

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: BROADCLOTH SKY

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The poet gathers images as a quilter collects scraps: to savor, to juxtapose, to integrate. But how can she explore the intricacies of her subject matter while maintaining a critical distance? These poems interpret, rather than impose upon, a series of interior and exterior landscapes that include seashores and snowfalls, the natural world seen in adulthood and the forgotten places of childhood, the real and the imagined. At the center of the collection is the quilter, turning remnants into folk art—using the sights and moments of her life to transform the ordinary into something beautiful.

BROADCLOTH SKY

by

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I

Shell-Gathering in the Keys

I watch a little girl collect
a few scallops, black and fractured,
discard them straight after without a look.

Down the shore,
a man sweeps his metal detector,
checks every buzz from his wand
for treasure or junk—he knows

why I turn over shell after shell,
drive a thumbnail into the grit
to unearth what's half-buried, to see
the whole of which only a part is evident.

Fire-tinged ridges
stand out from the pasty cockles and flotsam
as I look lower, knees cut by mussel shards—
unwilling to move from the crouch,

unable to leave one shell unexamined
for that flush of cream and flame.

Cherry Tree

Short, with sour fruit, the tree
was not what brought us there—
beneath its branches,
young grass shaped in a child-sized bed,
coverlet flecked with rotted fruit.
Sometimes, we picked smashed cherries
from the softness and laid the dolls to sleep.
Alone, I found I just fit the space, lying still,
a wasp's nest lantern just out of my reach.

A Study of Bivalves

I. *Razor Clam*

Like the blade that gave its name,
this shell is sharp enough to break skin
and fight, or slice resistant sand
and bury itself
in a hole dug fast as it flees.
Most days, every passing thing
is a danger to evade.

II. *Sea Scallop*

An edge of blue eyes
keeps vigil
between the ridged fans,
sees all sides
and views them as one.

III. *Mussel*

A heart
folded over,
two halves shine
with mother-of-pearl,
the same seabed gouges
on both exteriors.

IV. *Quahog Clam*

Like all the rest,
this shell's inhabitant latches on
to one of its two shells—
choosing sides.
The bruise-purple inner lip
still shows around
the adductor muscle, the foot,
but not as bright
as on the opposite side of the shell.

Biomechanics

Where ligaments should wrap around
the ankle, toe-shoe ribbons of tissue,
there is a paper-crackle of old wounds,
an intermediary made by the body.

Where the kneecap mountain rises
with the crossing of legs,
a pink fault line strains from the grind
of bones behind it, femur to fibula.

Where your hands pass over,
they read muscle and bone—
the story of a body
assembled beneath the skin.

When the spine forms a rainbow
brought earthward by heavy breasts
or some scalding grief,
can you discern the source?

The Red-Winged Blackbird's Mate

Only resembles her name in the rose flush
around her eyes.

Whispers her song
in the rushes. Listens for his,
the ostentatious call of her mate.

Does not miss the red-gold flash
of his fervor, the shake of cord grass
beneath his black wing.

Covers her eggs
with feathers the shade of her nest.

Covets the grackle's purple tail and head,
its rainbow sheen—

of difference— I also envy the bold flaunt

for her plumage, and mine, blend.
Wishes for color to give her voice.

The Asylum Dentist Speaks

Sometimes, in a mad person's mouth, you'll find
a crescent moon of fingernail not spat out, suspended

between gums and lips—shining over a seabed garden
planted across the tongue. Tall papillae flutter like seaweed,

gyrate in every rush of saliva towards the throat,
the current tangling debris in their tendrils.

The smallest are brain corals that mushroom
close to their source, or anemones that never retract.

Look hard enough, and you will see moonfish
swimming in a school, singing silver words

that echo against the teeth. Sunrise flashes
from their fins, orange across the mouth's red,

touching the ghostly bells of jellyfish that do not sting—
a universe pried open to light.

