

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE 25TH YEAR

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2023

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THE 25TH YEAR is a collection that seeks to understand what it means to bear witness. Cataloging their environment is how the speaker reconciles their fraught reality, making sense of the disorder of living. This disorder is reflected in the form of the work, as most of the poems are in free verse, with occasional variation. The poems in this collection explore themes of memory, community, and ordinary human kindness – and meditate on how powerful the practice of witness can be. In the tradition of Baldwin, Baudelaire, and the flâneur, the speaker observes what can often be missed, in order to connect to their community and themselves.

THE 25TH YEAR

by

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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
2023

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2023

Acknowledgements

This body of work is the culmination of years of writing, laughter, tears, and learning.

I am so grateful to every atom that propelled me on this journey. I'd like to thank a few individuals that particularly supported me.

Thank you to my cat, Cow, and my parents, Lisa and Terry, for their love and guidance.

My thesis committee, for their gracious support, especially my director, Professor Joshua Weiner. Working with you these last three years has been a true joy and has shown me how collaborative and grounding mentorship can be.

My cohort, for their feedback and commiseration, and my long-graduated upperclassmen, who welcomed me kindly into the program's fold. My dear friends, for their presence and support.

All of my professors during my time at the University of Maryland for the gift of their wisdom, curiosity, and care.

And to my inspirations, who don't know that they guide me. Writers and artists everywhere – thank you.

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DEFINITION

Silence (n.):

1. : A BEING

- a. a purposeful quietness. Not the lack of communication, but the presence of a different kind of speaking.
 - i. A byproduct of careful attention.
 - ii. [] is generative. [] is abundant as grass and teeth.

2. : A THING

- a. natural, pastoral – of birds and sea and sky. It is the color of rain.
- b. a kind of privacy, an interior realm. Sound is privilege.

3. : A HAPPENING

- a. a persistent state of listening.
 - i. A liminal space between trees.
 - ii. Not to be confused with absence, which leaves something behind.

4. : A QUESTION

- a. tangible but porous; boundaryless
 - i. ex: air, stillness, light, and dust
- b. something that obscures, a veil. A screen.

I. BEING

A Summer

The window pours its after-rain light on the floor and walls, making panes of light gray on the black carpet that came with the house. The Colombian man next door is moving his tan Saturn across the street to avoid a ticket. His corduroy shirt is tan, too. He blends into the upholstery when he drives. The car makes a jerky K-turn to narrowly avoid a fat gray squirrel. The squirrel darts into our front yard and sheaths its claws in the grass, searching. I lay in bed for an hour after waking and stare at my cuticles, the island of iridescent pink nail polish on my thumb. I cannot bring myself to get rid of it. Breakfast is something I can't taste no matter how long I chew. I watch the man and his car and the squirrel's hunched body. The blue room of sky never fails. I do not read my emails. Instead, I drink two Blue Moons and watch porn with the sound up. During dinner, I push a plate off the table, just to start a fight, just to feel the hair rise on my arms. Brush my teeth until my gums bleed and keep going, the water turning from peach to yellow to clear again. I feel like I'm on that Japanese game show where you have to bite door handles and table legs and see if they're chocolate. I keep setting my teeth against things to see inside.

Harlem

The C-Town Grocery with its wilting
cabbages like flaps of yellowed skin. The juice bar's green
smoothies, before they cost \$9 and your dignity.

The cramped art studio in the basement of a church,
closest thing to a castle. They taught me how to draw
an eye. The Black-owned bookstore that went out of business.

My best friend's apartment around the corner, which held the forbidden:
McDonald's and caffeinated soda. His mother, a short and wide
Polish woman who smoked in the house. Sometimes she spoke
to herself in Polish, things she wanted to say to her mother
who died before she could send for her. Or so my friend said.

Some days the apartment was grey and stretched
thin as a veil with silence. His father, a serious and tall African man,
from which country I forget. When he came home
from work, he would unbutton his patterned shirt slowly,
careful. The palms of his rough worker's hands, white
undershirt stark against the dark of the kitchen
at sundown. We would watch him do it, chewing Froot Loops
and quietly drinking the rainbow-stained milk from the bowl.

He beat his wife. I don't remember the details, if I'd ever known them.

I did not know then we would move to New Jersey, so far from the known world
it didn't exist. He had a bunk bed, no siblings. One sweaty summer
we sat in the top bunk and watched the first Spider-Man movie
on the brand new DVD player. I kissed him there, fast,
Mary Jane laughing in the rain on the screen behind us. Just to see
what all the fuss was about.

