

FIRE POND AND NEW POEMS

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Doctor of Philosophy

By

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ABSTRACT

The creative portion of this dissertation consists of one full-length manuscript of poems called *Fire Pond*, which won the Agha Shahid Ali Prize in Poetry and was published by the University of Utah Press in 2009, plus a shorter manuscript of new poems, written in the last two years. The poems are prefaced by a critical introduction entitled, "On the Inside of Language: Dickinson's Conditional." This essay focuses on how Dickinson's use of the conditional allows us to enter her poems' strange sense of time at the level of grammar. I argue that Dickinson tells the temporally distorted story of the conditional as a way of navigating the troublesome complexities of life and death, love and loss, and where they overlap. The narrative and temporal indeterminacy to which the conditional can give way provides Dickinson with a site where she imagines the interior life of the speaker in terms of the internal life of language. It's precisely this sort of linguistic and ontological complexity that has instigated a conversation with Dickinson's work in my poems as well. Her habit of superimposing time and space in strange, ecstatic ways has been a primary influence on my poetics.

ON THE INSIDE OF LANGUAGE: DICKINSON'S CONDITIONAL

“When Bells stop ringing – Church – begins – ” (Fr 601), writes Dickinson in a brief poem from 1863. And if we were to stop reading at this line, we might think her use of the grammatical structure called “the conditional” fairly standard – though, in the myriad examples and incarnations of the conditional that Dickinson uses in her poems, it almost never is. But at first glance we find that the two sentences in this poem abide strictly by the cause-and-effect formulation of “when this happens, then this” – one version of the conditional that depends heavily on *sequence*. Here is the full four-line poem:

When Bells stop ringing – Church – begins –

The Positive – of Bells –

When Cogs – stop – that’s Circumference –

The Ultimate – of Wheels –

In the first two lines, we find a detached observation of coinciding events (bells ceasing their ringing, church beginning) stated in terms that resemble a scientific theory – a hypothesis that has been proved by repeated testing. And repeated observation *would* likely yield a correlation between these sequential events; so, when the speaker (whomever she might be) states, “When Bells stop ringing – Church – begins – / The Positive – of Bells – ”, she is right, *to an extent*. And yet, there is something strange and a shade off-kilter about the way the data has been interpreted.

The speaker seems to ignore or misunderstand several things about the situation at hand. That the church or church service is called the “Positive” of bells suggests that both

church and bells are inhuman, independent forces. The speaker pushes away or ignores the fact that bells are rung *by* someone (they are not their own organic or mechanical or celestial agent, separate from human motivation) and that they are rung in order to signify a particular hour of a particular day of the week, when people have agreed to congregate together inside a church. The interpretive blind-spot resides in the way the poem's speaker leaves out these mundane, human, intermediary facts that could reasonably support the correlation between bells and church, and also in the naïve application of a scientist's mechanistic logic and terms to a relationship that could clearly be deduced more simply, through a layperson's sense of such matters. She takes the conditional to its extreme limit (leaving behind its lighter colloquial possibilities) and uses it as a scientist might – in order to attribute a deep causal relationship between bells and church – one that relies, to an extreme degree, on cog-like physicality or something akin to a law of nature – something provable by science or mathematics.

This becomes even clearer when the analogy migrates to “cogs” and “Circumference” in the second half of the poem (“When Cogs – stop – that’s Circumference – / The Ultimate – of Wheels – ”). When the mechanistic cogs (whether they be the bells’ inner workings, or more generalized cogs) cease their turning, the result of that halt is “Circumference,” which, by its standard definition, is the geometrical measurement of a circle’s perimeter. This statement, both in the form and content of its hypothesis, brings into greater relief the relationship Dickinson has posed between church and bells. By writing, “that’s Circumference,” Dickinson moves strangely and resolutely into the realm of definition, making of the stopped cogs a static state of completion that *is*, rather than causes,

the state of circumference. So already we find a shade of difference between the relationship of bells to church, and cogs to circumference, even though on the surface Dickinson seems to emphasize the sameness of the relationship between bells and church, cogs and circumference. She builds this surface similarity by the systematic manner in which she progresses from the first statement to the second, using the same form of the conditional. There is a discrepancy between structure and content here, though they coexist effortlessly.

