

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: FLY-OVER COUNTRY

Eva Foster, Master of Fine Arts, 2005

Thesis directed by: Professor Stanley Plumly  
Department of English

The focus of this collection is the geography of memory, human connection, and home, an exploration of an emotional and literal landscape. Fly-over country is sealed in the middle of the country and the speakers' consciousnesses. When the external world breaks through, it is in fragments: a memorandum on torture, a tsunami from a Japanese woodblock, a brief surfacing into a dystopic present presented through the voice of another poet. This fragmentation is central to the collection, which attempts to deal with the problem of experience and memory, dispersal and loss. History is addressed as a series of shifting and even contradictory experiences; landscape intrudes and recedes, in conflict with itself and with the speaker, who is often peripheral or disappearing into another perspective. The collection takes as its central subject the difficulties of estrangement and identity.

FLY-OVER COUNTRY

by

Eva Foster

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  
2005

Advisory Committee:

Professor Stanley Plumly, Chair  
Professor Elizabeth Arnold  
Professor Michael Collier

©Copyright by

Eva Foster

2005

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

FROM HIGHWAY 51 .....	1
SNOWMELT IN JANUARY .....	2
DREAM ARRANGEMENT FOR WOODWINDS.....	3
AFTER KAHLO’S SELF-PORTRAIT WITH CROPPED HAIR .....	4
BEFORE .....	5
TSUNAMI .....	6
HARBINGER .....	7
VALENTINE’S DAY: ECHOCARDIOGRAM.....	8
CHINCOTEAGUE ISLAND.....	9
FOR J. ....	10
LONG DIVISION .....	11
BLIND WOMAN.....	12
BODIES OF MOM, SON FOUND; EX CHARGED .....	13
JAPANESE LADY BEETLES .....	14
ILLNESS .....	15
NOVEMBER .....	16
NORTH OF THE CITY .....	17
FATAL IMMEDIACY .....	18
OUR NEIGHBORS HURL THE TELEVISION FROM THEIR BALCONY .....	19
OBSERVE THE WASP’S LEGS .....	20
ALMOST NIGHT .....	21
THE FIRST YEAR.....	22
ELEGY .....	23
STONINGTON .....	24
THE ASSISTANT: KA’ANAPALI HOTEL, MAUI .....	25
FILTERING MECHANISM.....	26
COVETING .....	27
A HISTORY .....	28
DEAD LETTER.....	30
NO SUCH ADDRESS.....	31
NATURE OF INVENTION .....	32
MY SISTER-IN-LAW MARRIES AT NINETEEN .....	33
FOR MY FATHER .....	34
MOLE QUEEN .....	35
OIL PAINTING 1977.....	37
MEMORANDUM.....	38
WAITING ROOM .....	39
SWIM .....	40
CALLING .....	41

## FROM HIGHWAY 51

for my mother

At the edges of tarmac where brown plants stand in fields, in fall, fallow, wild,  
I almost see you the way you were once, lithe and brown, bending and culling.  
Or passing the tiny, almost invisible creeks snarled with trees' difficult deep roots,

I see you rising from the bath's clear heat, its white mouthful cooling around you,  
then releasing you, and as you pull upward, your hand gripping the rim,  
the thin scar on your shoulder rises with your shoulder, your body follows it,

joining that climb into the loose, aerial touch of gravity losing and pulling.  
White noon sky confined by the horizon and wet from the pool you are ascending  
the steps the water sluicing away and back into its glittering sink. And now I can't

forget that upward motion or remember when you learned or how the hospital looked:  
recovery that must have been like crawling, the day you said to my father, let it take me  
whole. It didn't. I'm not wanted in this body, you meant. But the land doesn't want us,

iron-soil cracking like clay and the kind of poverty that's easy to mistake for hard work,  
and still, the fields fill with houses, the city digs a lake. I believed in your endlessness,  
the tender bones on your wrist as permanent as those rocks in the untilled fields

where flowers would spring up and die back to brown seed and spring up again.  
I can't stop myself. This is fly-over country, or country you leave if you can,  
the car's dreamed wheel-noise you can't wake from as the plains unreel their old fences  
and dry gullies, but it stays with you, all that unmerciful light, no one survives this.

## SNOWMELT IN JANUARY

Even in this all I've got  
is sadness.

                  The trees  
control the light  
like hitting a switch,

the grasses' false  
greens odd as graves.

I buy the seasons' new features  
  
but never figure them out.

My mother dipping her hands  
into the steel sink's  
still water.

My father  
putting the final touches on his silence.