The Field

The mown grass mixed with brittle brown foxtail and wild millet
unsteady in the last expiration of a summer evening, last sun
cut sharply by dark at the field's far edge. This I see from the slope
behind my house, picking elderberries that bleed juice
on my skin. Picking farther than I've wandered before and might be
forbidden to go. Into the border of goldenrod and Queen Anne's lace.
Chicory stems gouge my hands. Then, a clear patch with a low birch
shedding white flakes onto a rusted grate. Soft pines on
the slope swallow the noise from the street before I reach
a circle like the roofless dolls' houses I shape of grass clippings,
but of flattened, scorched stalks. Empty cans around a pile of char,
with two torn-up lawn chairs. Two cracked mugs on a rock.
Then the mattress: chrysanthemum print tinged yellow,
sharp springs gleaming along the edges. One ochre handprint.
The violet-stemmed elderberries hide me, hold me close.

House-sitting in a Snowstorm

Outside, the dogs catch snowflakes on their fur.
I know when they come in, the frosted tips of tails
will melt away into the couch, leave a stink to permeate
the foam well into spring—but it isn't my place to cut short
the joy of running circles over the transformed ground.
Last year was worse: two blizzards in four days smothered
everything but the streetlamp, barely left the channels
cut by shovel and plow above the ground. In the nights,
I re-read *Narnia* beneath the quilts. There, too, was
an ice prison filled with contorted figures—men,
not trees—waiting to melt, the frozen castle's dungeon
pocketed with oubliettes like the world beneath my window.
Forgetting isn't possible. Another year, another place
that was my home no longer but I couldn't leave. You left
before the storm, but the space was unchanged—brighter,
perhaps, in the light from snow prisms upon the sun's return.
Thaw would be a long time coming, and you'd be back
before the ice cracked across the asphalt.
This storm, this space, are easier to bear. Through the window,
I watch the dogs beneath a streetlamp—orange like gaslight
in the storm—seeing then, as now, the boundary
into some other snow-filled world.

My Father Shows Me His Angiogram

A cobweb design with less complication:
fewer intersections of fine threads

but connections no less vital—
these, dark gray on glistening film.

Spider-spun weaving in his chest,
how can we ever overlook the pulse

of your catch, fail to feel your threads
shudder as it fights for release,

only to entangle more deeply?
Two frames on the sheet: the dark

is better, is blood and motion.
Steel mesh supports his architecture.

Decommissioned Warships in Pencil and Wax

I. Old Foundry

Where the crucible once melted iron ore,
brick walls glow with electric spots.

On hooks dug into the mortar,
hands hang canvases.

II. Cruiser

Listing to starboard, the bow
so far below the waterline that
cold brine pours into every open hatch—

the ship starts to descend.
There is no fanfare—
traces of sea and sky, the ship,

but no veterans salute this vessel.
Bulky towers rise above the decks,
with radar and broken smokestacks.

The thin crosses of masts
will linger at the surface
before they sink.

III. Carrier I

From below, its decks cleared of cargo,
you might not see a ship at all.

Broad deck and narrow hull join,
a wedge to split the water traversed.

Sharp points jut from the carrier's sides,
pierce smudges of sky. Or is it the sea?

IV. *Carrier 2*

The ghost of a whitecap
low on the bow.
Displaced reflection
of the rear tower.

V. *Battleship*

Long guns protrude from
decks stacked square upon square,
armaments on each side.

Pedestals can swivel to aim,
hurl fire at what they find.

Never quite idling at harbor,
it waits for the orders
that will not come.

VI. *Supercarrier*

All sides of the vessel warp: convex, lighter;
concave, darker. The integrity
of this carrier's steel challenged.
Pungent harbor waters,
touched by sun and shadow,
rot the tie lines infinitely faster.

VII. *Destroyer*

Guns on the forged pyramid,
smoke suspended from their mouths.

Flecks are sailors here,
shadows bailing out the wrecks.

Midwinter

A fox's footfall at the edge of the trees,
by crunch of ice betrayed, brings out
a body from the shadows—ears flicking,
fur dappled with mud and bilge
from shredded trash bags he scavenged.
Under the streetlight, he is gray, solitary—
the silhouette of a species left to wander
the remnants of woods beside
the high rises, dumpsters, parking lots.
I'm too far off to see his face, though
I should know it will tell me nothing,
won't reveal if he thinks this is all there is.
In his stillness, his fur softens from
blowing snow sticking to each short strand.
He shakes it off, and is gone.