Bolognese

It's a little untraditional. You ask me to try the sauce, full of whole tomatoes, minced meat, carrots, and peppers cut thick. Maybe a little too wet but its smell fills the kitchen, bursts into the hallway. The table sunset-dappled, the plastic kettle boiling, steam coming off in waves. Miniature clouds forming under the cabinets, collapsing

into droplets that cling to fake wood. We're pressed together at the counter, our edges soft as bread. My shoulder pressed into your arm, my hip mid-your-thigh. There is open space that we fill with laughter and olive oil and OutKast. Then quiet, nothing but André 3000 apologizing over and over. I look at you closer. Your square chin,

your laugh Turkish coffee with fresh cream, your huge earlobes. Your boyishness. Your bared teeth contagious. The way you hold the onion when you cut it, the curve of your hand around it, your wrist bent at a beautiful angle. My name in your mouth.

Notes #1

10/25/2021 – transcribed from journal entry

I don't know what it is in me that requires ~~cataloging~~ proof. It's as if if I do not have it ~~that~~ I am afraid I'll never be convinced of the world's beauty again. I think about the ~~beautiful~~ flat red leaf with yellow veins for hours. It returns again and again to the edge of my consciousness. What am I afraid of losing — what is missing if I forget its plain, startling color?

I don't know how to stay in the moment, how to enjoy the taste of ~~that~~ the leaf. I only know that no one will ever know that identical taste, and it unsettles me like a secret.

I am no good at separating my methods of desire. What I wish to own to hold to love without hesitation to kiss to possess in body bleed into each other. Do I want them in the way that is permitted? In the way that I promised, and that alone?

iPhone note, 11/11/2021

lady came into work – brown/orange stain on her pink turtleneck sweater. it looked scratchy and warm. her blue credit card (Chase?) has bite marks in it like from a dog but not quite. she forgot her mask in her car, she said, she isn't "like that". she bought an Old Bay door mat and 4 cans of roach spray

Soft Spot

Zoe sniffs in circles, falling behind
and running ahead like currents
though schools of fish. The trail raises
roots under our feet. Every creature knows
its path – even the termites have their pattern
and code carved into the dead wood.

Still, humans have a way
of forcing their mark. Feet wear dirt
away where one has stepped within others.
Stairs and rectangles of paint peek out
from the tangle of forest.
Something peaceful about
watching things end – the slow
snow showers of leaves, the dead
brown lightning, the rivers of composting brush
in the deep parts of the trees.

I'm writing to hold my tears back.
I don't know how to move on from this wet

unformed part. I'm a child with a soft skull. I'm ten, collecting wild
raspberries. My parents still hold hands. Plucking
gently else they fall apart. Damp New Jersey summer coats my lungs.
So unremarkable and sweet.

Before the Leaving

We rang in the new year every night, crowded like pickling sardines
or lovers at the top of Smoker's Hill, sharing a Foster's
because it was cheapest and shittiest
and we believed in penance. *I don't have a problem — yet,*
he told me then, turning the blue can in his hands,
condensation glazing his palms.

Spent my 21st making breakfast in the grayscale kitchen,
unbroken blood orange yolks losing their shine
under the heat. Norwich is farm country,
dairy cows on every stretch of grass outside
city limits. Three for every mile I traveled
to see the medieval cobblestones of the city center,
the Primark that boasted the trendy sherpa coats for cheap,
my first BLT with perfect slivers of avocado and honey.

He left in the middle of the night without saying goodbye,
I leave in the early hours, watching the morning
drip in. Cows in our wake. Gray blurs on green.
Only proof in the wet ring of his glass.

Coin

The morning glories that summer sent
wilt in the window of the log house,
their scent dulled by cold. The snow outside
is gray and hard as river stones,
but a path has been worn away,
carved through to the red door.

Ravens peck at the roof. Thin tin
cans pounded flat. For breakfast, dry fish
and corn soup in the dark room.

She eats slow, lowering the spoon into the bowl
gentle as a casket. Presses the kernels against
the side until they split.

The tundra is frozen over
and soon it will return the dogs
and machines and copper haired men.
Winter's breath clings to her neck
as she walks and thinks about lies and red
and how all men are the same underneath.
Skin cannot hide them.

They are red just the same.

In the dark of a long winter, the moon is a bright coin
cradled in God's palm. She is steeped in red.

She wants to be clean. She wants
a warm drink, she wants to take back
what she's owed. She wants to sever.

To be separate, like heads cut
from fish. To be rooted, like river grass.

To be spent.

II. THING

Daylight Savings

I.