## DREAM ARRANGEMENT FOR WOODWINDS

Lost in a train station, then the blizzard of islands

Collarbone, arpeggio in curving fifths, fall of

What's left is yellow    Fire season

Nothing but sand and that cutting grass

A long way to go still

Later carried up hills

All the way to the boards

Blue and half-stripped by salt, gray now, gray with

A lilt

All the way to the half-remembered cliff

The landscape a plate of flame    A globe

Sky the dome

Tide pools: little catches, blue-

dark invitation of tide and rock

Chain    the precise

Talons inquiring into incessant

Recovery

Noise of metal going to ground

At the center

Nothing, how far, how many?

Anenome    Collars open

Stung, talk of water.

## AFTER KAHLO'S SELF-PORTRAIT WITH CROPPED HAIR

It's when you decide you're not young,  
or to spite someone.

Off to the barber in your husband's old suit.  
Scissors at the fly. Yellow chair.

"Look, if I loved you it was because  
of your hair." *If?*

Tangled drifts. The snips  
and tufts lift a little as if wind—

you want to wrap yourself  
the way you knit surgery, grotesquerie,

webs like a wedding dress. Native costume.  
Or earlier, tenderly dressed as young man

in your best young come-hither.  
Here to ash. You always worked fast

as if already angry about death—  
at your funeral, sitting up suddenly

in your bed of fire, hot halo—  
oh, heaven, take it off.



## BEFORE

That summer bees got in, would press  
Against the paned glass rippled with gravity,  
Softly, not startled like wasp or bird caught

In a solarium and hurting in flight  
But again and again in the gentle pressure  
Of wings as if swimming toward light—

Maybe the walls were gold inside with honey  
That darkens now—that was years ago,  
I spent days in sun floating on the water,

Hair the color of honey, never the bright  
Yellow I wanted. It darkens now, shadowing  
Its old color, as I dream the walls full of bees

Where no one lives, or no one we know  
And so the same as empty, their hive, the press  
Of humming alive in wooden frames

Darkening with age, as wood does when kept  
From light, and under brick a hundred hard rains  
Move and retreat. Tide of bees to sleep me here,

Tangled city where light does not retreat evenings  
And the soil black with litters of trees, yellowjackets'  
Swollen purses of hives papery, dangerous

In the branches. And how did we get rid of them,  
Did we leave them there, in eaves, in framings?  
What a long time it's been, for me to think of

Their unrooted summer, could have been  
Even a single day, this comfort: infinite wings  
In the walls' long night, sweetness.

TSUNAMI  
after Hokusai

In the painting a white lace over the smooth blue well  
frames the mountain. Somewhere the earth  
divides itself and closes, as off the west coast even now  
the lips of rock contend with touch, meaning  
to move, changing everything.

Islands the wave slid over, erasure,  
right to left, clean as hand on slate: now the blank ocean  
continues, innocent, reflecting sunlight,  
and on the mainland, the dead open their eyes  
in the market square.

HARBINGER  
for Sylvia

No one could have told you from the ocean that day—  
it cools as the light drains down the west sky's dome,  
pooling at the edge, where night leaps out, sudden,  
water a bruise, sky reflecting its uncertain little movements  
that hit you like a slap. You're floating,  
disconnected, swallowed in sense, and below you,  
eels are opening their yellow eyes,  
the night-fish in their deep cages of phosphorence  
are hanging up their stores of lures.  
Impossible to disappear, covered to the neck  
in yielding opacity, the lit house on the hill becomes the moon,  
the hill becomes the river you'll swim to those  
last fierce heartbeats of your life.

## VALENTINE'S DAY: ECHOCARDIOGRAM

It's a gray muscle, shaped like a teardrop: wide at the top, tapering.  
You can see how those paper hearts came to be, their buxom tops,  
their wasp waists not so far you'd strain to see it, as now, she holds

the sensor's palm against my ribcage as that muscle, asleep in its ghost  
of tissue drifting from it like a train, opens and closes, indifferently,  
and like a washing machine, turns over its routine surprise.

Sixteen, in the back of your car at the pond we called "lake"  
because we'd never seen a lake. The catfish had their cold hearts,  
too, still, enduring the freeze we shivered through and took off our clothes.

I'd like to think my heart was in my mouth, your mouth opening,  
a fish pulled to the deck's bright air and finding a terrible world there—  
that reason the old poets called it "death," besides euphemism, that stunned look.

A stunned animal that shivers, then leaps to work. It arrives in the breastbone  
as if from somewhere else, then fast enough to dry my mouth it shudders  
at its work. The ambulance, electric valentine, plays a dry tune under the awning

while the tech holds my elbow, her train of dark hair gathered in a knot at her neck.  
She slides the needle in as if it's all a dance she's done sleeping, the red-and-white  
a dozen roses wailing toward a sleepless venue. In sleep, it happens: rapid patter

like if it talks less the audience will get up and leave it. Tonight there's moon  
that leaves your shoulder bloodless, something carved. I don't wake you. The walls  
dilate, then contract. I wait to hear the news, watching the look on your face.