II

Work in Progress

1. *Piecing*

A night humming with women's songs—
from the doorways, late summer crickets harmonize
as windows cast squares of light on the road.
Inside each home, shears divest shirts of collars,
trousers of pockets, snipping around the holes and stains
to keep the best pieces. It's easier to work in strips
and shape them into blocks if it can be done—
if the fabric doesn't run out too quick.
Inside this home, a woman's hands stroke
her salvaged material, and pick up each scrap
to lay against another, the yellow sheet
with the dotted poplin—thinking what all the women
will say when they help with the quilting—
building her quilt top long into the night.

2. Triangles in Squares

She marries the boy who brings water lilies,
each Sunday, to the doorstep. White, and still
radiating water from the river shallows.

White sacking on the scrap-pile.

She breaks the stem off the biggest bloom
and pins it to her dress. Looks away, modest,
from his eyes—looks down to the starburst
at her breast. Her new old dress of floral print
folds around it, the motion of breath
bringing the whole constellation to life.

These triangles, little cloth lily-petals
aren't crushed in his hand either as he lays them out
with her, outward from the printed center,
the white drawing the eye back in.

3. *Texas Star*

Stars in the river: a full moon sliced and drawn out
by waves from a stone skipped across black water,
buoying floating lily pads up and down,
the blossoms winking silver in the faint light.
Where the river slips behind boulders to rest,
five-fingered tiger lilies glow in a rock grotto,
orange stars in a cluster. How can she sleep
on a night made to go outdoors and fill her nightdress
with stems—lilies and narcissi to be pressed among
the pages of her schoolbooks for safekeeping?
How can she not keep the plain-colored scraps,
shape diamond patches into broad stars across the quilt?
Dry flowers slip from her books on the way to school,
a constellation forming behind her on the path.

4. Path Through the Woods

Red squares and blocks emerge from the solid gray
quilt top, the pattern unassuming—
two jagged rows for a path, scattered blocks for trees.
Quiet on the dirt track that shows itself only a little
from the may-apples and the undergrowth,
he blends into the tree trunk he leans against.
She doesn't let him know she sees. Her eyes search
for the next flower, the wild herbs to bring home
for her mother. Seeing one green among the rest,
filling one hand with wild sage and the other with daisies,
she loses the path more than once—each tulip poplar
stands as high as the next. No landmark but
a boy in overalls, swinging a pail of nothing,
walking on from where she lost her way.

5. *Quilting Bee*

We stitch one until it's finished, then move on.

So much work for one needle in one hand,
the designs that join the pieces
and decorate them besides.

*We have many hands shaping one pattern—
it takes some learning for us all.*

The younger ones rub their heavy bellies
and ask, *will it hurt much?*
The elders tell of rags bitten through,
of the colors and patterns that come unbidden
when the pain crests and recedes.

*Don't let the dreams slip out of you with the child:
everything has meaning for a quilt, and after all
you work with what you're given.*

6. *One Hundred Flying Geese*

Every last woman stares up at the sky in envy.
The palettes of early morning, ruby-pink,
and winter nights the shade of countless blooming gentians
impossible to recreate on cloth. He always looks,
in the store, to find her a piece of the firmament.
They go out walking now, evenings, up the road
and back before the twilight's dyes fade from the land—
sometimes, as they linger at the edges of fields
to see the spread of indigo blossoms against the green—
a sprigged calico clipped by the dark edging ditches—
she lets him take her hand. And when autumn settles in,
the gold of earth and heaven too bright to bear, they watch
one hundred geese cross the space between—
one hundred tiny patches on a broadcloth sky.

7. Spring Cleaning

By the third day,
after the dust is pushed out
the open windows,

and the floors washed
with boiled water and lime,
the house is at last clean

except for quilts thick with dust.
They need airing out as much
as their makers need a rest.