At Ladew Gardens the cashier in the gift shop turns
to point out the first topiary scene, hunting dogs
carved out of shrubbery chasing a fox suspended in green.
Bunches of red berries only birds can eat and Robin's hair
a brighter, more distant patch of holly that hangs, untethered.

Thorny arches ensconce a nude child
turned out from pale yellow marble,
hair in frozen ringlets. A swan perches above,
trying to shoot water
into the gourd resting on hip and missing
continuously. The lily pads wear their funeral
dress. Nestled in the garden
a clementine gazebo
and a blue fish sprouting a plant
with tiny lime leaves that turn
towards the sun like petals.

II.

I hold your hand in my mind, turning
over your imagined palm to study leaf-veins,
dull under your skin, blue under brown
like mine. I have held them this way every night
before I sleep for the past week
to stave off the cold. The radiator shudders
awake for one hour every day at 6 PM,
long after the night pours
into the room, thick isolating paint.

208 to Ithaca

On the way upstate;
my mother at war with the GPS. They don't sound human,
she can't understand them, so I read her
the directions I printed out. I spread the map
we bought at a rest stop out before us.
Paper makes it special. The blue lines of the tracks
make their slow journey cross country.
It's a weird blue, a teal like the faded earth
tattoo on her back. It's smudged. It was cheap
and rushed and her skin has stretched. Her arms
hang slack against the wheel as if she's been driving forever
instead of a decade. They're toned from churning
mulch in her garden; the repetitive movement has carved
out muscle. She turns to me, "What'd you say?
Where's the exit?" and the sagging sun
catches her nose stud. It threatens falling
through the hole. She used to have a hoop,
but she has a job again. The light streams in
just below the sun visor and she squints, pronouncing
the groove between her eyebrows.

“It’s exit thirteen. 20 miles
‘til you have to change lanes.” She frowns,
marring the regal calm of her profile.
A sloping line, a wave.
She probably has to piss again. Even after
the surgery, she always has to, the phantom
weight of her womb sitting heavy on her bladder.
Her stomach is puckered like a silk blouse
gathered by a loose thread.

Canticle: Doors at 8, Music at 8:30

Half an hour late, we arrive too early, stand around in clots while the guys set up the mics. There's a cardboard box for donations with a few crumpled bills sitting on the table outside. The writing on the side says SUPPORT YR LOCAL BANDS!!! in someone's nearly illegible scrawl. The room is a collage of slip dresses, graphic tees over long sleeves, stick-n-pokes peeking out from under cuffed jeans. Docs and Vans in equal measure. Bisexual attire or the liberal arts standard? Someone is talking loudly about weed. I scratch behind my ear, my elbow, fold and unfold my hands. Put them in my pockets, take them out, bite my chipping nails. Check my phone. The first act finishes tuning his guitar. He plays 4 songs, drowned out by *you look so good!* and *can I have a hit of your Juul?* At 9:30 the real show starts.

The empty pockets in the room are filled by strangers. We size each other up: during the week we're tutors and tour guides, but we've transformed. The second band starts with a kick of drums, and they're off, playing a song that throbs in my chest, bass riffs slithering through the forest of bodies. We pitch against each other like marbles in a box, elbows out and catching cheekbones and ribs, trying to push each other back into ourselves. The sweat of someone's arm or neck presses into my skin, becomes mine. Our collective porous body of tears and bloody noses. It is peace and chaos, like peeing yourself when your father smacked you in the face, open palmed. All you could do was stand there in a puddle of your own shame, the hot imprint of his hand like a brand. When we pour out of the darkness, sloughing off sweat like ice off mountains, blinking at the fluorescents and catching our breath,

my hands are still.

Venerable Kassapa, 41

“A Forest Monk’s Lesson in the New York Jungle”, published in The New York Times.

“I’m a Buddhist monk, in case you’re wondering,” he says, smoothing the draped fabric of his brown robe. I am taking his statement at the Starbucks in Trump Tower. Periodically, my radio crackles loudly at my hip. The decaf coffee I bought him, no milk, goes cold on the marble tabletop. “I know,” I say gently. “I’ve been around.” His hands keep reaching for the cloth bag, finding air, falling limp. The sudden absence of the material is jarring — he’d come to know the cotton under his hand, the water bottle’s comfortable weight, white threads and slips of paper, a borrowed cell phone. Vanished. His tanned face is drawn but unlined. I ask him where he’s from.

Venerable Kassapa, 41 and six-foot-four, abandoned the smog of London for Sri Lanka at age 13 because his mother was dying. He’d watched facsimiles of kung fu every day after school on their old television, the blue light of the screen flickering over her waxy skin. He wanted a way out of suffering but the forest monks only laughed when he asked them to teach him to fight.