## CHINCOTEAGUE ISLAND

At night we cross the bay's chalk cliffs,  
morning, the tide-flat smell smuggles in its heaviness,  
sleep we adhere to like a contract. The hotel's cat  
asleep in tattered nests of reeds: how doesn't she sink,  
a black burrower into the silt-stemmed grasses over water?  
The crabs in their sideways marsh eluding capture...  
I don't say much. You answer the same way.  
Across the cool slats of deck  
the sun can almost teach to whiteness, stripes  
of brown salt marsh: this place is built on water.  
The town, sulfur and fish and sand beach  
the ocean swallows more each year we  
come here, reading the paper's real estate section  
as if a story; the way the ledes scold  
Parks for not shoring the dunes  
marked *stay off, fragile*, and Parks  
replies decay is natural. Grasses needle  
what's left of them, but sparse.  
We don't belong here. The ocean's ironed thin  
with cold that moves like tides. Off season,  
the theater keeps its children's movie advertised  
till summer. The one good restaurant  
still asks for reservations.

FOR J.

Think of you in your little house, the baby asleep on the glassed-in porch,  
“second bedroom” the landlord promises to fix.

You manage the all-night sandwich shop ten to six, then lock yourself in  
the living room and let her crawl. You’ve learned to sleep listening.

Alone, you hope your seizures stay gone, writing to them  
in your head like the lovers you don’t want to see back again,

the one who threatened you with a gun,  
the vegan who wouldn’t let you sleep in his bed. To your ex-husband you say

don’t make me love you again. Don’t take the baby.  
If you last long enough,

you’ll leave behind the dry twisting grass  
that turns to fire in October in the hometown where everyone knows

the way your parents divorced. You survive everything.  
After a while we count on it.

LONG DIVISION  
after Kenneth Koch

Wait long enough, and nothing matters.  
The need to purchase what you thought needed purchasing passes;  
you have learned to do without it. Filing papers  
you thought would need filing as they gathered in masses  
until the weight of them slid a drift off tables  
you discover irrelevance in passels,  
insurance policies long since cancelled, solicitations, other hassles  
that diminished as you passed them.  
Leaving unanswered the machine's stacked story of calls, tussles  
for your time you couldn't face, you find the time has passed  
utterly from which these calls could matter,  
just as those old photographs, never put in albums, have gone from shutter's  
capture of faces no labels now remember to dusty stacks, or  
as continents turn under whole cities, until water  
covers them, or ice hugely patrols the dim shoulders  
and shoals of earth, and retreats, whole species shattered  
and remade, their strange cries and eyes the color of wheat having passed  
into memory that returns to matter, carbon, to the blank slate of atoms.  
So consider carefully what's worth doing, the irrepressible murmur  
of obligation urging you on, and on, repeating these tasks, or  
turning elsewhere, the small shattering pleasures  
of sidewalks or lit late-night signs that movement blurs, or  
taking on an attitude of despair, for  
these, too, scratch nothing indelibly, but will be murdered  
by time's indifference—nothing matters  
against the long view—choose carefully! The lovely blather  
of everyday tasks, the declaration of love: among infinity's dull stare  
are equally dust: what becomes of us?—but go on, blunder  
lovely through, hope dumbly. This too, doesn't matter,  
so do it, the universe indifferently clattering onward.

## BLIND WOMAN

In she comes held by two hands. Sunglasses.  
*Here's the chair. No. Left a little.* Now they take  
her glasses. Her son lets go her hand.  
Her husband moves to the desk to make her next  
appointment after handing her a magazine:  
*we'll read it together.* She holds it in her lap  
a hand along each side, curving it.  
When he hands it to her she turns her head  
before he speaks. Now she waits  
the way I imagine the dead must wait,  
a kind of silence that grows up like a row  
of hedges. Now she turns her face to me,  
her eyes moving over me as if seeing me,  
weighing something in me disinterestedly,  
her brows indicating a recognition, her mouth  
impassive. Setting aside the magazine  
she lowers her head and strokes one hand  
with the other hand, feels surely at her cuticles  
as if seeing. As if practicing what it is  
to be blind and now growing a little bored,  
letting the world back in in sips of strangers'  
faces thinking it safe to stare, in the familiar  
commonplaces of fingers. The way you might,  
diagnosed with some eventual darkness, practice  
first, learning to do even then without what you  
knew you would have only a little longer.  
The magazine has fallen to the floor: she looks up  
at the re-arrangement of air that is her husband  
arriving out of the cavernous mystery of the waiting room,  
its plants, its row of staggered chairs. Imagine that rehearsal,  
as even now she must be rehearsing with the practiced air  
of the professional who has done this so many times  
what he has feigned finally enters him.