In every yard, quilts
on clothes lines or over wood piles,
turned from the sun so not to fade—

women dressed up and walking
to see joy spread across the town.

8. *String-Pieced Quilt, Unfinished*

Ghosts in the woods behind the shed,
flattened into shadow, show themselves
after his nighttime tales. First to her,
then to the children crying into the sheets.
Of the brightest scraps—oranges and purples,
summer whites—she pieces a top that glows
in the faintest fire, in all but the newest moon.
The string-piecing, triangles laid tip to base
in narrow rows, three long webs as of a spider
but *big enough*, she tells her children, *to catch
and hold a ghost*. She speaks of gossamer fingers
trapped in the tight stitching. Who dares approach
the quilt covering the heads of her small ones who,
each morning, shake away the night's haunting?

9. *Lazy Gal*

Not the right name at all.
Made-in-haste, or
needed-quick.
Not so quilt-like, these,
but truer names
for the quilt tops made from
strips-of-strips,
uneven rivers that flow
the length of a sickbed,
oxbow across
the shoulders of those
who need warmth
but can't make it
for themselves.

Due Diligence

1. *Autumn Haze*

For two weeks, it's been on the shelf—
no time for anything but sun-up
to sundown work—no labor of love in
the harvest, in the readying for winter.
Plenty of time once the frosts come
to fill the stove with slow-burning chips,
warmth enough to carry to the window
that lets in more than light. But it's not here,
not yet, the time of shawls and kerosene lamps
in the night, the windows icing over with the river.
She thinks of the rose-printed ticking yet to be cut,
in her bag with the elderberry strips to match
her fingers stained from canning buckets of fruit—
a longing that leaves her wishing for a freeze.

2. *Snowball*

Cold white batting:
snow over flannel-red mud
frozen for days now—
the earth a quilt turned inside out.

They scoop two hands full,
set the lumps into buckets
to melt for water, the solid white
dissolving over red fire.

Tree stumps in the yard
just show through the covering—
the children, feet frozen,
jump on them for respite.

In the years she collects all the scraps,
red and white, three snows fall.

3. *Sampler*

For her daughter, red thread to spell
“Waste Not Want Not” across the old apron bib.
A cleared corner of the table to prop her elbows
and lift the stitching into better light.
She won’t fix the mistakes or guide
her child’s hands with hands, only words
the way she learned: *push in, pull through*,
to feel the right way for a stitch and repeat it
the length of the seam without a pucker:
don’t hold so tight it’s not going nowhere,
done and undone so many times
the cloth smudges brown like old blood—
the girl’s hands are cramped when she throws
down the sampler—facing out, WANT.

4. *Housetops*

Each man builds a home,
each woman a quilt

in testimony of work

that could be lost
if a fire jumped the hearth

or a storm blew down
the sycamores out back,

but their home lasts

long enough for a son
to grow tall

and climb to treetops
all around the town:

shout of the split-board roofs
there's no two alike.

5. *Day's Work*

So many things need watching:
weeds creep up fast between tomato stalks,
hide in the flutter of carrot tops
all ready to overrun the garden—
the well's cover open and waiting
to admit one child with a soaked nightshirt
pulling him into the earth—
the beans in the pot boil away to mush.
Her day is made from tasks laid end to end,
held together with tailor's tacks and care.
When she sleeps, she dreams of the fabrics
piled by the treadle machine's pedal,
a collage unfurling on her table,
unstirred by motion.

6. *Intersection*

Two crossed strips per block—
fabric the shape of a whirligig

like her daughter got at the fair:
four plain lines could spin a circle

in endless motion. Until
the wind stops, and the hand

lets it fall. Two lines cross
as in a window divided

into panes, a cross on an altar,
one of white stone

atop a grassy swell.
On crushed reeds, his body:

legs and arms askew.
A star with one point gone.