We tend to the mind, not the body, they said. Ordained at 20, he spends his time

alone or with other monks in rock huts. He depends on the charity of the starving.

He studies Buddhist texts and meditates. He does not carry money.

He eats one meal a day and has never had sex. People often bow before him.

In New York City, no one bows. In New York City, his simple cloth bag is stolen, no money inside. The American power, he was saying just before it was taken, can be harnessed for harm or for good. I explain that the bag could be anywhere by now,

Brooklyn or Bronx or in the trash, a million blessings and a million numbers, the careful chirography of their names discarded. “A lot of times, with nothing of value, they just throw it away,” I say. He nods as if he understands. I take

his temporary address, watch him peer into a trash can. He passes through the revolving door and pours into the jungle.

Dark-Watching

On my commute home I pull things out of the dark:

A homeless camp hidden in the tall milkweed.

A man with a white beard and a gray hat

packing something into a blue hiking backpack. The weeds are folded

over and pressed flat where he sits. On the bus,

a mother rouses her daughter from sleeping

to make space for a black man with thin oval glasses

and a large suitcase. The girl's pink dress wrinkles and distorts

a unicorn's white body. I can see into cars as they pass:

people eating, biting sandwiches sideways—

shaking their heads at themselves— people looking

around when someone honks, throwing up their hands.

Noise punctures the roiling of the bus' body as we ride: a shuffling

newspaper. A loud ringtone. The sharp laughter of teenagers. And flashes

of streetlights: a bread truck shaped like a loaf. Trees hunched over like canes.

Someone sits under a sign that says "good jobs for good people

just upstairs". I watch dark eyes disappear into deeper dark.

Wet as ink. Some parts don't come up clean.

Chinatown

We shoot out into the station, into the dark past
that. Turn the corner from the sleek storefronts
into Chinatown. The smell of honey-roasted peanuts rises
like perfume over piss-stained sidewalks,
my yellow coat a dab of mustard in the crowd.
The concentric slopes of the Chrysler hovering behind winter fog.
A couple walks in front of me, red mitten pressed to red mitten. Pause
under the streetlamp, its light a thin rice cracker
they stand in. Above, the *Chinatown Podiatry* sign is disjointed,
its matte red vinyl letters peeling and framed by old windows.
Every chain from TD Bank to McDonald's has a Chinese sister-name.

On the other side of the street,
an old woman in a plaid newsboy washes a vandalized window
altar. A weak light blankets the painted lady inside,
her chipped bronze hands raised in prayer.
The crowd parts around her: someone's daughter
on her knees on Canal, her acetone-brittle hands scrubbing
at the glass. All for one more glimpse of the Virgin's face.
I look away.

Dear Grandpa,

Bad news: the dust has seeped into every corner of me.

It collects in my joints like sand. Is it cold yet in Cincinnati? Here, it's just cold enough to see your breath. The tree outside my bedroom window makes bumpy red fruit that not even the sparrows eat. I spend my lunch break picking out the unbruised blueberries; the firm, pale ones that are somehow both sour and tasteless. The softest ones taste deeper but my teeth cannot bear to break their skin. I wait on the corner for my ride to the clinic and notice to pass time. I count:

two pairs of mint green shutters

one shiny cicada shell, separated from the others

eight cold quarters in my pocket for bus fare

three tents huddled together in an abandoned lot like children or birds.

I don't want to count anymore.

It is late November and the birch trees are peeling off wool stockings to reveal white legs. The inside of the Uber smells of yeast and flat Coke. She takes the side streets instead of the parkway. It means we drive past a black dog with stubby legs that trots across the street like a prize pony. It means we enter the pile of leaves the leaf-blower men collect and they fly to us like moths to light. Today I'm getting my COVID booster. I forgot my headphones so I think about the role of blood and organisms and dirt. Like how in *The Fly* starring Jeff Goldblum – have you seen it? Do you remember when he becomes less man than he was before?

The adding of an ingredient means the diminishing of another because there cannot be more than 100 percent of anything in the body.

But I don't know much about science. I just do as I'm told. It's all I can do to keep wading through the layers of black, looking for that high sun.

I miss you. I can't remember what you sound like.

Protective Factor

I laid there after I came and thought of the roadkill I'd seen on my commute yesterday.
Too small to be a fox. Too big to be a squirrel or bird. Tail too uniform to be a raccoon.

Why do I think of sad little deaths after my pathetic orgasm?

I fear every little thing is a dead body now:

Crumpled McDonald's bag on the curb

where the homeless woman appears every other evening.