## BODIES OF MOM, SON FOUND; EX CHARGED

Uncovering them, alluvial.  
An archeology, the dried skull  
Leathery, moon sickle  
Gap of grin in the white grasses.  
In Juarez, too, where no one looks  
For them. Utah's blue mountains  
Like a technology of scenery.  
Somewhere the uneasy  
Near-sleep of a man riding  
The night bus. No, he's at his desk.  
That light's been buzzing  
In the office for what feels like years.  
He almost remembers something  
But he has his other self on,  
Smiling skin suit. It lifts up  
The pencil and makes a considered  
Mark. Drops the dull coins  
Like eyes into the terminal dark  
Of the fare-box. The door sighs  
Like the neighbors, *if we'd*  
*Known we'd have helped her*  
And later, *but he had a hard life.*

## JAPANESE LADY BEETLES

Mustard carapaces  
under, wings tissue  
taffeta black trailing

like a slip when after  
flying landing  
on warm walls

not managing quite  
to fold flight  
back to its hidden

beginnings.  
All autumn slipping  
through crevices

in walls to congregate  
in the secret coombs  
dark to the joists.

Surprised or palmed  
to dark the smell  
of copper, bitter grasses.

## ILLNESS

The things that matter, you don't talk about.  
Elude discourse. Etude. Pain like a bowstring  
playing the breastbone, or the lungs  
sleeping there like a pair of steaks, slackened,  
sponged with blood, marbled. The words  
for things go mute with effort. Agree to disagree.  
Better to look at the way snow coming on  
leaves the moon in a swollen ring of that light  
that laps at everything, doesn't illuminate.  
There it is through the bare trees: look there,  
the unlit white a lake through the jointed limbs.  
Let's not talk about it, not when the deer are just now  
making their double-tracked way through the winter thorns.  
They'll eat what there is by the water until daybreak.

## NOVEMBER

Scalded milk  
into the coffee  
and the windowpanes  
blue at four-thirty.

Already the parking-  
lot's lights silvering  
the flat expanse.

How the door opens,  
how the unsettled night  
inhabits the undersides  
of little tables...

The last morning  
of trees finally turning  
each leaf red.

Tomorrow black branches  
are language you almost  
speak. Today: incarnadine,  
multitudes, dark at the palms.

## NORTH OF THE CITY

Winter afternoons the house grew into itself,  
secretive, its closets cathedrals of castoffs, its creaking white halls  
imagining the attic fan and spreading their roots into  
the rooms until the rooms were themselves transitional:

In one my mother sleeps into various species  
of pain and imagines to leave it off. In one my father  
labors over his taxes: the light is thin. Outside the boys  
are bicycling, the boys are honking their horns, outside,  
the undersized rabbits blink on in the lawn like discrete fog,  
then shudder in their clay burrows under the evergreen  
bushes the neighbors will soon uproot. The man next door  
dies in his sleep: every year of his life he bought  
just one box of the candy and edged with silver shears.  
The air here has been still for a number of years. I am standing  
on the driveway, waiting for the kids that climb our stockade fence  
to the unlit pool each summer the night we leave town.

## FATAL IMMEDIACY

*The danger in relations between women  
is that the daughter will eat the mother alive.*  
--Margaret Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*

How much you must have feared I'd never relinquish you.  
Hard-bellied as a ship that ninth month stretching into ten.  
Everything you liked was bitter in your mouth by then.

Even your husband: a gray lump at the end of a long chain,  
balloon full of nothing-talk that drove you finally to hospital.  
Induced, the indignities of shaving, crowds of students

receded before that bloody heave of me into the world.  
You thought to free us, not knowing I would always need you,  
my house, my skin, my meal, my wife, my self.

OUR NEIGHBORS HURL THE TELEVISION  
FROM THEIR BALCONY

Tipping over all the old shows, peanut butter on the horse's teeth  
to make him seem like talking and the pearl-necklace wife sleeping  
across from husband's fatherly cardigan folded neatly on the chair,

or the news hours' lipstick rendition of neighborhood sorrows  
and spelling bees in technicolor, every lisp—it's a heavy cabinet,  
the old style, pretend furniture with this wood grain,

baptize you credenza with a lit world inside instead of the usual  
liquor sitting there in the black until it's old enough to throw out.  
Either crooning out its salad devices and cleaning powders

at someone's too-vulnerable moment or else it stopped talking,  
a slick gray iris no one could shut. The railing is good and high.  
Three of them, shirtless, sweat to lever it. The landing, spectacular:

the wife dreams salad dry in a single vicious twist, the horse rescues  
the latest high-crime neighborhood. The winsome champion sputters out  
the winning words: *Angostura bitters. Maraschino. Triple Sec.*

## OBSERVE THE WASP'S LEGS

Picking signals out of the air as it circles,  
embroidering, embroidering,  
its buzz lining the window-blind,  
its neat, martial body:

brown tortoiseshell Wright-veined  
wings like a hard lampshade against the light,

teardrop head coming to a point.  
It tilts to the right.  
It lightly listens.  
Flight that hovers, a casual lilting,

approaching not directly  
its rustling fist of nest,  
shuddering touch of others,  
their eating,

their blind young,  
and mornings, the hover like nodding  
and landing on water  
and drinking and returning.