Definition (along with grammar) might be thought of as a scientific dimension of language – the aspect of language that is fixed, proven and observable, and which everyone can supposedly agree upon. And yet, in the context of this poem, by virtue of the very misinterpretations bred by the mechanistic logic used, “Circumference” comes slightly unpinned from its geometry-oriented definition, dilating beyond it. Circumference is no longer simply a quantity, arrived at by a certain process of measurement, but, rather, it is an “Ultimate” state, definition-like in nature, just as “Church” becomes a state (rather than a building or a ritual process) in the poem’s first two lines. Like the shadowless idea (but not reality) of “Noon,” circumference seems to represent a state of totality or eternity for Dickinson, and is famously central to many of her poems. Thus, the broader context of her usage of this word (not just her use of it in this particular poem) also expands what one might mistake for a static definition of a mathematical term. It is leant nearly spiritual resonances, both in this poem and across poems.

In using the formal language of hypotheses to constitute the basic skeleton of this poem, Dickinson is actually seeking to test the limits, capacities, and subtleties of that language. We see this in the way mechanistic logic both breeds naive misunderstanding and thrillingly

expands meaning in this poem. We also see it in the way Dickinson uses the language of the conditional both to bolster a sense of spiritual expansiveness and to reveal the folly of using logic to deduce religious faith. For, in the state of circumference and in the almost magical (extra-human) correlation between bells ceasing and church beginning that the speaker poses, we find a shimmer of the spiritual. But it is not of the sort that may be traced back to a God. If it may be said to have a source, that source is more convincingly language than anything else. But this expanded dimension we feel in the poem paradoxically arises from the speaker's misguided use of the scientific language of the conditional to form religious deductions about matters that are not usually thought of as religious, but which are merely included in the associative realm of religion (namely, a church and the incidence of its bells ringing, the cogs that make those bells move, perhaps). To rely on religion to explain such phenomena as these is as strange as relying on science to explain them. So, on the one hand the mistake seems to reside with the naïve speaker; but on the other, Dickinson, through hyperbolic use of the conditional, comments obliquely on the misguided insistence on the part of science and religion that they know firmly how to deduce the unseen from the seen, that causes are themselves deduce-able, if one subscribes to certain convictions and uses the language of conviction. And yet, as I have pointed out, this is no pinched satire on Dickinson's part. She tests the philosophical limits of the conditional, even as she mines its capacities to create a kind of shimmering spiritual overflow of a non-religious sort, all in the confines of one four-line poem.

Another instance of Dickinson walking the line between revealing the conditional's limits and revealing its capacities can be found in the way she posits causal *sequence* (at least formally, through its 'when this happens, then this happens' set-up), but makes the root of the

sequence material, rather than temporal. She asserts the possibility of sequence, but then undercuts it and strips it of temporality. For, the church bells in the context of this poem seem to have nothing to *do* with time – a strange thing, since we know this to be their understood significance, in the context of the world outside of this poem. Part of the way Dickinson is able to wipe temporality from the equation is by stretching the possibilities of misinterpretation, lack of interpretation, or forgetfulness inherent in the conditional's middle ground – the space between the two terms (between the “when” and “then” clause) – where more reasonable (or even strange, unreasonable) conclusions about the relationship between bells and church could potentially be found. For example, that a man with white hair climbs to the tower and rings them until a minute or two before church will begin, then climbs down and enters the church himself; or that the bells have stopped only for the speaker – because she has gone deaf or moved away or died – and not because church is about to begin. But this space is left blank by the form of the conditional itself, and Dickinson leaves it that way and pushes it even further in that direction – she does not fill in the blank but rather manipulates this ambiguous no-man's-land and draws it to the foreground. It feels a bit vertiginous, the way she asserts that blank and allows its non-reality to supplant worldly reality, while still playing by the rules of the conditional's strict grammatical form – like dressing chaos in formal attire.