She asks people in cars for cash like she's selling fruit. She's missing
most her teeth. Her eyes are milkwhite.

Everything's fine, everything's falling apart. I'm getting tired of trying
to have a good day. I take my medication, lie to my therapist.

I see a gray lump face down in the road. I can't let go
of the thorn in my palm. I'm tired of looking for beautiful things.

Is there any poetry left in me?

+

Cat-called on my way to the station while I sweated like a pig in the post-rain humidity.

He even whistled, like in some movie. *Mami*, he said, *where you going?*

Ritual

I am learning what men do and why they do it. Today, my father
teaches me fear. Mother watches from the house. I watch as if I am outside
myself, see the tense ripple of my arm pulling back and study the way an arrow
interrupts the joint of the deer, making the round movement of running
impossible. I watch myself pull my arm back again. The pop of the heart splitting
open. The fawn long fled, his body an arc of water in the green.

The static of the field. Dark shapes
and breath against clouded sky.

I turn my flashlight on, trying to catch the gleam.
First blanket of dark, then my gaze adjusts. I find her on her side,
the black marble bloodslick. It bores into me
even in bed later. Father says no such thing as murder
to an animal. Under the cover
of starless night, I dreamt I spent my life.

III. HAPPENING

The Garden

The weak necks
of the marsh grass bend
under frost winds into a bronze river of
my lover's hair. We've never kissed.
I show him my poems unfinished.

We descended into
the lake and shivered
into our scales.

What was my original name?
Tongue too soft now, skin loose
overripe fruit. As a child, I knew my soul:
It's bright and white
and when I'm asleep at night
it goes flying.

In the dream I crack open. To be perfect
again, my body must be filled
with wax, buffed smooth and fresh
as white soap. I wake up filtered, strange.

Stranger even.

He shows me how to peel away
my discolored skin. Its paleness
often confused for beauty.

I show him my heart in a cigar box
dug up from the garden, brittle and browned
by January dirt. He spits on it,
clears the dust
away with his sleeve,
and it shines like blown glass.

Degrees of Separation

The weather lounges between
winter and spring these days.

The gray humps of snow that will last until April
cast their shadows on the salt bleached sidewalk.

Day rests until it breaks, and light stains
the below: two scooters in love,
their handlebars tangled. A bright cardinal
landing on the sagging power line. Weeping willows
making new branches. Pale green streams.

When I rise, woken by the edges of an argument downstairs,
I put the coffee on, listen to the pumping grounds push
through water and the rise and fall of their voices. The toddler wails
a consistent harmony. I don't mind this noise,
or the creaking of the new neighbors through the wall. I like knowing
I'm still alive. Sometimes I feel like a silhouette,
only visible in outline. Things orbit me, I stay still.
I stay still. Things enter my shadow.

Notes #2

iPhone note, 12/17/2021 – The man and I walked parallel but slightly out of step. He was across the street, carrying a green reusable grocery bag close to his side, his head down, maybe looking at his phone. I saw him, and then he disappeared behind the thick trunk of an ancient oak. And each step we took together continued to conceal him until I was convinced I had imagined him, and stopped walking in order to prove he was real.

11/12/2021

On my walk home from work, noticing a thread of water filling the sidewalk's crack, making its way to the storm drain as if by some magic. I recall the static spring of 2019 where I barely ate and refused to open the curtains. I showered once a week, scrubbing off layers of skin to rid myself of the dark stain that had taken over everything. It was unbearable to be alone with my own noise, which I could hear even in a crowded room, even when I did not speak.

Over the phone, Grandma told me of the thinness of Grandpa's body, whittled down and dry as kindling. He wouldn't eat anything other than Cream of Wheat. He hadn't been outside in months. We two fish, twin Pisces, circling in the same inch of water. Barely enough to breathe.

I wondered – if I disappeared – who would know? Am I a person if no one notices me?

How do I know?

Permission

Drivers on the same route

wave as they pass each other.

People walk in pairs, plant trees,

buy rice in bulk, kiss cheeks.

Birds rise past the bus window,

a plume of dirty smoke.

I see you in my reflection,

in the faces of flowers and billboards.

Your name is hard candy

stuck on the roof of my mouth.

Two syllables, like a heart beat

or lock turning. I imagine you dive

into the 70% water of me

and cut it like glass.

Here, you squint blue across the damp table:

I meet your eyes then look away. Then say something stupid

to make you laugh. Quiet again.

