steadied the tripod,  
Timed the exposures  
As the colors burned  
Through the dark, through the lens.

I walked along the concrete edge  
Where the water sloshed over.  
One foot out of place, and in I would go.  
I brushed the clusters of wet blossoms  
On my face, cold water and petals.

In the end, it was as you said.  
The long exposure,  
Night turned to day,  
The flowers and water burning  
With light, and my silhouette  
There, dark between the tree trunks.

## A Warm November

It is strange so late in fall  
To find so much in bloom,  
So many leaves still on the branch,  
So many bees in flight.  
Among the fallen autumn leaves  
The gaillardia still in flower  
And one or two azalea blooms  
Adorn the barren boughs.  
Now when the frost should coat  
The golden fields  
The crickets still abound.  
And overhead the flocks of crows  
Circle aimless round and round.  
Beside the path, the clearest sign,  
The thumbnail nubs of daffodils  
Pushing upward through the ground.

## The Patron of the Slothful

Understands that you don't want to get up.  
Each day stretches out into hours, mornings, afternoons  
Of television, shouting kids, laundry to do, buses to catch,  
Meetings to sit through, dinner to cook.  
He pushed the snooze button for you at six.  
Six thirty. Seven. Eight. Eight forty-five, and nine.

He liked that dream you were having, the one in which  
Everything you needed to do was already done.  
You had said everything you planned to say,  
Cooked and frozen every meal for the rest of your life,  
Paid every bill, even made funeral plans  
And said every prayer you ever needed to say.

You were free to lie there, dreaming a dream  
Inside a dream, swimming in a cool, deep river  
Shaded by high pines, worryless and empty.  
Your body stretched out long and lazy  
Over sheets you really ought to change.  
The patron is lounging in the corner by the clock,  
His clear brown eyes fixed ahead on eternity,  
No twitching in his limbs. He has forever  
To wait for you to turn and rub your eyes.

## The Blessed Martyr of Waiting

He spent his life in waiting rooms:  
Doctor's offices, dentists, train stations, airports.  
He waited for the clock to strike five,  
The alarm to go off at six thirty,  
The evening news to end,  
The holes in his socks to grow larger.  
He waited for church to be over.  
He waited for life to end.  
Ask for his prayers when time moves too slowly,  
The mail hasn't come, the answer not arrived.  
Now, he waits forever  
Tending to the waiting room  
Somewhere between purgatory and heaven.  
He hands out cups of tea  
And a thousand back issues  
Of *Ladies' Home Journal*  
To anxious souls awaiting verdicts.  
They ask him, have you seen God?  
And if so, what did you see?  
He sighs and drizzles honey into another cup.  
No, no, I am still waiting, he replies.

## A Snake Poem

I know a woman who killed one with a shovel  
in her driveway, his mouth was open  
To show the soft white palate, the lavender tongue.  
From a few feet away, she hoisted the shovel,  
And drove down its steel edge. She sliced off his head,  
Blood and venom dripped down to the road  
Through the screen door, her children  
And dogs watched the body shudder.  
Over dinner, she cooked up metaphors about sin.

Spring in southern Illinois, bird watching  
In cypress swamp where even in daylight,  
Owls sat in the high branches over swirling  
Milky green water to hunt delicious snakes.  
Water snakes--harmless, yellow bellied--  
turned beneath the surface,  
As bright as prothonotary warblers. All the same,  
some children screamed. Along the path, unseen,  
Two cottonmouths sat coiled, sunning on a log.

When the reptiles come down from the limestone bluffs  
To make their fall migration, they are deceived  
By warm asphalt just as gulls mistake parking lots  
For bodies of water or songbirds smash into glass  
Seeing a reflected sky. They linger on the warm road  
They close their eyes and press their bellies into the road,  
And are flattened by car after car, the roads beneath the cliffs  
Striped with blood, the drivers befuddled, a soft,  
Soundless hiss.

## The Patron of Writer's block

The patron of writer's block is...  
Is no, cross that out.  
All these poems  
Start out the same.

The patron saint of writer's block  
not distracted by the dishes  
The dirty kitchen floor,  
The food sitting in the fridge  
That might be good to eat right now if only...  
He does not stop to mop and—  
No. Stop to mop? Writer's block?  
Erase.

His name is not indexed among the writings  
Of the Saints. Francis de Salle has infinite patience  
But David lobbies to uninvite the patron of writer's block  
From their heavenly writer's workshop  
And Pascal secretly concurs.

He never got all the way through  
One of his stories, which were  
Never quite good enough.  
Which were never really well written?  
Which were never worded right?