Between the two terms of the conditional is where narrative events could exist, were Dickinson to let them. Instead of narrative, however, Dickinson emphasizes a binary relationship between events that is based on the way those two events fit into a relative *linguistic* structure. She abstracts from their grounding in the phenomenal world the events the poem purports to describe. Instead, the form and outer limits of the conditional itself (with all

its possibility for ambiguity, forgetfulness, misinterpretation/reinterpretation, and strange manipulations of time and space) is what the poem revels in; this takes over, supplanting any normalized scene or story. Or, to put it another way, it *becomes* the story. It fills the amnesiac gap where character, setting, and time-dependent action might have been, or been expected.

I would like to push analysis of this poem just a bit further, in order to emphasize the way Dickinson uses language as a point of entry into the world of the poem, rather than simply as a way to express that world. As I've begun to suggest, when Dickinson describes church as the "Positive – of Bells," she makes the ceasing of the bells' ringing and the subsequent materialization of the church service seem to be related by laws of matter or mathematics. The bells do not *merely* stop – their abrupt cessation creates a concrete state of absence that is the negative to church's "Positive." To complicate matters, in the manuscript of the poem, the variant of the word "Positive" is "Transitive." This is a term used in mathematics when one wants to prove that the relationship between *a* and *b*, when also existing between *b* and *c*, can be said to hold true between *a* and *c* as well. Thus, a relationship or analogy is transferable across terms that might at first seem unrelated. The presence of this word in the poem is quite relevant, since the second conditional statement ("When Cogs – stop – that's Circumference - / The Ultimate – of Wheels –") relies on the logic and structure of the first – which means that the poem's progression of statements and sense-making through language enacts the same sort of transitivity that the speaker sees as existing in the mathematical relationship between bells and church, and between cogs and circumference (which only make a kind of "slant" sense). Still, she uses this principle to inform the way she proceeds linguistically through the

poem's argument – which is based quite solidly on the conditional's "when this, then this" nature.

But the word has a linguistic meaning as well: a "transitive verb" is one that requires a direct object. The verb's action cannot simply exist on its own – it must be done *to* or enacted *upon* something or someone – in the grammatical sense, anyway. But how, then, do we interpret the statement that "Church – beginning" is "The [Transitive] – of Bells"? What does it mean for church to be the "direct object" of bells? It takes some mental gymnastics to interpret this shade of the variant's meaning, since the phenomenal relationship between bells and church is filtered through the structural screen of grammar. The word "Church," whether one means the building or the colloquial way of conveying "church service," is, grammatically speaking, a noun. And yet, the latter seems to stretch the limits of a noun. A church service is not an object, but an active series of events and rituals and movement and speaking. To give it the solid, static noun-weight of a church building is to ignore the semantic properties of each – properties which are corroborated by actual experience but which are ignored in this poem. And this, indeed, is what language must necessarily do in the name of a coherent system. For all its semantic nuances (which we find Dickinson delighting in regularly) it must make certain stark categorizations and wash out subtle differences at the level of structure, for language does not have the capacity to distinguish between phenomena such as these two shades of noun-ness.

Furthermore, the word "Bells" is not a transitive verb. It too is a noun, though the poem has allowed us to picture them ringing and also ceasing to ring – enacting a verb and ceasing to do so. But what we begin to realize is that it is not simply that the noun "bells" can act, or perform a verb/action, but rather that the bells *become* a transitive verb for Dickinson – as

much as such a thing can happen. Semantically (if not grammatically) the bells' being and their action are superimposed on each other, coexisting, so that their motion seems to become noun-like, translated into a static state (the negative to church's "positive") – while at the same time the solid noun-ness of the bells as objects are inflected by the quality of a transitive verb, whose action requires an object of transference. We do not see the bells simply as they exist in the world, but as they exist as lexical objects – or, rather, as a single lexical object (though the "real" bells are plural). The grammatical and the phenomenal exist at the "same time"; though, really there is nothing temporal about the way they coexist – and perhaps this is part of the fascination for Dickinson, as time-obsessed as she is. They are categories that are superimposed but don't match up in time or space. By trying to abide by one, you must transgress or misunderstand the boundaries of the other.