The silence that isn't silence unfolds

under the dewy oaks. Families playing
soccer in the dying field. Dogs wagging their tails,
making the dry leaves stutter. Late summer cicadas
mate in the trees above the tennis court. The grass is still wet
though the clouds have passed. Sweat wets
your neckline, makes your hair a jewel.
It's 90 today but it will rain again.

I study your profile, partly hidden by the tall grass,
your low voice working its way through me
like a stream that breaks
up the green around it, carving into the land over time.
The sun drips its slow warmth in my ear. Past the bridge
of your nose two deer huddle
together, eating into the stillness of each other.

I try not to notice all the things I like:

1. growing in beard,
2. the way you hold your backpack to your side,
3. worn t-shirt with the bleeding lettering.
4. Your hair is longer than when we first met
5. but the back of your neck still tan from working.

Instead I watch you go. The sweat mark at the dip
of your lower back stretches and folds, then disappears,
your baseball tee and thin shoulders swallowed
by the couples kissing and mothers fixing
their children's hair, dogs and owners jogging,
loving each other. Allowing that pleasure.

How do I know you in the dark?

I know you blind. Only in dreams
may I see the fullness of you
without holding my breath.

Birdsong

A glitching computer. The chug and clunk of cars over the bridge. Cyclical, fading in and out. The chimes on a belt, a hip shaking, disturbing them. Salt water gargling, babies gurgling. A large crowd talking over each other like a fever. “Who? Who?” A low moaning. Faint rumble, so elongated it becomes background, a hum of traffic. The tense squirt of a water gun. The chirp of a child at his mother. The hollow sound of an open bottle and a harsh wind. “Wait. WaitWait.” Squeak and catch of paper towel against a clean mirror. Laughing dog. A sprinkler, speeding up as it sprays the lawn. “I’m here. I’m here.”

Aware of time’s shift

and my tangible weakness.

Can’t control my tears, my praise.

In West Orange, New Jersey

on the poorer side of a wealthy town,
I sat in the dust-prone apartment after school,
listening to the clunk and slosh of the washing machine in the closet.
Then, later at night, the airy whipping
of the clothes in the dryer. No windows, no door;
It was already sweltering in May.
All of my walls coated in the pasty and pubescent leaders
of the tweenage cult: Justin Bieber and Nick Jonas
and all the members of One Direction. Everything was purple
and sparkly then, afternoon light glinting
off the rhinestones and sequins.
The ancient radio was always on, NPR
or jazz or reggae. Sometimes an old Aretha
cassette, the buzzing hive of static breaking
into her voice if you jostled it reaching
for the rice. It was the only way I could sleep
when we moved to the new house, the boombox unpacked
before the frozen green beans.
The silence of new walls and rooms,
and later, the silence before and after the fights,

suffocated me with its invisible
smoke until I couldn't see my hand
in front of my face. Blurred like wet ink.

My parents wouldn't be home til late.

Brian Lehrer's steady spiel
cut through the creaks of the hardwood
and clanks of the radiator. His voice evidence
of distance, its clean sound
evidence of life.

Still no air conditioner. Just the stale air,
still despite the work of three fans. Unshakable
cold, even in the summer.

Paterson

It seemed like a day for rain.

So gray and restrained – like a secret

or a button too big for its hole.

Smokestacks and abandoned warehouses

towered over Peruvian restaurants. Everything is colder

near the water and stark against

its muted palette. Color mixes

with color until unintelligible.

Alone I might've cried: wind whipped

from nowhere, traffic swallowed the sound

of the rushing. Together we watched

the Passaic break into slices of dull aluminum.

The falls threw water back

skyward. The blackbirds flew in their curious murmuration.

Soft speech to each other,

silence to our evolved ears.

Notes #3

12/18/2021, transcribed from Post-it note

distant fuzzy sound between two phones of the silence
inside of the 24 hr CVS. the sounds of breathing and her
talking to herself, muffled by the fan and her hair against
the receiver. ghost sounds of feet on scratchy blue carpet
searching for ~~thermometers~~ thermometers and Pedialyte.

2/23/23 – transcribed from journal entry

I still haven't accepted that all this is what life is.

Buying roach bait. Missing the bus.

Forgetting to eat. Dental cleanings I can't afford.

I keep thinking that there'll be an age where I realize

there's a hidden passage into the place where I'm meant to be.

I know this place. It doesn't exist. You must make do. What you have is what you have: that's
the way life works. Make something out of routine. Collect things – collect nothings, too.

My childhood seems so far from me but it's only arm's length. What I wanted and what I want are fraternal twins. A comfy bed. A sweet treat. Something to hold in the dark. No one else to provide. My needs are my own, ~~now~~.