Late Work

1. His Work Clothes

After he goes into the ground, she walks
past the headstone, past the mourners,
a widow making her way home.
Every drawer turned out. Every trunk.
The sun she sends back out the window
flashed off the shears she drives through
the legs, arms, backs of the clothes
that someone else could've worn. Denim,
all, in shades of indigo and sky. Some rips.
Easy, still, to get enough strips, lay them
at one another's sides. The church women
won't complain about quilting through
such thickness. Let her cover herself
with an arm she can pretend is not her own.

2. *Country Album*

Fire from the wood stove stirs
like water disturbed
by a windstorm blowing for days,

and the patches before her flicker
as the flames rise and fall
like the pull of a needle through cloth,
like blue ripples of thread linking rough strips

of corduroy a dozen years old—
she still stretches her scraps
across one project to the next—

into one wide, wavering quilt top.
Her late work: restless hands
make stitches turbulent as fire,
her age spots appliquéd to the thinnest skin.

3. *One Patch*

Hands flitting across the plane of air parallel to the hanging quilt, the perfumed docent continues her narration: *they use old clothes and remnants, so naturally, rectangular and square shapes are easier to fashion.* Which is why one side is straight, and the other tapers off where the turquoise—with yellow dots and white hexagons—ran out. *The others demonstrate more artistry, but you have to admire the coordination of color against the plainness of the blocks.* Goldenrods and Easter greens cut with blues and reds. Cut and pieced one at a time, they fit as though always joined. One patch of a dress, of a curtain, of a worn-out cushion, until the bed is covered.

4. Trip Around the World

When I go to choose the palette,
twenty-four concentric diamonds,
the task feels too great.
Rows of fabrics bloom from the shelves:
vines curling around the cardboard bolts,
scatters of tiny daisies—
smell of starch holding the factory's crease
in fabrics unspoiled by wash or wear.
The pattern is not of my making.
Yet I bring color to the grid of squares,
paint them through my piecing.
I think, at last, in shades of a sunrise
laying rows of color across a hill, a rainbow
progression outward from one center patch.

5. *Work in Progress*

Late in the night, my old Singer's thrum
a steady dip-pull of oars in a river,
the ball-point needle churning through
the stacked top, batting, backing—
joining layers that are nothing alone.
Stitch and backstitch to anchor the seams,
then the slow straight motion of needle
through fabric beneath the presser foot,
the quilt top spreading across the table
as it comes, stitched, out the other side.
Patches are fields, edging rivers, or perhaps
are themselves the rivers—water that stills
and changes with the moon and wind,
with every shift in vantage.

III

Hydromancy

I.

What lovers throw into water after the end:
house keys on their silver rings,
pendants on chains, bright gold wedding bands
that skim before sinking,
flower crowns woven from first bouquets,
watches, dead or working—
though most observe the arc and splash,
none can know how long until
it reaches bottom, how many strikes before
it settles, or where the current will place it.

II.

Who could know where one glass marble started?
Resting blue and opaque at the bottom
of a koi pond, it glances off rainbows
from the fish scales as though rejecting
any color not its own. In my hand, its glaze
as uniform as my skin—
these outsides we show to the world.
Diviners cast stones into a shallow fountain—
a question asked in silence—
my hand lingering to count the ripples.

III.

Does the bowl distort the vision,
or do its contents? Both surrounded
by the darkness needed for seeing—
a focus strengthened by absence.
To scry is to gaze in silence
at a liquid mirror, to summon images
for the seekers with a drawn finger.
Their faces over the rim:
narcissi bent toward the lake.

IV.

Inevitable, the quick swirl and slip beneath the surface
as the blossom is pulled toward the drop.
It reappears, the yellow daffodil, petals tipped
skyward in answer to the absent sun.

To sink or swim: prognostications made
by casting in bread or stones to see the result.
River-foam scrolls, curled paper fortunes,
will not open at the flower's touch.
I watch it all the way to the drop, as though
in the hiss of the falls I'd hear an answer.

V.

Curses are incantations—
words over water
hold special potency.
Like charms. Rolling
into clear air
in disruptive waves
before they vanish,
reverberations of voice
mark messages in
the stream below.

VI.