## ALMOST NIGHT

before the way it rains here,  
air to water, the air blue and lit greens of vines you walk under,  
midday, light turned wet as undersides  
of leaves. Life has denseness.

It crowds against itself. Tell the water  
to let up, the dark cluster  
of locusts to stop singing up  
the shadows in the corners of these rooms.  
Our houses already rotting as we lay them down.  
The slightest exhale  
a pouring biology of revisions.

This building as if  
rooted, as  
if bursting to flower  
and manufacture's fast autumn  
until windows tilt.  
The screen sags,  
the rain comes in,  
a silverfish articulate as water  
eats the books whose dust will cover you sleeping.

## THE FIRST YEAR

Folding and re-folding the tender crooks of jumpers  
stuck to each other like burrs in socks when later

I hiked to my grandfather's burned-down school  
in wild grass the red bugs sleep in, waking to burrow

under the skin: I spent a week in the house in welts  
you painted over with that patience you'd learned

to catch in your teeth. You smother them, that's  
the secret of medicine. And then? Your body

dismantles and uses what it can. They disappear.  
How familiar it must have been to you, folding

what I came along to unfold with my unformed hands,  
infinitesimal, remorseless. As later you taught me

to disappear into a book: if you couldn't talk  
to someone real at least you could have some silence.

Mostly I wanted a set of real paints like yours.  
The way you could fall into the paper's grain. To put you

on like a skin. If you saw yourself wouldn't you come to love  
what you saw, wouldn't you have to take what was in you and use it.

## ELEGY

First Alabama's dark eternal dirt  
And breezeway dog-trots and your childhood house,  
Then what the oil-fields smelled like in the dusk.  
The '30s poverty. Your mother's face.

P-38s: their ululating blasts  
Of sound that slowly beat your eardrums flat  
So now your "what" is what we can't undo  
Or breach. The boys who in the cockpits spat

For luck, and lifted skyward: there they burned  
Entirely, and killed, too, in their turn.  
And if returned, were changed. As now again  
They change with this forgetting that you've learned

As once your body unlearned hearing.  
Your wife you too lost twice: her early death  
You stumbled on. That whole, still afternoon—  
And now, too soon, it seems, as if a breath

Blurred her, her pictures lose their sharp relief  
Becoming just another swimming face  
Among the rest that you can't name. The years'  
Indignities: the brother you can't place

Who's dead of cancer, *our* names, those you know  
The best. It's *you* you lose now: *stroke*: as if  
It meant a gentle touch instead of these  
Undoings. Little failings. Now the breadth

Of love your daughters have's between yourself  
And anonymity. The house you loved  
You've lost. *I'm not myself*, you say, but you  
Persist. Your thinness. Your unrest. Who cleaved

The west and east pecan trees: trunk and branch,  
A graft of fruit that always fell, and root  
That weathered drought. Who ploughed the garden down  
Its red clay rows—whose hands remembered, wrought,

And kept their paces. Ringed around by death  
You lift your head still, don't you? As those boys  
You loved would rise on blackout nights, and lost,  
Would leave the earth, burning, that fire their voice.

## STONINGTON

The glacier's had it. Now the woods choke light out.  
Clear them, the field's full of rocks. People lived here,  
they farmed—mostly, the ocean's black-ice  
four a.m., boats holding their unswimming bodies  
into the choked fog and wide throat of foghorns,  
hands raw and slicked with the soiled sludge  
of bay-mud as the traps pull up, gleaming red with catch.  
Now it's restaurants, this one good month with the light  
gleaming late in the coves where salt tide's mirror-still,  
its rocky undergrowth and weeds visible, then sunset.  
Boats moored everywhere, hotels stuffed like cliffs of seagulls.  
When winter comes, the old dark self returns. The fishers wake  
to their cold work, the ice returns, the children go hungry.

THE ASSISTANT: KA'ANAPALI HOTEL, MAUI

She burns under klieg lights, fake Pele, local boys  
in loose loincloths just that age the women like  
to look at over chicken as the lights

go drinks-on-the-house-till-9 when her magician  
husband lets her climb in the disappear-you trick,  
the spin-you-in-half trick, her face the requisite surprise.