He died unpublished and unread.  
His notebooks full of blacked out lines.  
In the afterlife, he peels up all  
The words you threw away,  
The ideas that never worked,  
The poems stuck at one line,  
And the stuff that you meant  
To get to someday, but never did,  
And swirls them together  
Into songs for St. Cecilia.

## The Patron Saint of Plants

A slice of DNA carefully culled  
From the belly of a frozen beast,  
Or perhaps a few cells found preserved  
In the acid water of a bog are all they can know  
Of these wide, variegated blue leaves,  
These fat triangular seeds.

From here, from heaven's edges,  
The view stretched on forever  
Without time and I can see them all  
At once, from seed to blossom and back  
To seed, canopies fading, receding,  
Filling back in again all green.  
All slowly edges towards disappearance,  
The gradual change into something new,  
The new roots feeding off the old.

I like to sit beside them in the botany labs,  
These young and eager creatures in lab coats  
Staring through their microscopes at hard-walled  
Cells in wonder. The specimens are labeled and filed.  
If only, I think sometimes, I could let them in  
On the mysteries I now tend to—let them see  
The flowers of the fossilized seeds,  
The dark red lily that produced the pollen  
Extracted from the amber.

In the evenings, in my arboretum of God's handiwork,  
Gregor sometimes stops by and we brew tea  
From the strange new plant he is working on  
And tell jokes about the tree of knowledge.  
I show him the Pleistocene ferns, the Jurassic conifers,  
And the scent of jasmine's precursor mixes  
With the stinkflower, a tiny orchid lost to Agent Orange,  
And a yellow cactus flower soon to disappear  
Mingle eternally—the scent of heaven.

## Bird Displays

In the ornithology lab,  
I dusted off a Victorian display  
Of colorful birds,  
arranged as though they were flowers.

The tanager had faded to pink,  
The African roller to a dirty mauve,  
The feathers caked with coal dust.  
In the center, an endangered Costa Rican bird,  
Stuffed with cotton batting, posed as if in flight.

In the Natural History Museum,  
Near the bathrooms and a gelato stand,  
I look through the glass cabinets  
At the Carolina Parakeet,  
The only member of the Psittadae native  
To the Eastern U.S.

Stuffed: 1867.  
Extinct: 1918.  
Nearby, the passenger pigeons  
Nest in dried sphagnum moss,  
The Ivory-bill stands nailed  
To his deadwood perch.

This Kingfisher at the zoo,  
Glowing orange like a harvest moon.  
Extinct in the wild, breathing here.  
The reason why displayed alongside him  
In a clear plastic box—brown tree snakes.  
Here, they are safely contained,  
They only feast on zoo mice.

At night, the snakes coil around each other  
In their box for warmth.  
The bird sleeps alone,  
In a nest of dry sphagnum moss.

The Elkhart Public Library A.V. Department

Monday morning at eight forty-five  
they are waiting outside with their grocery bags  
the sharp black edges of video cases  
pushing precariously through the plastic  
that strains at the weight of their returns:  
ten videos or ten DVDs per cardholder.  
This is what they do each day because  
this is what there is to do. The doors open at nine  
and in they come, searching through the bins—  
“No, please don’t touch those, I haven’t  
checked them in.” “I already seen all of them,”  
a man tells me, gesturing to the room.  
“There are over four-thousand titles,” is all  
I can say. What I’m supposed to say.  
“Well, the library should buy more.  
I’ll watch these ones again,” he says  
putting ten DVDs on the counter.  
The clerks downstairs just don’t understand—  
the ones who deal in books, I mean--  
yesterday, a man sauntered up and said  
“So, where you keep the dirty ones?”  
A man returns another ten,  
the black cases slip down the slot.  
In half-despair, the patrons gather round  
as I check the tapes in. They watch and wait  
then turn away and say, to no one in particular,  
“Well, I seen all them. I seen them.”

## The Patron of Unanswered Prayers

We are sorry. God is not in at the moment.  
He went round back a few millennia ago,  
Mumbling something about testing new tree branches.  
Great success, you see, is always followed  
By a period of letdown.  
One begins to feel unnoticed, unappreciated.  
When you know everything and are its creator,  
Conversation is hard to come by.  
Work is in progress for a new universe,  
Something to keep Him busy.  
I'll give Him your message.  
I'll let Him know you were looking for Him.

## On a Family Trip to Tennessee

On a family trip to Tennessee,  
When my mother was fourteen,  
She wandered off along a trail  
Through the swamp where blanched trunks  
Stood in dark water dense with frogs  
And hidden birds.  
Her parents stayed behind,  
Not noticing her gone.  
Her sister lay in the backseat of the car  
Listening to the radio.  
My mother had a bird book,  
Outdated, black and white.  
She was happy to be alone  
And listen for the calls  
Of unknown birds,  
To look for blossoms  
In the hot damp soil.

