

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

TENDING

Caitlin Reid, Master of Fine Arts, 2018

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Tending is a poetry collection concerned with the mutability of landscapes, stories, and relationships. In a mix of free-verse sonnets, found language, and discovered forms, these narrative poems listen for the old songs and everyday birds that drift through urban and pastoral settings to flood the speaker with memory.

TENDING

by

Caitlin Reid

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Acknowledgements

I've borrowed five titles that I'm aware of: "Almagest" from Ptolemy, "Casida of the Branches" from Federico Garcia Lorca, "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" from John Ashbery, "After Apple-Picking" from Robert Frost, and "Who do you wish was with us?" from Dylan Thomas.

"Cathedral of Learning, after Orientation" borrows a line from Octavio Paz's poem "Piedra de Sol" ("Sunstone"), translated by Eliot Weinberger. "Version Control" is a found poem from a Git white page on the subject. "Second Marriage" adapts language from a National Park Service Preservation Brief called *Repointing Mortar Joints in Historic Masonry Buildings*.

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Skyfishing

We play a game to bring the bats.
They have to be invited
at dusk when we expect no more
cars to cross our country road.
We crouch to drag our fingers
through the blue-stone gravel,
count down for the jump,
and scatter fists of stony bait
that tempt them to us. As we watch
for the rocks to pause between
their rise and fall, for stillness, something
tucks my chin to chest exactly as
the hard rain rattles down.
We lift our heads to light
sucked up by silhouettes of pear
trees piercing the horizon.
Then bats arrive as slips of black
flung about in dips and surges,
as if by the will of another
being on the ground
with a control box and antenna.
The bats hear our cast stones
as gnats and mosquitoes
because that's what they want.
We lie and they listen, as you are
listening now. Sonar requires
a specific kind of believing
after you hurl your own call out
to bounce around the different darks.

Self-Taught

there's a radial arm saw in our family my father gave my brother headed north
looking for land with his lover and child I remember my great-grandfather Charlie
balancing a pool cue on the two-and-a-half fingers making his left hand how winter
came and he didn't have shoes for school and a teacher gave him her old pair a
kindness too big too pretty too essential to be squandered you can't get back the
things you needed when you had them the man who raised my father took the safety
off to best cut teak candlesticks that burned the first time I tried candlelight a good
case for precious metals better hand-me-downs what happened to his missing fingers
I know without asking in our family you pick them up yourself

Almagest

City starlight struggles through the thick grape
arbor of a restaurant I can't afford.
I feel tired and late for something,
as if elsewhere's streetlights burn fresher bulbs.
Looking up is the oldest human longing.
I'm grateful for the alternative firmament of fruit,
predictable spheres to reach for from a barstool
with more than the naked eye.
I'd like to locate enough stars to string together
one familiar shape. On my father's farm,
a black velvet sky houses polished things.
There, I could show you your star sign.
Now a purple dark crowds the tea lights on my table
and what might be stars, satellites, or mid-flight planes.
Night doesn't fall here. Dawn doesn't break.
Days fade, and nights arrive already faded.
I'm unlearning everything as arbitrary as a constellation.
No shapes, no stories to trap and trick the light,
to cut and tumble the world into being
more than it is.

Epithalamion

There are songs that surprise
by lasting like snow
in the mountain's lee,
where a half-mile bluff shields the lowlands.

Sing song kitty can'tcha ki-me-o

On learning a nonsense song:
by the chorus you'll want another
version to get under or behind
the first fuddle in your ear.

Sing song kitty can'tcha ki-me-o

When language strikes out
in two directions, stripped of meaning
and double pressed, a second singer
makes it clear. In Gaelic or sun-struck woods,

*He-mo hi-mo beetle bug jingle
Me-he mi-ho pretty pennywinkle*

what you say twice
is true. *Ramp tom-a-doodle snake
A-rang tangle rattlebug
A-sing song kitty can'tcha ki-me-o*

When you want the words
by heart, write them down.

Waiting Where We Can Go Home

At the station where no train comes,
I sit on the hard bench of expectation

knowing precisely
the position of my mother's mind

on the shelf in a house
which no longer stands.

They say it sounds like a train,
the stillness after a storm.