The jellyfish in the glass case seems
unnaturally pink until I consider
the Portuguese Man O' War on the next shelf.
The electric rose tentacles stretch like legs
beneath the mantle streaked with fuchsia veins
—or maybe nerves—under pliable skin.
I wonder if they bleed, or if they are made up
of the tropical sea they swim in, warm and saline,
not the clear gel resin that traps this one in stasis—
still as I am in the silent exhibit.

VII.

The drop of the falls comes quickly after
the low fringe of pines whose sharp fingers skim
the river. Orange rocks shape a descent so sharp
that the far-flung water does not touch them,
but drives into the pool harder. Descending
the side, I see below the stain of the river, tinted
as with residue from a copper bracelet worn too long—
I might ask you about mineral content, but you're not here.
This trail's flat track runs for miles against the sides of mountains.
The river, for a time, follows—then turns a bend, and is gone.

Bi

Bi means split in two,
in the past and always—

lines bisecting shapes in textbooks;
divided, but never separate,

or the bicycle, having two wheels
and needing both to function,

or a binary in which two options could
be limits or possibilities.

It's bilateral symmetry, where
both sides are identical,

and bivalve: the human heart (or
the complex shell of a mollusk).

I see it at the start of birth, and
Bible, and also of bigot—

but not so, says the dictionary, turning
us instead to *biweekly* and *bimonthly*...

I like the sound of bifurcating
water and trees, that

surely relates to
biology: a natural state of being.

Catch

Small, sharp, and silver, half the size
of my pink barrette is the fish hook
my father presses between his fingers
to thread it on the line. He ties it off, winds

a worm around the curve,
drives the barbed point through knotted flesh—
the ridged tips of the worm struggle,
stretch out into the humid air,

thin trickle of guts on pink worm skin
showing the damage done.
He won't let me touch it—won't let me
cast my line into the still water—

he holds tight to the rod until
I press against the wooden rail
of the pier poking into the brown lake
and squeeze my eyes shut.

*Silver point, slick from piercing the worm
drives deep into the fish's gold eye—*

when my father pulls my first bluegill
off the line, I turn away
from the hook snagged in flesh,
the soundless shock of the fish.

Tower

One red bloom
with petals of a child's fingertip's breadth
suspended by a broken trellis over

a concrete square stained with rust,
beside the brief slope flecked
with dust and mica bordering

a kingdom around a vine-wrapped tower.
The blue ribbed doll blanket laid out on a corner
makes a bed. In the beach bucket,

we stir a goulash of leaves and dirt.
My friend imagines that she is a prince
and we lie down,

the double yellow center of the rose
above us an eye leaning ever closer.

The Girl with Violets in Her Lap

I knew the flowers
in her lap, overflowing
the basket of her fingers,

their green spade leaves
buried under purple.
I knew the violet glow

against the underside
of her breasts, the light
of so many flowers

against skin,
petals thick in the vale
between her thighs.

Spring violets,
white and lilac and purple.
I knew her, Sappho,

before I found your fragments—
the unspeakable excerpted
by time or hands—and I find her,

beautiful bride
with violets in her lap,
in her chamber prior to dressing.

Readying herself
for one lost to time,
whose fragment wore away

and set her center on the page
for me to find.
You, coveted in a poet's words,

woman bright with petals,
I have known but never seen
until flowers fluttered off the page,

and then you—
naming the want of Lesbos—
two thousand years escape my breast.

Visiting Hour

You stop the fork just before his mouth,
and I wonder if you can feed him

the square of fish you hold to his lips
since his hands can't lift without shaking—

hands that never held a scrap
to your lips, but left you silent,

pressed so tight in the corner
of the porch that the brickwork
gridded your shoulders—

you told me you forgave him.
He says *I love you* with every goodbye.

His chapped lips part
and you let the bland flesh slip
into them, and again

until he is done, and I see
in the frame of window

an old man: legs curled into himself,
his son at his side, hand on the crown of his head.