The husbands laugh hard, the wives smile. Her hard thighs  
strut the hip-cut leotards. Between each act she changes  
costumes and not the run in her stockings.

## FILTERING MECHANISM

If you stare long enough it begins raining.  
The bright sliver of beak astonishing the dull body.  
Work has its words: *site abandonment*, eels

Named *Lampetra* as if lit up. At the nadir  
Of cold lakes, unwelcome glimmer. Meanwhile,  
Mini-vans are experiencing a crisis on the news:

Who wants them? The armored helicopters  
Float muscular and delicate over the proceedings  
Of the first elected body. Democracy by show

Of hands and the slow attrition of car bombs  
And someone thinks for the first time *why not*  
*Put TVs in them*. Well, imagine the beach towns

In this light, gulls circling the off-season dive  
Graceless until they make that water landing  
Even in heavy surf. *Sleeps six* with Y privileges

For an even thousand. The songbirds  
Of Jurassic Golf catch *Rex* mid-bellow,  
Raise their children in his stalled jaw.

## COVETING

Spring's brutal—so sad, that's why we like it.  
The rain across the sky like a palm shading a lamp,  
the buses with their lights on the cold afternoon  
breathing out nightfall. The trees are grand  
with sadness: mother-of-pearl sky tearing itself  
to tulle in the wet branches. Everyone walking  
one by one in those first long dusks, down  
the avenue of telephone poles rich and full  
of wet light. They pause not at the parks'  
green strath, but at the burned house boarded up  
for twenty years, the lonely store we all know  
will never last till summer. When it's night at last,  
we rise up lit stairwells like moths, drink the water-  
cladded air in our sleep, and dream sad dreams,  
water, mirror, those bare halls—wake sad  
in that first light, completed by our sadness.

## A HISTORY

Before, my mother smoked. My father, too.  
My grandparents, packs until the air  
Was blue. My great aunts in their hazy house  
Smoked, one deaf, one blind almost:  
Could see my shape as if through smoke,  
Against the light.

In Catholic school on Wednesday nights,  
Between lessons on chalice and chastity,  
The prettiest thirteen-year-old smoked  
And told me how one afternoon she lit  
The Bic bright as an Easter egg until  
The flame ran out, then pushed to flesh  
Its two straight lines of wheel, a scar  
She covered at the wrist when, lit up,  
Got into boys' cars. And in ballet class,  
Later, leotard against the breasts  
I wanted, or wanted to touch, she'd arch  
Her back into her curve of arm, ankle-  
Centered, face near mine and hair beginning  
Its disarray would waft the smell of smoke.

At parties, parents' friends: their children,  
Too, now grown as me, know the flick,  
The hit of pack to palm, pull of breath, quick,  
To bring the flame along the stick  
To lip. Lipstick on the tip: my mother  
Took a pull, my father, *just for fun*—  
I was worried—and when my grandparents  
Lit them in the car, I hurried the window down,  
Migraine like a dark spike mixed  
With Da's gold tooth, Grandmama's perfumes.

High school: my best friend and I  
Wandered through the rooms of our lives,  
Lit matches and a cigarette. The light, the pull:  
It's *hot*, I found, another thing to strive, and fail,  
Be bad at—but my friend was cool, liked menthols,  
Like my boyfriend that summer in the deserted school  
Against the wall, down hallways, where he  
Smelled like camphor. Taste of a headache.  
Said *quit*, but he didn't, he left, joined the army.

(continued, stanza break)



(“A History,” continued)

Buried my—grandfather, two great-aunts,  
Who all quit smoking: first my mother with me  
Swimming in her like a fish, then the aunts,  
As if in answer, did so mid-painting,  
Mid-vacation, mid-letter. Died of cancer,  
Anyway—no, the eldest was a stroke:  
Smoking’s a pleasure, for the old,  
*And I don’t want to live forever*, she’d said.  
But stopped. And one noon bright as cut glass,  
Said *my necklace is too tight* and only that.

Da told me: *In the Navy, gave them to us  
With our rations, free, and no one said  
How I would need them.* Handed my grand-  
Mother her lighter, pack. Those two put  
Them down and picked them up like cards, like rocks  
Around the birch tree in the yard. I grew up.  
They stopped for good one year and we  
Celebrated—they would live forever or five years  
Until leukemia—Da, a vet, Hiroshima’s  
Clean-up team once, and still didn’t want  
The Navy benefits they used to treat him  
At the end, didn’t think they owed him—

And now, no one picks up a *cancer stick*,  
*Light, acquired taste* and I’m too old  
To learn the trick: pull and flick  
Of lighter over knuckle into fire.  
So after class, my students or my friends  
Light and, animal at their pyres  
Of leaves blossoming orange and up,  
I watch and breathe what cradled  
All my family into their next lives.  
The dark smell, welcome step through  
Some remembered doorway, one-note song,  
The sweet rain-on-grass tobacco taste,  
Cupped hand of fire: what makes and takes us.