Trains in the trees
when the water recedes.

Like Rose Oil in Wooden Vials

The Bulgarians need a home
for their goldfish. Peach
and cherry blossoms snowball
bloom with the apples
on our Appalachian foothill,
everything fragrant at once, delicate
as the valley of the roses

when they tip their glass bowl
into our irrigation pond.
They talk like birds
to their fish and each other,
then say in English,
Give more chances
than you get. They gift me

Pushkin, ACDC, my first
Led Zeppelin, some Zappa.
I go back to Baltimore weekends
for the market and report their fish
are multiplying into new colors.
I don't tell them a blue heron's
feet mark the clay bank nightly.

They're both degreed and gone
from Hopkins when a bigger
pond is built below the first.
Gravity feeds a few fish
through the connector.
They're soon enormous.
The same heron follows

and now a kingfisher finds
the rose-pink flashes
in our cold black water.
From the house I hear the thunk
of fish-flesh on the headless
drum of the overflow pipe.
I've seen him swallow them whole.

The Hell It Is

I don't know how to pay respect
or to whom. Honor is one fifth-grader
being sweet to another, wanting to believe
the real world is made of school rules
and real life has better food.

The boy with the reddest hair,
pure red like an excuse
to taunt and tease, he finds us
before school as busses circle
and spill children into the yard.

Something about your book-bag
makes him hate you. Lalala Bean,
he sings. Then he calls me
your little girlfriend, and I know
you'll show off your taekwondo

while a crowd grows amused
and mean. I like you best
when you plead and repeat
your schoolteacher parents,
bright-hearted, reasoned.

My sister took that stance
against our mother once. The nurse told
us, say It's my body. No one can touch
it without permission. Mom grabbed
a silver hairbrush and replied,

The hell it is. Childhood casts no light
into the future. I could still learn
to protect those I love instead of saving
myself. I've glared at injustice
most of my life, which is a strong way

of watching and doing nothing.
The redhead dies by fire
when his helicopter clips a hill
that isn't much of a mountain.
I'm stopped in traffic for his parade.

Mom strikes a bargain with Jesus
and keeps it. My sister still says to say
hi next I see you. I don't
admit you're in jail again.
They demolished that school

this summer, carelessly, no attempt
to dampen the deadly dust.
Nothing breaks down as cleanly
as it's made. The dust gets deep
in us all, and it stays.

Sugarsnaps

No one can shit in the psych ward
because the food is so bad, the same stuff
delivered to the county jail.
My mother's mind improves but her guts
distract her recovery. A cool spell

grants sugarsnap vines long lives this year.
They wrap their complicated
shoots across the trellis near my car.
I tear at the plants
to fill a plastic grocery bag.

It's been a week.
I drive a different highway
than I did this morning for work.
Crisp, sweet sugarsnaps will make my mother
less crazy than the others.

An attendant reaches under his desk
to open three doors.
I sign in and he sneers: Don't come here
with *that*. Shakes the bag. They'll
suffocate themselves, or you.

Peapods stretch the bowl of my shirt
in a country way of carrying. The empty bag
gets flattened and locked in a drawer.
I'm handed the sticky square of my name
that I wear on my visiting body.

Indelible

I think of you so rarely, I'll have to look you up.
But sometimes I see you in my son, in cities
you've never lived in or haven't lived in yet,
if you've kept yourself alive. Please be alive. Don't quit
staggering across the street while I watch from my car
with the windows up, wondering where you sleep these days.

A day-drinker weaves through traffic against the light.
I stop without honking. I'm less angry now.
As I wait I notice a butterfly land on a soft new sidewalk
and fold its wings in prayer. I should have pulled
the ladder up after us. I should have put you in a room,
door and windows shut. Don't come home to me.

Don't knock and ask my husband to use the shower.
Don't show up in the rain. Here comes a man with a sign
about the wet cement. Through its feet, the butterfly
tastes something hardening on its tongue.
I'm still in a red car stopped for you at a green light.
I remember our initials in wood, then stone.