We could say of almost any poet that the nature of an object or an action within a poem is colored by the kind of figurative language she uses to describe it. But in this poem, Dickinson pushes this phenomenon into another territory entirely. It is not that the phenomenal world of this poem is tinted by her diction; the objects in the poem are actually defined by their grammatical identities – and by the way they overflow the boundaries of those identities into *other* grammatical identities (such as what we saw with the insufficiency of the noun category to hold the different shades of the word "church," and its cross-over into verb territory). We see the phenomenal world straining, ghost-like, through, but the container-like forms of language are the organizing principles by which Dickinson structures and understands (or misunderstands) reality, within this poem's bounds. It seems worthwhile to ask what's behind this predilection on Dickinson's part, and what makes her relationship to the conditional a

special site for her, beyond her idiosyncratic relationship to language more generally. I will spend the remainder of this essay driving in both of these directions – first by delineating the conditional more carefully, and then by looking at several poems that animate the conditional in interesting ways.

In *Mode and Modality*, Frank Robert Palmer establishes a definition of “modality” (the grammatical category to which the conditional belongs) that is useful to a reading of Dickinson’s poems. While “tense” refers to the time at which a particular event or experience happens in time, and “aspect” refers to the “nature of the event” (1), “modality” mainly expresses the “status of the proposition that describes the event” (1). In this way, modality is at a considerable remove from the semantic content of a sentence, and from the specific content of the event itself (in that a multitude of events can be supported by a single conditional statement). Furthermore, one can use the conditional to hypothesize, to express doubt, to state an intention, to predict how, when or how likely it is something *might* happen, and under what conditions. And just as the motive for using it isn’t fixed, so the relationship between the two clauses that comprise a conditional statement or question is not fixed; the relation can be causal or merely contiguous, it can suggest a simultaneity or a sequence of actions, it can be predictive or non-predictive.

The conditional can be usefully split into sub-categories, based on a few different criteria. One set of criteria is the varied purposes the conditional may be used for. Here are some of those purposes, with relevant examples from Dickinson’s oeuvre: to make a firm causal or sequential statement or hypothesis (“After great pain, a formal feeling comes” or “I shall

know why – when Time is over”), to conjecture based on observation (“I am alive – I guess – / The Branches on my Hand / Are full of Morning Glory”), to pose a question, a request, or to wonder about something (“I wondered which would miss me, least, / And when Thanksgiving, came, / If Father’d multiply the plates - / To make an even sum” [Fr 344]) or to instruct (“If I should’nt be alive / When the Robins come, / Give the one in Red Cravat, / A Memorial crumb – ” [Fr 210]). As these examples make clear, Dickinson uses the conditional in ways that seem assertive at times, humbler at others; to seal firm distinctions, and to probe questioningly. It is a formal structure that allows her to move between these positions and inhabit them all.

Another category of criteria, and perhaps the more important for this essay, involves the level of certainty implied by the structure of the statements made. It is important to note that what is *not* governed by the conditional is the truth or untruth of the contents of the statements made. The conditional relies on the plausibility of the relationship between the two clauses that comprise the sentence, not on their specific tested truth in the world, or on causality. The most certain form, built like a scientific principle, puts both condition and result in the simple present (“When Bells stop ringing – Church – begins – ”) – and yet we must recognize that this statement is not particularly scientific. There are many circumstances that could render this statement false (such as the bells being rung at the wrong hour, or perhaps the bells having stopped ringing because the person has gone deaf, or even died, and can no longer hear them, meaning the bells ceasing don’t have to do with church beginning). Likewise, the array of possible events that can support this statement is wide-ranging. Another construction puts the condition in the simple present tense, but casts the result into the future (“If pain for peace prepares / Lo, what ‘Augustan’ years / Our feet await!” [Fr 155]). Or, both