Huge, bright, red-crested,  
Black and white,  
Beak long and creamy,  
Yellow-white,  
On the trunk of tall dead tree,  
A bird she had not seen before.

The forest ranger told her  
She must have been wrong  
When she brought him the guide book  
And showed him the page.  
There was no way she had seen it.  
Those were extinct.  
It must have been pileated, not ivory-billed.  
He said go home little girl.

On the news, forty years later,  
Someone got some film of what  
Might just be an Ivory bill.  
My mother folds her arms  
And says, yes, that's what I saw.

## The Patron of Swamps

Into the swamp, she disappeared to find silence,  
And found it there between the cedars  
Where the rain pools around the roots  
And the yellow snakes glide through the water.

There, with the owls asleep above her,  
She learned to pray and sing  
In the lushness and green  
Where she witnesses small miracles—  
Tadpoles, cardinal flowers, the deer in winter time.  
Here she saw the lone straggler of the Ivory Bills  
Who waited and listened for God.  
Upon her death, her bones sank into the mud.  
She has permission to climb down from heaven, though,  
And roost with the herons.

There are turtles to move out of the way when the trucks come,  
Salamanders to uncoil from fishing line.  
She gathers the frogs in her skirt when the water is drained.  
She lies on the layer of fill dirt, the ghost forest  
Growing up around her.

## The Doe

It is a sunny day at the country cemetery  
With its cattle fence surrounding it  
And an old juniper within,  
Our version of the cedar.

I sit on a moss patch  
Beside the place where daylilies  
And domestic irises are coming up.  
Someone must have left them here  
Decades ago to bloom above these graves.

In the ditch, the body of a doe  
Has been thrown from the road.  
The ribcage stripped down to white  
The disconnected legs  
And hooves cradled in mud.  
She must have been hit by a car  
And thrown here, perhaps out of respect,  
Perhaps just to clear the road.

The daylilies curl down the bank  
To embrace her naked bones.

## Reviving the Thylacine

“The Australian Museum has dumped its much-publicized attempt to clone a Tasmanian Tiger, or thylacine...from DNA recovered from a thylacine pup which had been preserved in ethanol for 136 years.” -The Australian Broadcasting Corporation

They line the incubator with museum skins  
So she will imprint on the odor of seventy years decay,  
But still the smell of her own kind.  
On the shelf nearby, the pickled fetus  
Watches from its jar the birth  
Of her twin through dead, unopened eyes.

The surrogate rejects the mewling infant  
As a finch finding cowbirds hatched in her nest,  
Only this is just the opposite.  
The lab techs take turns cradling her in latex gloves,  
They feed her koala milk with a syringe.  
She soon takes to meat.

The only one of her kind;  
Not even the taxidermied specimen,  
Its belly all sewn up with silk thread,  
Smells like her. Only cotton batting,  
Glue and dust.

Photos line the lab, black and white,  
thylacines hung between poles,  
paws bound, front and back,  
mouths still snapping at the air,  
men with shotguns resting on their boots.

The last thylacine, the last one seen,  
(Aside from the one who, according to the monks  
at the monastery, came into their kitchen to eat  
the bread left for the birds)  
was named Christopher.  
He was sullen and moped in his cage  
And died in nine-teen thirty-six.  
In footage, he paces along the edge  
He stretches his brown tiger stripes  
Along the stone walls.

Summer Vacation, 1965

Along the Mississippi, in a state park campground,  
My mother, then twelve years old,  
And her parents, always old.  
They are pulled down by the weight  
Of drunken farms  
And drunken boarding houses.  
They busy themselves with camp dishes,  
They busy themselves with fishing rods.  
They do not look at one another.  
A boat washed up empty this morning  
And it was none of their business.

My mother goes out later, alone  
In a small paddle boat, on the green water,  
Thickened with algae, thickened with mud.  
And her paddle hits something not grounded like rock,  
More solid than plants. Submerged, she sees  
The back of a plaid flannel shirt,  
The back of a balding man's head.  
His hands floating empty, a greenish white  
Tangled in loops of stringy plant leaves.

Her mother tells her, it's none of their business.  
Her father says the same.  
The police have been making inquiries.  
She keeps her mouth shut.  
At the camp store, she sees the man's photo  
Taped to the window.  
In her dreams, he turns in the water to face her.  
Bubbles rise from his mouth.  
It's none of your business, her parents say.  
You didn't see anything.