A Visiting Congregation

Invasive bird, invasive branch. Heavy
is the tree with city kids, their eyes bright
as our yard's starlings. The flockful kind. Youth
groups bussed to the corner-store church line up
this Sunday morning. You step through them all.
Bubbles jump up your bourbon bottle's neck
like a level gone awry. "You judge *you*."
Wobbly in ankle-twisting boots, pregnant
until tomorrow. In the practiced shade
of the Tree of Heaven you lean against,
a forty-foot weed grown too deep to kill,
I pull at your arm to keep us moving.
Invited bird on invited branch. Red
light caught in the black of your undone braid.

Casida of the Branches

King-bloom, king-bloom,
half-brown by bud-break:
the limb that knows itself in other seasons
than lush, sudden spring.
Who sets out rainwater bowls
for the rented honeybees?
When the mountain shields the sunset
from the tiny fists of leaves,
some branches speak,
some listen. Funny how little
of a first eager star we'll ever see.
We say we love the water
when we mean where the light touches,
where our bodies are held,
a few inches (if any) more,
where water laps the ground.
I'm puzzled by the untouched edge of you
a few months out of reach
and by the honeybee's need
to drink. Buzzards swirl
and turn, riding thermals.
Black hands on a blue face,
still-winged over the dark-milk pond,
a sky that's right twice a day.
It's the stopped clock
we circle around.

Admittance

Past the window lined with chicken wire,
hot air warps people parking cars. Our side
is overly air-conditioned and much smudged
by hands. I have just tried to dress my mother
for the first time. She will not help me
wrap this thin cotton gown over her symptoms:
scars from the heavy traffic of organs and infants
across her belly, the blue ink marked on her
legs and breasts by a stray pen. There is no time
to wet my thumb and rub these things away
before the nurses return to fend off the dark birds
and burning tires alight in her eyes.

Killdeer

In the spring I wake to the tractor disking
the tomato field into good tilth. The combing
metal pings high notes of quartz and purple shale
like uncovered nibs on a music box. My father turns
the tractor in half-circles, led by the wing-point
of a grounded bird. Collared like a priest or a bowling pin,
a killdeer shows no distinct mark of being male or female,
something my father would disapprove of
if it occurred to him. The bird's parenthood
is spelled out by the broken-wing display. The gesture
looks sincere. The truth is a bird that hides
its offspring out in the open seems too stupid to survive.
The truth is a shorebird satisfied by a pond wastes its wings
while its chicks blend with the bare, unremarked earth.

My father dislikes surprises, startled by his own
father's heart gone quiet its thirty-ninth year.
There's a face he makes when the mower chokes
over rabbits or turtles. He brakes for most critters
he finds in time, before the harrow can claw
across a body like a pastry cutter. The eggs
must have come close to the McCormick's tires
as the killdeer took a running start, raised a wing, and called
its own name. How do such traditions begin
instead of birds that build a better home?
Tractor to tail feathers, my father follows
by the rules of a hunt he hands down to me:
Believe the bird long enough to lead
you both away, until it heals itself and flies.

Anthem for My Brother

Back then we had the radio,
jazz and justice coming in
good by the time we hit the first
state line, sun-up by the second.
One lane turned to two
and then six walls of traffic.
Always a crash to crawl through.

There was a sound in you
that wanted out—the apical dominance
of uncuttable hair—like the reach
of Hendrix at Woodstock from the fuzzed speakers
of the F150 with the spongy brakes.
Something for the commuters in suits
come to rest around us, you said. Patriotic.

You turned it up too loud for talking,
rolled down the glass, and pressed
your heart as some stared.
I'll remember this the dawn you head
all-the-way west with what you owned
turtle-topped to your Pontiac,
how bungee-corded together we were

to our name: a box truck, bad brakes,
the fruit heating up in back,
a blue bank bag at your knee. All our father's.
What work was, what we had
between us the years
I mothered where none
was needed.