## DEAD LETTER

*Such logic will lead / to loss without death*  
--Anne Sexton

Under my fingers.  
Under belly rising like a hill.

Sure, I loved you—like the cool smell  
Of dew rising from the night grass when  
I climbed my father's fence to touch  
Your father—

My parents slept their hot sleep,  
Sleep of the old.

When I discovered you,  
They woke: they wailed like mourners.

Did they see me and know what you,  
Already full of my blood, my taste,  
My air, there under my ribs'  
Frail cage, had absorbed already,  
Knowledge at the bone?

Is that why my father  
Bowed his head?

Because in the end,  
I chose. We all do. I wept, my hands  
Over you, because I preferred my own life.

NO SUCH ADDRESS

Little fly-wing.

No, smaller: may-fly's prism vein, sun-struck.

Small grub of mine. Blood-fed. You drank the taste of me like air.

Graceful as a bean, that kidney curve of your back, lovely ancient tail.

Shark's eye, black gaze deep as a globe, you must have tasted sorrow, resolve—

Your future, chemical, in the twilit thrum of the body—

Before I woke to

presence, necessity—

Hungry thing. Tree-root

Draining what feeds you its mixed self.

The earth would drowse too.

Felling what needs it, would try to speak.

Would wonder if you raised your head as these hands

Fell to root it up, save the host.

## NATURE OF INVENTION

The city moderates the forests until, like the apartments always spilling  
their late lights onto the spits of asphalt cars rush down in a blinkered fury,  
they grow small, heavy with detail the office-building reflects in its silvered glass

all day hiding those inside who labor dully. Out of its once-wide limbs-reach  
step the deer each night when the last car coughs its way from the lot.  
Their eyes are black as bark. When they dip their faces into the wet grasses,

they imagine themselves, their undangerous mouths wet, their necks arching  
like the buttresses of cathedrals, in a ring of trees, the traffic only thunder,  
the glass mirrors of the building like water pouring itself in silence from a height.

## MY SISTER-IN-LAW MARRIES AT NINETEEN

That summer you crawled underneath the summer stage  
in its crater of grass carved from the best wild park of our town  
and all the coaxing we did came to nothing. You emerged,  
as always, when the spirit moved you. Now you lower yourself  
into the long sleep of marriage. He's a good man. I regret  
nothing; maybe you will feel the same. *But you're so young,*  
my grandfather said to me, driving me down some road  
fringed on the sides with empty fields fallow with tall grass.  
We have buried him in the graveyard east of town,  
a flat stone like a mirror when I visit it in December... I mean  
the young mercilessly outlive us. You will survive  
what we did. That summer, *you're taking him away,* you said,  
as if your brother was going into the land of death. *Cleave,* said  
the minister, that word that means joining and splitting apart.  
You're so young I can still see your childhood trail you like a shadow.  
At the altar now, your hands folded together until I can't tell  
where they come apart, or what marriage: I am looking across  
the candle at your brother, half serious, half laughing.  
That summer you emerged when it got dark, of course.  
It's not so serious, I want to tell you, but what could I ever  
tell you that you'd believe? *I won't take him, we're not going  
anywhere,* I said, lying almost from the first second I knew you.

## FOR MY FATHER

Everything in the way you bend to bank the fire in this house you built  
and the long day starting at five in which you comfort your own mother,

the doppler-effect of small emergencies. Need like a drowner's grip.  
At night, your blue police shows, their lives starting with killings

like that's the key that turns the music box, your eyes opening,  
shutting until your dream is the argument for evidence. Morning comes:

you have put the night to bed as you once put down your own daughter,  
whom you know like night: asleep you know, words spill from you, your body,

ghostly, travels, doing what it believes is real. Morning passes, its work passes.  
Here in the afternoon of your life, your car, its clean gleam of paid-for,

carries you across these low hills not quite believing in themselves,  
their scrub oaks single and quiet, unknown, unrelenting.

## MOLE QUEEN

Within the colony a single female  
produces recognizable castes...

– *Encyclopedia of Animals*

Naked, we  
live by touch,  
fur of earth  
our boundary  
our warmth  
the dirt  
and pale twitch  
of touching skins,  
brother and sister.  
Mammal-hive,  
this is blinded  
care, cradle  
of claws, travel  
of sounds,  
each utterance  
through ground  
and bone  
reverberating  
to the pitch-dark  
throne and center,  
ear and reason.  
Who bears  
and bears us,  
speaks a weave  
of voices,  
nurses, moves  
seldom, who  
teems with we  
who tend her  
black eyes  
or skin innocent  
of hair. Whose  
sere sisters tender  
their thousand gentle  
regrets, sweep  
the depths, hands  
for brooms, make  
the rooms: sterile  
as doctors, who  
fix, scuttle past her,

(continued, no stanza break)

("Mole Queen," continued)

mother, our  
object, her reclining  
body, her dark,  
her fixed firmament.