the condition *and* the result can be cast in terms of possible events, not yet taken as a given (“If I may have it, when it’s dead / I’ll be contented – so” [Fr 431]). Finally, the least certain form of the conditional is the one that frames hypothetical conditions and results both in terms of the past (“I had not minded – Walls / Were Universe – one Rock – ” [Fr 554]). However it is used, the conditional is a grammatical structure that doesn’t primarily seek to place happenings in time (though sometimes, as the examples above show, they are inflected by time), as tense and aspect do, but rather to place *the possibility of* one circumstance *in terms of* another circumstance. Tense is necessary to form statements expressed in the conditional mode, and sometimes a conditional statement expresses a cause-effect statement based on temporal sequence, but temporality is not the generative crux of this grammatical construction—it is subordinated by a larger type of order the conditional seeks to employ. This order is based on statement, and on the opening of possible worlds that are not time-bound but find their limits and possibilities in linguistic structures instead.

In the remainder of this essay I will examine three more poems, each of which highlights something important about Dickinson’s use of the conditional: “My friend must be a Bird – ” (Fr 71), “If He were living – dare I ask” (Fr 719) and “To fill a Gap” (Fr 647). I will argue that the temporal and narrative confusion that characterize these poems stems from the fact that Dickinson is telling the temporally distorted story *of the conditional*, as a way of navigating the troublesome complexities of life and death, love and loss (and where they overlap). For Dickinson, the conditional provides a way to avoid the pain of narrativizing experience in any conventional sense, while still expressing the core pathos and problems of experience. In other words, Dickinson may be rooting around in what she imaginatively renders as the problems and

pains of language, as much as she is rooting around in the problems and pains of experience. She imagines the interior life of the speaker *in terms of* the internal life of language (or what Dickinson imagines as such). And the interior of the conditional in particular is a space of extreme temporal disorientation.

In *Lyric Time* (1979), Sharon Cameron argues that the linguistic, contextual, and narrative rupture in Dickinson's poems is due to the intense psychic pressure that being in the middle of a painful experience or encountering death exerts on the poems' speakers; experiences such as death and despair "defeat names" and "flood conception," so that the evocation of them through language is necessarily fragmented and disoriented, language being inherently sequential in its production. I agree that there seems to be an extreme form of interiority governing these poems and resisting singular interpretation. But it seems to me that in her conditional poems Dickinson is as much inhabiting the disorienting interior of language, as experience. The narrative and temporal indeterminacy to which the conditional can give way seems to me the generative force of these poems. It is almost as if language were an *other* whose experience she sympathetically dons in/through the writing of poems about life and death, love and loss, pain and ecstasy. Experiences find a kind of kaleidoscopic release this way, even as they do not have to be recounted and simplified into singular threads of narrative progress and resultant meaning. While Cameron's approach suggests the prior existence of an original, singular narrative, which is subsequently distorted, my approach assumes that language is the generating force behind these poems. The language of the conditional can *become* experience for Dickinson, rather than just *express* it.

While the first example discussed here (“When Bells stop ringing – Church – begins –”) seems at first glance to take up rather “impersonal” subject matter, I think there’s in fact a vulnerability present even in that poem, which we experience through the speaker’s misguided groping for causes and clear-cut, scientific explanations for aspects of life that cannot be explained this way. Even if the aspects figured in that poem may not seem immediately poignant in nature, her manner of approaching them is. The speaker of that poem seems almost like an anthropologist of the interior, looking at human constructions from inside a perspective that is neither wholly human or wholly inhuman – from a fraught, in-between space. While many of Dickinson’s other poems that use the conditional deal overtly with deep anguish, or death, or both, still in these poems we find a similar perspective as what we found in the “When Bells stop ringing...” – a boldly naïve groping that both seems to come from deep inside a perspective, but a perspective that still does not seem “personal,” as we might put it, in respect to another sort of poet than Dickinson is. At times it seems that she is inhabiting the linguistic structure of the conditional, and that this act might, for Dickinson, be related to inhabiting the interior of pain or death. It feels simultaneously like an act of empathy and an act of rebellion; a willingness to sink into another perspective, and an unwillingness to do so.