Honeysuckle

To get it, we had to push
into the arms of the tallest pine,
twenty feet high with branches
the length of a child's body,
needles the length of a child's hand.
My mother knew
we'd put out our eyes,
so we shut them, shuffled through
the sharp orange needles, drying
and angry, piercing our skin,
to seize fistfuls of vine that we hoped
had flowers. Back on the grass
we rubbed our feet, divided the blossoms
in sight of the tree.
Birds, my mother said, and deer
had them first, blighted stem and flower
with their wild sickness.
We pinched off the stem-ends of each bloom
(the yellow ones tasted best),
squeezed onto our lips the nectar
too sweet not to taste.

Postgraduate

As we pack up his room, my new-engineer brother
says he expects nuclear war within twenty years.
He tucks into a bag the senior design project
that he showed off earlier—before our parents
drove off, leaving us to settle the mess in his dorm.
An airplane in unadorned black lines on paper,
pixilated curves of fuselage, cross-sectioned wings
deflecting arrows of wind. Missiles aren't so different:
wings, tailfins, engines steer painted sleek cylinders.
Would they be easier to make than an airplane,
knowing what they carry doesn't have to survive?
Once, as children, we built a time machine. I tied hula hoops
together; he shaped the console from a shoebox and Play-Doh.
He moved the crusted buttons—turned that box into rocket,
then a robot, reinvented it with tweaks I hardly noticed.
The portfolio out of sight, he tells me how aerodynamics
dictate a bullet's trajectory, *like this*: holding up the model
Ferrari I gave him last Christmas, he drives it through the air
and bumps it into my shoulder; its sleek curves, he says,
displace everything in its way. I pull the car away
and wrap it in paper, not wanting anything else broken.

Snowdon in February

Here the lichens cannot grow. I slip and gritty limestone
lies beneath me as wind rushes across my back.

Under arms once spread, now splayed across this boulder,
my eyes darken the gray rock to the shade of this afternoon's sky.

If I lift my hands, my palms will sting worse from the winter air.
Cold stone sets iron into my skin, but nothing else is still:

wind crosses the summit, and with it, voices of climbers
from below, on the other side. Will they turn back before the top?

Earth has no scent at this height. If I rise, open my jacket,
this arctic gale could lift me. I won't remember

the slopes of dead heather and grass or the valley where I land.
But I fear even to stand, to have the wind take my will from me.

Fata Morgana

Halfway across the horizon's crescent, dark wall
thrust above darker ocean; a glint of white—

on the shore, a mother and daughter argue
in fingers: one mile out? two? They jump a wave.

Blackhead gulls don't count intervals, don't consider
the depths when they land, bob for a time,

then take off again, grooving the surface.
Fingers scoop sand to carve

a moat around the castle, that small lump
with shattered clams for windows,

dry grass gracing the turret. A space dug less deep
for a drawbridge that will fail,

as sand will siphon water saved for the moat
and leave no barrier to be crossed.

—

With *over* comes the prospect of *under*
and no steel mined from the hills she lives on
can hold her over water with her eyes open.

Three-rivered city of latticed steel spans
and streetcars, of sons whose seabird legs
pushed out the hems of pants yearly—

she lights a candle by the weeping Virgin
and boards the car with eyes shut.

-

Seagrass roots in a wave trough, out of reach:
the swimmers grab at flotsam for the challenge,

but the saturated stalks flake apart in their hands.
It will travel farther in pieces, take root,

flatten in a hurricane, swaddle a heron's eggs—
slowly, each stem will brown,

the lingering white of the base
exposed by receding silt,

it will let go and go
where the water wills.

-

An island in a flat lake, tangled with bird-flecked
thickets crowned with bare trees bowed inward.
Summers, it greened up and hid the outcrop
that rose to a flat tower, dark chambers within.

Summers, the park's candy-button rowboats circled
close enough to land on the fingernail curve
of beach, push through the gnarl of blackberry
to ascend the crags full of violets and moss—

but close enough was too deep for a girl to wade
and she went under, too shocked to fight
the liquid grasp that is all she recalled until
life found her again in the pavilion's shade.

-

Straight north to south, or east to west,
the shoreline is at any time bidirectional.

Sand invariably ends at the grass
when it starts at the water.