OIL PAINTING 1977

It seems strange now that it is always there when I think of *sun*,  
behind the sofa, its frame a slick bamboo series of lines like the movement

of green traffic stakes hashing the bridge over the Cimarron River.

The mountain's Japanese line of volcanic soil, loaned red hearts  
of coals, from left to right rose into the air like a chart—jagged spike,

its lifted heartbeat—and over it all, mustard gold of the sun, its black

threads circling and losing themselves, its spheric ridges of paint,  
the way it glowed, a fire skimmed with oil, an edict, too, that

between afternoon's slap of heat in the yard flat from stem to stern

and evening's glowering in the west, I think of it, and turned  
to bed, my last, filial kisses be hand along the frame, furtive left-

turned trace of its stalled orbit, its mouthful of flame.

## MEMORANDUM

The virtue of torture is that it's hard to understand. When rendered  
in the clinical niceties of newspapers' earnest reportage  
(*loud rap music was played in the prisoners' cells, the prisoners*

*were interrogated harshly with the collusion of medical officials*),  
it loses its last glamour, darkness of the incomprehensible,  
romance of the late-night knock on the door and you don't know where,

becomes pedestrian, the trials barely penny dreadfuls,  
the pictures blurred strategically, losing, in repetition, the clarity  
of amazement and becoming only a thing that happened.

What's key is keeping it from happening to anyone  
who's anyone, or anyone one imagines knowing—and the hunger  
for information, too, you can use: stress how pressing our need to know

more about ourselves. Who can discuss, at dinner, on the subway's  
noise of momentum and politesse, the techniques, which are often ordinary  
and nothing we haven't heard before, the electricity, the false hanging,

the beating impossible to imagine, the shit distasteful to dwell on—  
no, things will die down. It will become possible to sustain further inquiries  
quite soon, with a modicum of restraint, with the wisdom of empire

we have surely attained, carefully, the way one must not incapacitate  
but only encourage, so now, we prepare the listener, we tell  
what he most fears and show him how easy rescue is.

## WAITING ROOM

Mostly we are old, fat or thin.  
Bad breath, shambles. We have  
the hospital smell of sterile band-aid

boxes and roughly cleaned skin—  
what's worst isn't the fear but that,  
discomfort, which no one tells you.

Everything is very clean, you'd be amazed  
how little care goes into that. The sheets  
scratchy. The gowns missing the crucial string.

This room comes to be your comfort.  
Busy, everyone in it dressed for lives  
they intend to pick up again, like knitting.

The lost gravity of suspension, as in water.  
You may go further here into the corridors  
you can imagine the look of: gray, many

doors leading to machines' lapsed etiquettes.  
Or on reprieve, encapsulated in the reproaches  
of the trembling elevator to the front hall

smelling of sandwiches. The streets  
deal in sunlight and appointment books  
while very far away it approaches.

## SWIM

The water's touch. Salt taste  
in the back of your mouth,  
phantom salt,  
the pavement's rock-salt whiteness  
lying to you, saying  
salt, natural.  
Redbud bleeds its stems  
into the white basin  
each spring  
you jackknife  
into the deep end's  
arrhythmia  
at Easter, the ice barely  
clear. Summer  
the dearness of water  
in a farm state.  
We pay. You learn  
not to see the cost of things,  
you turn away  
from the meddlings  
of water,  
father's offering  
to childhood you use  
when you seduce  
the lifeguard at the Y  
in your  
first two-piece  
slicing the bland expanse  
imagining it  
opened like an eye  
at night  
knowing even then  
how you would enter  
high, and fast.

CALLING  
for my mother

*Come here!* Across the house my breath jerking as my knees  
pull up into a hop you sing about in the kitchen, *my daughter*

*hops like a cricket*, you sing, *the dog is making some bread...*  
In the morning, your hands are animals speaking the animal language

to my laughing, and in the garage, they turn to tools, break wood  
as sometimes your voice breaks into that anger like siren, tornados,

*come here! Why are you such a mess?* You smash the glass—  
that rising rage that builds itself from nothing—sorry already

you've lost your voice when I hear your least whisper, even  
these years later in another place, where it wakes me

long past the last light you'd douse to talk me to sleep  
as if sleep were a house you were calling me into,

your talk the taut thread I could never unknit myself from,  
the scattered trail white and uneaten in the forest.