For Dickinson, the interior experience of pain “has an Element of Blank—” that has no reliable temporal coordinates with which to order experience, though pain presumably does have a starting point and sequence to one not inside it. Similarly, within the domain of language (which more generally requires sequence for its production) the conditional has formal coordinates within/between which to navigate (the related “if” and “then” clauses) and yet there is an element of temporally-distorted blank within the bounds of the conditional’s

grammatical coordinates. Its interior spaces are vast and can accommodate so much divergent and ambiguous semantic material that those grammatical coordinates lose their usual sort of resolve. Dickinson's vertiginous use of the conditional, then, is not a mere symptom of being stuck inside the time-stopping experience of pain or an encounter with death. For Dickinson inhabiting the conditional is an experience not unlike inhabiting the experience of pain or death: all three are governed more by interiority than by subject-matter or the outcome of a series of events.

Cameron makes the point in her later work on the fascicles, *Choosing Not Choosing*, that it is not possible to determine in many of Dickinson's poems whether pain is the subject or death is the subject. These are impossible questions to make sense of because "'sense' would depend on a distinction between outside and inside that the poetry disputes" (188). If Dickinson insists on "interiority itself—interiority without either origin or outside" (187), then we might say the conditional is not a metaphor for death, so much as a state that shares qualities with pain and death – a relationship more akin to metonymy. What the conditional makes especially clear is that, within states of extreme interiority, we do not find narratives that depend upon strict temporality. The only sense of narrative we can glean comes from the sense that a speech act – an act of *telling* – must reside in time somehow, and might itself become a story. (But even in this case, speech-acts don't tend to be tethered to linguistic conventions of time, such as tense, in the ways we might assume them to be.) In sum, narrative, in these poems, is subordinated to statement, rather than statement being in service of narrative. And it seems to me that Dickinson was quite ahead of her time in this regard, as

evidenced by the fact that we see some form of this strategy present in twentieth century writers as varied as Faulkner and Bishop, Eliot and Moore.

The time kept by Dickinson in her poems that make particular use of the conditional has nothing to do with the conventional sense of time which places the past behind, the future up ahead, and the present somewhere in between; nor is it of the sort that is formed by *tense*, or how we delineate singular 'events' in telling stories. Instead, the conditional is an interior site where Dickinson can reside without owing much of anything to linear narrative—where binary, hypothetical statements usurp narrative. We can also see her attempting, through the conditional, to resist what Sharon Cameron calls the inherent diachronic nature of language. By this she means the way in which language is based on sequence and linearity; the way it happens across time, one word following the next, toward a sentence, which leads to another sentence, which leads to sense-making via the symbolic order of language. Cameron suggests that Dickinson's pushing the limits of the lyric's sense of time (which leans more toward totality *outside* of time, she says) is what allows us to see Dickinson resisting the diachronic quality of language. But perhaps one could also say that the conditional, with its positing of sequence that is not necessarily grounded in real conditions or events, is not necessarily bound to logic, time, narrative, or truth-telling, and that harbors a temporal blank between its binary terms – maybe this site of the conditional is more useful in helping us understand the nature of Dickinson's lean toward totality or simultaneity. Discussions of Dickinson's poems "My friend must be a Bird – / Because it flies!" (F 71) and "If He were living – dare I ask / And how if He be dead –" (F 719) will make this clearer.

Dickinson's "My friend must be a Bird – / Because it flies!" (F 71) is a poem that has no sequence of action in the usual sense of a story. Instead, what's at stake in the poem is the *telling*, and the thinking that underlies that telling, which is based in erroneous logic. The form of the conditional is "hidden" in this poem, in that it is logically one step removed from the statements made. Here is the text of this rather brief poem, written in 1859:

My friend must be a Bird –
Because it flies!
Mortal, my friend must be –
Because it dies!
Barbs has it, like a Bee!
Ah, curious friend!
Thou puzzlest me!