Into the Dusk-Charged Air

Before he dies, before the set begins, Billy Higgins sways to something. For almost sixty years, Buddy Rich and Max Roach have it out on a wobbly record. In Nashville, one-armed Rick Allen keeps up by the river. Terri Lyne Carrington an octopus in Baltimore. Philly Joe Jones, not to be swapped for Papa Jo, though they die days apart after swimming on the set. All the men who stole the sock cymbal from Ethel Minor. Pittsburgh, the Hill District at night, Roger Humphries putting some *oeuf* on it, Art Blakey's Messengers. Elvin Jones always telling a good story with a punchline. Kenny Klook-a-mop Clark moving time from hi-hat to ride. Baby Dodds's shimmy beat shifting six over four in his solos. Bill McKinney and his Cotton Pickers subbing Cuba Austin, who then lights up Gene Krupa. Kofi Ghanaba getting Tony Allen ready for Fela Kuti's marathons. Rashied Ali gentle at the end of Coltrane. Dennis Chambers speeding past what Scofield has to say. Heels aching to see Vinnie Colaiuta with Herbie. Never a chance of Second Great Quintet Tony Williams, but "Million Dollar Legs" on cassette. Butch Trucks talking squash blossoms and Voltaire the day he goes. Lenny White with Chick in *Return to Forever*. Chico Hamilton with everyone. Chester Thompson after Zappa, Little Feat's double set but no double pedals (what feet are for). Richie Hayward's rock and shuffle before he passed. Richie Ramone at The Bayou in Georgetown. Jay Lane stomping swampflats for Claypool. Topper Headon before getting steady on heroin. Surviving his wife's wound to his chest, Al Jackson Jr. takes five bullets later in his back. Perfect timing, Clyde Stubblefield and Jabo Starks pulling James Brown from the wings over and over. Omar Hakim fluttering around Bowie and Madonna. The other Knopfler brother. Jojo Mayer with Nina Simone singing paradiddle melodies. Stanton Moore and his marching drum tuned way, way, down... So what

Neil Pert and Carter Beauford, sorry
Ringo. Nothing
like James Gadson in the pocket.
Eh to Stewart Copeland; too many toys.

But goofy Keith Moon, that dynamite.
Like Louis Hayes with Horace Silver
and Cannonball. Citizen Tain
with Michael Brecker before his death. Bonham's
Ludwigs in the basement. John Ware
watching The Hawks
when he was young. Levon at the helm.

Insane Ginger Baker seated
before his altars. Tito Puente's
papacy of sound. Steve
Gadd giving all kinds of weather.

The Cathedral of Learning, after Orientation

Cruel, that building, some doors gone
to fluorescent lights and linoleum,
key-stoned arches over lamp-lit wells
of stairs down sudden others. Flights we ran
up and counted wrong, testing
transoms and tapping windows.
Midnight-gentle. The summer your mother
lived in a commune, you learned locks
from someone who let you sit shoulder-close
on southern porches, who kept you out of the rain.

You brought two tools to college:
a Leatherman and the light-grabbing flash
of something I didn't recognize
the night we broke in the church
for a belfry we never found.
Thinking of thunder for cover
through that first good storm, of ringing bells
that weren't there. After thirty-six stories,
you can't hide how quick the gate gives way.
What happens when you try.

I see you still on that rooftop
with the lit grid of your life before you,
leaning into lightning strikes,
under balconies of rain.

Version Control

The task of keeping consistent
many versions
organized by who held it last

is run on your own changes.
Revert, compare
each point of failure

of centralization

(the question of saving
what's different)
of backup for when

you have the entire
history of a place
in one place and

risk losing everything.

Proofreading

I'm too afraid of permanence to tattoo
or pierce my body, still apprehensive
after urges long done, like pregnancies,
one of them carried to term. What's the language
of love-child and bastard but yes and no
to being who you've been. A new girl

at work garbles copy for our agency.
She has a kind of turned-up
beauty that scares me. I've never seen a tattoo inside
a mouth. She pulls down the tongue-side of her bottom lip,
where a fish would be hooked. Instead, ink needled
iridescent, the letters backwards

like on an ambulance. *Dirty South*. I don't know
why she's shown me.
We're both a bit unqualified for our lives.
I've wanted my own mistakes gone
un-made or penciled in.
Know things I won't. Tell them to me.