What's between these two edges
goes on forever,

up and up, or down, though it's possible
to walk one way and think it's the other.

Scenes repeat: house, truck, fishing poles
in the sand, the stone jetty.

People grow indistinct, because after a time,
the faces run together,

marbled flesh and hair with color,
figures running past

from grass to sea—
crossing, never still.

-

Small things first: vertigo
and shaking hands. Still she does puzzles
from the newspaper's back page,
pen-and-ink ciphers in the notebooks
she keeps: pages of taped-in photos
and lists and solutions, where
she can't find her sister's address
that she knows is in this book,
or is it in another?

-

Inland, the water rises slowly
as the storm surge and rainfall,

after long hours, converge
in the lowest-lying places.

Marsh grass thrashes as
the flood creeps up, then stills

as the last feathered tips
are overtaken.

Loblolly pines weep green needles
into the orange floating dead below,

while white egrets race through the dark
to nests they won't be able to save.

-

Saturdays, she does her hair.
Wash and set the night before,
unroll the curls and pin them back.
Eighty years of Saturdays.
In her mind, she still buys rollers
for a nickel a set on Carson Street,
the drugstore by the river,
two trolley stops from the Kollar Club,
where every night, the men gather to drink

and every Saturday, she goes to dance.
The long-dry lipstick a chalky gloss.

-

Only when the conditions are right,
when air rests up on air
in ascending warmth, when light
weaves its way between the layers—
this, over open sea where a vessel
lingers at the horizon, is when it appears:
the land of blue cliffs rising in the distance.

-

What would be her last good day:
a drive with her family
for air, ending at the arboretum.
April's half-blooms emerge from branch tips,
from tufts of grass fighting for spring green.

At the forest's edge, a long lake,
blue and opaque in the afternoon shade,
they stop. And as they are still,
the lake's center stirs—
the island they did not see
sends up from its crown of thickets
a ring of grackles, startled,
a swirling tower in the water.
She forgets her fear of drowning,

and after she is pulled, fighting,
from water up to her hips,
one shoe gone and shivering,
strapped into the car,
she doesn't understand why
her daughter whispers *when it happens—*
just let me swim.

Elizabeth Bishop and the Chieftains

There are pipers tonight in Key West,
playing under the palms and iron balconies,
their Celtic drums echo off stucco walls.
Rain fell all day, glossing the pavement
under the musicians' shoes, pooling
in the Virgin Mary's cupped hands.
The courtyard overflows with the wet,
reflecting light from red crepe lanterns
strung through the lowest branches.

Bishop asked if the traveling impulse
stemmed from a lack of imagination,
from the weak mind incapable of creating
that which it did not already know.
I have never heard pipers in Key West,
but there they are, playing beneath
the textured trunks of palms under
the moon. Could I find the intact whelk
without rushing against the incoming wave?

Or does it matter what comes first,
to dream our dreams or to have them—
I know it's just a trick of the mind tonight
that's mixing Irish flutes and poetry
to cover the din of the carnival
across from my windows,
but the blinds can't keep out the lights
from the Ferris wheel, and the 1001 Nights
spinning around and around out there.

Notes on the Text

“The Asylum Dentist Speaks” draws its inspiration from Anne Carson’s “The Glass Essay,” specifically, the line “I wonder how you clean the teeth of mad people.”

“Decommissioned Warships in Pencil and Wax” describes works in the *Disengaged* series by Baltimore artist Sasha Blanton.

The poems in Part II compose a sequence imagined from the folk quilts made by African American women quilters of Gee’s Bend, Alabama. The titles of the following sections are taken in part or entirety from the names of their respective quilt patterns: “Triangles in Squares,” “Texas Star,” “Path Through the Woods,” “One Hundred Flying Geese,” “String-Pieced Quilt, Unfinished,” “Lazy Gal,” “Autumn Haze,” “Snowball,” “Housetops,” “Country Album,” “One Patch,” and “Trip Around the World.”

“The Girl with Violets in Her Lap” responds to a recurring image in the fragments of Sappho as translated by Anne Carson in *If Not, Winter*.