Ostrakon

for Mom

Today, snow falls
through the fingers
of trees and hides nothing.
On the drive home from the hospital,
I look for dead things on the side of the road,
heart jumping at every plastic bag.

Two months after diagnosis,
she paused while folding clothes
that had been sitting in silk laundry bags for weeks,
remembering something. "I've been saving this."
She pulled out a string of black
and white pearls so heavy my palm
sagged under their weight.
Behind her, birds kept flying past
the window, splitting the sky.
Lifting out of the frame, then falling
into the blue air.

+

It was a gradual loss, like overboiling water.

First the hair, then the dirtied spoons,

dollar store ceramic plates splitting

into butterfly wings,

the empty shake of her hands.

Leaving her quiet as vapor.

So I watered the plants, made tea, watched her eyes move

while she dreamed. Shaved her head to hide the bald spots.

More water, more tea,

the gas ticking. Warm towels for her feet.

The elderly couple next door gave us clothes

and expensive Swedish face wash.

There wasn't anything else to give.

Still, some things stay frozen.

She washes her face with orange

bar soap that smells like rain.

The plants in the front yard

haven't flowered in two years.

The house across the road

survived the fire, and wears
its new yellow siding
like fresh duck feathers.

+

On my birthday last year
Mom told me again
the story of the day I was born.
How I punched my fist
into the air and screamed my way out —
my first breath a victory cry.

+

Home from college in winter,
sobering after drinks, she parked in the driveway. Flicked
on the manual light. It gave her face an amber outline.

“I was laughing the other day and I touched my neck and felt this bump,”

she said, and pressed a slightly raised part
of her throat, near her collarbone.

(She assured me that she had discussed it with God and she would not die. I had not discussed any such thing with God. Sometimes, in desperation, I reached out the hand of my consciousness — my soul? — and asked God for an answer. I felt nothing but cold stillness.)

Yesterday

my phone's hummingbird

vibration against my cheek

pulled off the skin

of sleep. On the line, her breath shallow

and thin as reeds between teeth,

her words pulled out

like whining dogs. I listened

to the pre-dawn bedroom-dark,

the punctured balloon of her chest,

her pulse fast as a child's.

+

The last summer before diagnosis we made mojitos with mint from the garden and took long drives in her new car, a maroon sedan older than me. Sunset came over the Hudson and barely brushed us parked at the edge of the Valley, the discolored tar of suburbia spread out before us. She squinted, pointed out the Empire State peeking above the weeping willows.

“There,” she told me, guiding my finger,
her hand still sticky. “There it is.”

+

Today, we sit on the porch,
home from the hospital. Today, we got the good news.
I look at my mom now, her eyes a little sunken.
She won’t get the feeling back in her feet for months.
She can’t walk up the stairs alone.
Her hair hasn’t grown past peach fuzz yet.

To celebrate, we sip green tea and chew plain toast in silence.
Watch the man next door move his Italian sports car. The trees in the front yard
crawl into the sky. Count clouds and birds and leaves,
cataloging the living.

+

Five years ago, singing Queen in the car,
flying down the open highway. Pausing only
at highway rest stops for watery coffee

and single serve creamer.

“Listen,” she said then, looking over at me,

“I want you to write the greatness that I know is inside you.

But we are Brown people

and we need to worry about survival first.”

I don't want to survive. I don't have anything left

to package nicely. I don't know what the present is,

even as it envelops me in waves.

These shattered moments cling

together in my memory, brittle as terracotta.

IV. QUESTION

Temporary

I watch the world from my small box and follow the low sun.

Stray cats melt from bushes and shadow to bathe in sun.

On Zoom I look into everyone's bedrooms, digging my hands through their drawers.

Their green striped wallpaper and hand-washed socks dry sun-stiff.

Last night a breeze made my mirror fall. The oval glass fractured into pieces of light.

I fell asleep to the smell of smoke and the neighbor's grill flame, a midnight sun.

Still cool during the day, crickets hum jazz. Summer hasn't reached us yet.

A girl rolls her locs between two calloused palms, her laugh a slice of sun.

Someone's momma calls her girls home, their braids and plastic clips clinking colorfully.

They drop jump ropes and run inside for ice pops and morning cartoons: it's Sunday.

We carve our life out of garden boxes full of basil and lavender. We hide chipping paint and water stains under family photos and Christmas lights still winking in April sunset.

The neighborhood kids don't know my name but I know them by smile. They fly in packs of trikes and skateboards. It's okay that we're strangers; they're someone's sun.