From a Glacier Since Retreated

Ice bluer than snow and dirty as something pushed aside
in a parking lot by a plow. I don't need to see all
the ice hoards while it inches along. Give me one photo
or an avalanche. Waterfalls gone stony, shelves of ice and ice
hung like sheet-rock, I am standing in a dry riverbed of cold
I can feel in my metal fillings, in the steel fixed to my boots.
I want to hear ice groan, twisted by underground rivers.
My lips and fingers are purple. I'm alone on a glacier in the rain
for a moment before the guide reappears. He's annoyed
he'll have to take me back. I can't breathe and he doesn't want
me to slow the others down. I've had this conversation with a man
nine thousand miles away. Everything sounds farther
in kilometers. The road signs say I'm traveling faster than I am
as I head into Albert Town to touch the buttons of a payphone,
snow on the Southern Alps pristine from this distance.

Oliver Poem

Some things I remember
differently, low-pile
high-traffic carpet, lying
under a table with our books—
By the Great Horn Spoon!—
windows bunker-narrow
and long so the light
had to angle down to us.
Fifth grade, you'd say third,
they would partner us up
for reading ahead.
For being hopelessly
behind in the work we did
when we felt like it.
We were getting away

with something. I remember
after school, honey-butter
bread, fried cheese
in your mother's skillet,
cider hardening in the barn.
Riding bikes around
the schoolhouse your father
fit with crown moulding
one long summer, then cars.
Ocean City, the AT, Maine.
One of us followed
the other to college.
On my way to class
I'd see you, no shirt
and shoeless on the lawn,
always high

on something. I remember
you singing *Don't*
sit under the apple tree
with anyone else but me
while you worked
through my friends.
I'm moving again.
Your chicken-scratch notes
line the books you lent me,
gave maybe.
Full of promise, promises

in rows across my desk.
And behind breaking clouds
climbs the slant of sun
careful as any body
through my window,
unexpected but sure.

After Apple-Picking

If it were five years ago I was dying,
who would it have been
who cared? That one boy
I could count on to board the train
Sundays I bought apples from my father at the market
under the bridge. Or the surfer who got lost
on the drive to the farm in the dark
and didn't want me after.
Or the sculptor who made me something
sadder than I knew.

I have made mistakes.
Thought it was going to rain
just now, how the wind kicked up,
the street trees losing their leaves
over and over again.

Street Sweeping
(for Bernard)

Praise the parking policewoman
ticketing the black Bronco
of my friend, my neighbor
who died at home
last night. Praise she who takes
down his plates, his model and make,
and later (if you believe
in anything), trust a higher-up
shall know his name,
and there will be a summons.

Counting Poem

Perhaps you, too, loved a grandmother
who didn't like people. Who loved many
dogs and one wounding parakeet, who kept a bird
clock by the dinner table. It chirped and trilled
rather than chimed each hour the sunlight spun
feathers and dog hair into your cold-cut
lunch. Into Coca-Cola that was mostly ice.

The clock, good company
for Ralph the bird, for ten of the fifty
years she lived without my grandfather.
She gave it to me after a doctor appraised her
blockages at ninety, ninety-five, and two
one-hundred-per-cents. Her heart
opened anyway at eighty-three

to try to save something we still wanted.
The natural symbol
is inadequate now: hiding
down the hall from my children calling,
my forehead chilled by a city window
where a bird sings and sounds
a lot like eleven o'clock.

Bananas for Stu

A few weeks before your wife left, you went
feral, showed up to the houses of friends
around dinner time

and I was out front pulling tearthumb
to put in a banana tree I'd traded for
with late-August peaches at the market,

when I still worked markets,
the year it kept hot through fall
and peaches stayed dense and true.

I was digging to shift the amended soil
where it could do the most good,
at the bottom, away from my bad mood

garden: wolfsbane, belladonna, rue—
I'd been alone so long,
trading for plants all summer—

when you stopped by to say bananas
wouldn't bear and would die
in a DC minute

of plunging cold, but that was the point
while I tried what came my way
without a care for winter.

Second Marriage

Mortar joints are intended
to be sacrificial, sensitive
toward the needs of historic
brick and stone. Slaked
lime and local sand
destroy a structure
if overly strong. Analysis
requires interpretation. Repointing
restores physical and visual
integrity, or detracts
and damages the masonry:

Mortar as bedding
rather than glue,
pigmented by lampblack,
brickdust, oystershells,
coral sands and locks of hair.
The joint is tooled
when thumbprint hard
to match existing bonds.
New construction bloom
fades through normal
weathering.

River-rounded sand,
free from impurities,
a handful is part void
between the grains. Good mortar
fills each emptiness. And vines
weigh down one corner
of the building, vines
planted by another.
I say they'll drag
the whole wall down. You
swear they hold it up.

Who do you wish was with us?

I've traveled a week without
this Welsh rain. The sky's held
off for a moment unweighted
by an umbrella. Remembering can
inoculate the clouds a little while.

The difference between a walk
in the rain and getting caught
in the rain is not the rain.
A walled garden's pressed name-
plates in Latin remind me I'll never learn.

On the eighth day, rain
drives me under the arches
of an old Swansea tree
whose name I don't know.
Magpies want the high, dry ground

and a wood pigeon sinks
its grip in my hair.
I swat at startled feathers. The bird
settles near, cautious, but stays
out of the weather.

Tumbling Run

We'd overstayed the weather in the woods,
a storm we knew was coming
though we drove to Michaux without food or packs—
the Civic's glove compartment full of drugs—

I've never been up for the mission except as chaperone.
Shrooms I can't eat because of stuff I know
they grow in get the guys high while we hike the lower falls.
Snow doubles and I wonder about coming down.

It's getting dark or I'm dying, Wagner says.
George and O won't talk at all.
My brother's prints loop off behind us: boulders
big as houses, sloped roofs, no doors,

holding left foot right and I see
him crumpled below in each gully. Catch
my breath and follow his billy-goat scramble down
and back up in the slow going of the not-brave,

of the congenitally sober. Alone.
Call his name, dulled
half-dark by anger, burned down to blue
warmth of worry. I'd always

hounded his adventures and brought him back when
I thought he'd needed it. When he does
answer, he's so close I reach out in moonlight held aloft
by a veil of pines and touch his outstretched hand.

Because he'd become a tree in a field full of trees and tried
to do what the rest were doing; as I try to make sense
of what sisters are supposed to do, no one to look up to, no one looking up to
me later, years after the long childhood spent rehearsing losses.

Kevlar and Calfskin

The first time I see a rock maple drum shell without its hardware and heads,
I think I'm looking at a tree ring. I think I'm looking at a year lifted from a nest
of years, one self-contained circle, a record of the wet and dry seasons.
I reason the tree's other rings have become other drums. A trap set of years

surrounds my father while he and I figure what's wrong with his snare.
Eight gut-strings wound with wire rest in his lap like links of chain mail.
He dismantles an instrument with the confidence of a man who builds things,
who trusts his tools, who never loses any pieces and will re-make them whole.

I get to listen to his busy-work banter if I clean lug nuts and tension rods.
He says about drums, *there's Kevlar and calfskin, not much in between.*
Dad relies on bulletproof durability. Tough new drumheads
sink black holes into the carpet. Part of me might disappear inside

should I reach for them. Without its skins, the drum's silence is a kind of nakedness.
Parallel grain runs the wood like ledger lines in a composition book—
like lines and spaces without their music on. I record everything my father says
when we work like this. *Two drumheads, get it? Not much in between.*

It's years before we all leave him. It's years before I learn drums aren't tree rings,
before I see one made from a plank ripped from its tree, unstraightened
by steam and steel, and sanded into a perfect circle meant to amplify.
I can't yet differentiate shaping from warping. I laugh like Kevlar and calfskin

and emptiness are all things I've long known. I laugh like I know my father well.
I've blown back the tiny feelers in my ears to be close to him. Asleep
on the quilt that muffles his kick drum, I think this is love, my heart bucking
and stumbling to match step with the mallet striking, finding its own music.

Crayfish

Because water caught the light
like flesh on the lid of a tin can,
Conewago Creek rose in narrow locks
and pooled the sunset.
I climbed after it to the ridge
where a spring the size of a child's bath
began from nothing. Water
occurred to a stack of rocks
until the damp spilled under leaves,
unnoticed, along the same logging road
I wandered each day of my childhood
that I'd care to remember.