Solstice

Spring shoots come late here, we leave
before first bloom. Grandma folds soft
olive bills into my palm, strokes my hair
and fixes my cap. A red apple slice against greyed grass.
We say goodbye to the black ice
and the aching. In its place,
I am gifted cramping, crumbling,
twirling, pollen allergies.
At 15, is there a joy
greater than talking to boys and pushing your chest out?
Their confused boy eyes—
what to do with that flatness,
that girl-body. It is March and the magnolias
are opening their folds. Some color has returned
to the ginkgo and to my grandfather's cheeks.
For that I must thank the body:
it has given me laughter and drunkenness,
these shaking hands.

Recycling

I am better at losing things now.

Bare feet clutching shards of glass
in grass. Geese take their night journey.

Things disappear without noise.

Feet clutch shards of grass.

Summer fires leave empty holes.

Things disappear without noise
and time wipes away all anchors.

Holes and plots burned empty
lined by wrinkled trees perfumed with rain.

Time uproots my anchors;

I thought it would stay static as I moved.

Rain's perfume settles in tree wrinkles.

Wind licks hair from forehead.

Nothing stays static. I lose.

I get better at moving.

Yesterday I woke early from a dream, sweat-soaked from the waist down. I thought I was eight again, wetting the bare mattress the night before we moved. My dream-daughter was nameless and dream-me went out for a cigarette and came back to her dead in her crib, still tucked in. I cried and cried, curled on the nursery floor until I woke up. But some part of me was still stuck in the dream, one arm lost in the flesh of it.

I laid in bed in silence for hours, watching the moon veiled by clouds, exposed, and hidden again. For one blissful half hour, the clouds disappeared, and the moon pulled its light over the bedroom like a sheet.

iPhone note, 11/7/2021

went to the Renwick glass exhibit with ryan to take pictures of the sausage chandelier i saw on insta

but i got distracted looking at the emptiness of glass – someone’s warm breath trapped inside what we think of as hollow

but air isn’t hollow, its living – like silence

typical artists – more than anything we want to put our stamp on things lol. like, *we were here, world! we lived!*

Next Year, Eastham

We drove into the storm.

The road swallowed by rain.

But once we made it on the Cape, the sun snuck out. Uncle Ron
and Vivian greeted us on gravel barefoot. We ate nuts and rye crackers
and he told stories of Apartheid. Clouds move quick when you don't look.
Soon the patio furniture was the only evidence of a storm.

I read Shylock's speech aloud by the fire. Hummingbirds flitted close
and drank. The snapping of the fire and the shuffle of pine needles underfoot
made a kind of song. Tufts of white ash rose against the dark.
Too humid for blankets, Kristine salts her wound with Cape air.
Peeled plum scrape already starting to scab.

In the morning, Turkish delight and toast with a brave chipmunk
who steals our scraps. I showered and brushed my teeth
and meditated on the toilet to the sound of air and crickets and gravel
and laughter. At night, we had dry white, grilled fish, leftover birthday cake.

On the last day we walked to the marsh, avoiding the tall grass and noseums.

The gulls flew past, taking the tail of my shadow with them.

No Outlet

Goodbye to the swollen bloom
that was killing who I love.
Its name I still cannot say.

Goodbye to my first apartment
and the roaches and the baby
roaches who are still children
and the old job and friends
who I don't know
anymore. What I knew is

tofu expiring in the back of the fridge,
over-fermented. Melted candles, rainbow wax all over
the granulate frosting. No one to eat with.

Wrinkled plums, bulging carton of milk:

Time trivializes. *This time next year I'll be living*

so good won't remember no pain...

New year's layer of paint
hides the stain, not the smell

of rot. Time is a negligent landlord.

I don't know how to love.

My parents and the sugar bowl my only examples.

What they hold irregular

and so small. Its predecessor split.

+

Too wet first kiss in the empty theater

and his hands a threat around my throat.

Body hot as welding iron

when he opened my mouth. That flash of heat is what makes you

pliable, makes you move. I wanted it

to be the thing that fixed me,

no matter how overdue. I saved the ticket stub.

+

Brown lovers on the Red line

his faded jersey her gold hoops. Red breaks

across her hair and eyelids and we chug on, breaking out

of the underground, the city flanking our thin path,
pale and separate.

Hands shaking. Can't feel my own touch.

Night rushes in silent, a fast tide.

Only thing to do is turn
around, go back where you came.

Dead ends all the way home.

How it Works

Joy is a room

things live in. Or

a transformer – a filter to see through.

We think we understand

how it works. We think

we understand ourselves.

Or is it a byproduct

of all the rest?

What will it mean, the discarded chaff

of heartbreak—? No matter, nothing is wasted.