I saw a beauty I wanted to enlarge
and did the wrong thing: I returned
with a shovel. You have to understand,
above the woods, where the orchard clung
to its cleared south-eastern slope,
fruit trees were dying in their rows.
My mother had paid a water witch from town
to site a new well. The dowser,
wife of the well-digger,
walked with a peach branch balanced
in her palms all morning, and divined what would be
a poor spot for her husband to dig.

Not telling about the spring made it mine
to ruin with improvements.
I numbed my hands for days
piling rocks and emptying the bowl
of old leaves and silt. Things that had lived there
dried on the bank. The spring bled mud
to heal its waters
of my digging. I sliced
a crayfish in half before I stopped. I'd heard
they could trace freshwater to its start.
It died among the rounded stones
with its face turned toward the source.

Against Elegy

You learned this somewhere,
the five mirrors
of loss. It's not what I want

for my children.
I'm going now.
I don't wish to be followed.

Give me all I have
before I'm gone
and I'll divvy it up with you.

Grant me buttermilk
in a cup
of the living world.

Allow me bread
that's risen
a few times, and slowly.

Where I've been
with you
less in twos and threes

than lonely, be alone
at my end's
unbuilding.

Pruning

You have to open up the tree
to the idea of bearing, center out,
sun to the lower branches. Slice at
suckers until your forearms ache.
The adventitious limbs are whip-thin
and incapable of peaches.
Cull them before the sap swells
everything green and pink. Any child
knows what to keep and where to cut
the upstarts. Underfoot,
they bloom for days behind you, unchosen
among the roots where they lay their petals down.

Hillwater

I.

I'd step off the bus and want the words
out of any music. I liked the wind's rush
down the orchard's slope, the cattle gate
swung wide to the woods and my ears
ringing. My skin
dulled the day's high blush.
Everything slowed and opened.
I went first by my eyes, mindful
for rattlers, second by my hearing
for the same. An insect hum from school
could linger like a colony
for hours in the brain.
Once the forest floor started speaking
like a small far-off fire.

I moved a broad-leaf brown's worth
of blanket to find the shape of a fawn
in beetlebacks that curved their eyelights up
at me. My whole life, I had the good sense
to keep looking for the things I found.
A hide beetle is named for what it cleans
and keeps whole, the kind kept
to expose museum bones and get the middle
gone. I walked the fawn's flat length
in the woods before learning
the rustling meant a river of nothing
underfoot.

Above, the devil in its acre:
brambles I remember best
for failing to thrive. Every farm
has one, untenable rock tripping up the silted hill,
sogged or cracked dry, wind-fallowed.
Some plants like to suffer, and you should
put them there. And my mother, sister, and I,
our habit of debt-hungry men
in their vineyards wild and tame,
eating grapes to give up the wine
harvest after middling harvest. *Autumn
sons and vernal daughters; careless fun,
then broken waters.*

Remember
burning the mortgage by the barn door?

Cars in the cornfield, campfires,
dances all night on fallen arches.
The exhaust of red trucks running
still sends summer's lemon-sugar hands to me.
How my first love heaved his heartbroad chest
under his apron when I was showy with a second child.
Pressing two sides of a tablecloth
with the tops of our thighs, all our decisions
neat between us. His wife a lot like me, heavy
where I used to be. It can take twenty years
to know a thing you're told.

Over and over
I returned to the trees I understood, retying
timber boundaries' blue flags that girded those I held
and looked up to. Old-growth gone anyway, toppled
and torn across re-sheared logging roads,
pungent stumps left to read and count out
my birth in concentric rings. There is a name
for the creek made from a spring that tumbles
next to its empty bed. You'll hear it
if you go alone, or with one willing
to say nothing a while: Conewago,
Conewago, *hillwater*
swept to falls in Lenape.

II.

Catholics crossed
the valley here in wagons
to build their brick box, hang thick glass
wed by lead. Valley of The White Squaw
is named for Mary Jemison, whose family was scalped,
whose cornsilk hair saved her
from having that part taken. Beauty
can protect like that if one wants it
to live and is better armed than another.
They lined us up in elementary school
with our backs against the board,
then culled the dark and short-haired.
Leaving bucktoothed Tina and bucktoothed me...

This tittering spool of yellow
-bellied cruelties I could have stopped
if I'd better known the ugly curled inside.
Always listening for danger, waiting
each footfall out on leaf-deep hills

in case anything poisonous cared
to lead. New-spawned copperheads
the worst for their unregulated woundings.
I heard a rattlesnake just once, one boot raised
from the dry creek's wiregrass,
but the sound shook the knuckled oaks
and swaying pines. I sweat
out the bone-knocked voice, thrown and echoed back.

Next steps are often
treacherous. The woodsman's son crosses
the road at twelve to quit clearing our apple brush.
He's felled a tree on his father. I'll fall for all four
brothers of the Mennonites with the accurate family
name of Baum. Back then, you'd notice my father's
Reid-red hair, our highland shyness,
my mother's Argento silver threading her
foothill braids. We are not far from the naming
of this place. Bears come for our grapes
from Bear Mountain. Narrows Road
is so. The waterwheel along Mill
Run has nowhere else to go.

Any path
leads to my grandmother alone
and sunk in her lumpy blue chair.
Oxygen flows audible through the house
from silver tanks to greening tubes
meeting under her nose. I'd kneel
on the carpet to interrupt the TV
so she'd say something sweet: *I see you
have the troubles with your hair
or I spent today with your pictures
and threw out the worst.* Stacks of things
between us we don't understand, her wedding
book on top.

We don't discuss
my grandfather gone to his girlfriend's
condo for the weekend. What do you call
a woman led on fifty years
alongside a man and wife? A town beauty
is stuck hillside. Her granddaughters
lack town or trousseau, though my sister
kisses the four boys next door and finds winter
trips for her life to grow. Grandmother
laughs at her black thumb in the garden.
She praises my sister's hands,
elegant and poised above keys or strings.

My sister takes music wherever she goes.

III.

Our family ends
before we each start our own. Our brother returns
from college to hear how to run the land,
money like water pulled up and put down
by the roots. More than we could tend, always more
to grit and pretend. Our mother
counts out crackers at the table, busy being thin.
She takes lovers my brother's age by spring,
when long mounds of berries need gathered and sold.
My father walks the fence-line all morning.
With three shells in his left breast pocket,
he finds nothing in the woods,
then his wife and a worker in the barn—

If you do not make your life,
you'll be given the one you have
over and over. Suppose
you were raised by a lady who fell
in love with everyone. You'd be cruel
too, taught to hunt by your father's wanders,
the first time a truck hit its brakes in the street
so a man could *have to tell you, you're something
perfect*. Imagine trying to stop
what you were, deep outside
looks you couldn't control. My mother's
beauty was a craziness she had
so long she gifted it to strangers.
Time has given it a name.

Some questions beg for an answer,
some answers beg for the same.
I lost the fed-beetle fawn when I searched again.
I thought there'd be bones, or winged
generations of the scavengers
I'd heard. I've never so faithfully
tracked back my travel.
Such a small death; I think I meant
to bring a piece home. Instead, all around,
a shock of white I'd waited my life to see:
the fluted necks of Indian Pipe,
sun-shunning flowers peeking

from the ground, curled like lampposts,
greenless ghosts nearly glowing.

There is one place I will ever know
and I've seen it for the last time,
covered in plants that sow themselves
to the highfield channery loam.
There is a field full of tiny bells
that stays silent over the dead.
Ghost flowers reach for their living
from the tangled roots of others.
I almost wish I could have shown you
and the children I would've liked
to dip in the creek's deep spring.
May there be logic
to such blooming. I stood a long time
before knowing to leave them there.

Tending

Better to be buried in the season of your own yard's flowers.
Though most of us, yourself included,
go in the month of unsold roses.

Better to be finite in your longing. I wasn't one
you woke for at the end.
This is handholding work.

Sitting on a carpet that smells like
everything you tried to get out of it.
There's a message I can't erase:

My sister says, quick now. They put you in a room
with the blinds down. I'll do the viewing
but do not attend

the dying. Why take my body from yours
while yours lived
tethered to the breathing machines?

On the other side of a wall
that used to be a door,
I hold up this book with my name on it.

Best to be remembered
by the church-yard's light across the valley, one that comes on at dusk
like a bird I've seen all my life and not heard.