What must be understood by the speaker, in order for those first two lines to be claimed, might be translated simply as follows: "If something flies, then it must be a bird." Clearly this is not to be believed. While flight may be an action one associates with birds, it is also an action one associates with insects and angels. And if we take the figurative use of "fly," then an even greater number of things, animate or inanimate, real or abstract, might be the subject here. The line reveals a drama centered in misunderstanding, whether willed or genuine. While the scale and the direction of the logic is off, the contingency, strangely, is intensified by the "must" and "because"—as though this were a statement rooted in causality, rather than in a misguided, internal *searching out* of causes.

An important point this brings up regarding the conditional – one worth re-emphasizing – is that it accommodates true and untrue, plausible and implausible statements equally, all of which can be expressed with the same level of certainty. For example, in an even less plausible statement than we find above, but whose logic may in fact be sounder, Dickinson writes, “If recollecting were forgetting, / Then I remember not, / And if forgetting, recollecting, / How near had I forgot...” “Recollecting” could never actually be “forgetting,” without shedding the definitions of those words we have come to accept (thereby tampering with our language and our sense of the world at the same time); thus the statement could not be said to be rooted in truth or plausibility. And yet, the statement stands – the logic here works because she stays inside the absurd, hypothetical terms she has set up. And part of what she gains from this is the chance to posit chaos (in which the world as we know it flips its poles and becomes alien) without giving in to it.

The flip-side of this quality of the conditional is that it can also support any number of actual events. We see this in the third and fourth lines of “My friend must be a Bird –”:

“Mortal, my friend must be – / Because it dies!” Here the poem reveals that death is somehow at issue here. Again, we find an underlying logic in the form of a firm conditional statement—the sort that is somewhere between conjecture and mathematical certainty: “If something dies, then it must be mortal.” This time the statement is not erroneous; but while the truth of the statement, and the turn toward something we can at least put our finger on *as* a phenomenon (namely, death and mortality), would make this statement seem simpler than the last, these lines nevertheless fracture coherent narrative further, rather than bringing it into focus. For, when we read “Because it dies!”—what are we to picture? Has someone or something died in

the recent past, and the speaker is mourning “it”? Or does the friend only have the *capacity* to die? (In this case, the statement is virtually meaningless in terms of usual narrative, since almost anything or anyone we can imagine calling ‘friend’ has this capacity.) Or, is the friend actually in the process of dying before the speaker’s eyes? Read in another way, the friend “must be” mortal in the present moment; and yet, the only way to judge mortality is to have seen the death occur (in the past), creating an impossible simultaneity. We cannot sort through all of these possibilities and pick one because the form of the conditional supports them all, and because the form of the conditional used here (putting both the verb in the condition and the verb in the result in the present tense) obscures temporality—refuses to fix events in time.

When in the next line, “Barbs has it – like a Bee!”, Dickinson turns to simile, this is a move that could imply what’s being sought in the poem is definition, or the linking of characteristic and identity – and this move takes her even further outside the realm of temporally-bound events. In light of this turn toward definition and identity (possession of barbs = beehood), the previous phrase “it dies” might be more coherently read as a quality rather than an action (possession of capacity to die = mortality). In this interpretation, the poem loses what threadbare element of narrative it might have seemed to have. The principle ‘characters’ are not recognizable or decipherable (this “friend” could just as well be an “hour” as a human friend, as poem 68, also from fascicle 3, makes clear), just as a discernible sequence of events is not in sight. The poem becomes all riddle – but a riddle without its usual *raison d’être*: an answer. There is no answer, because an answer is not what is sought. This makes the 1896 title given to the poem, “Who?”, seem particularly insipid.

The poem instead is about its own telling. What we are to know of this speaker is the way she speaks her misunderstanding of what others might call “events,” or else the way she speaks her inability to suss out the difference between possible events and those that have “occurred.” Likewise, the language in which the poem is written has no internal capacity to make such subtle, delineated interpretations. In fact, the desire to interpret and the desire *not* to interpret – or the leaning toward interpretation as a strategy and the *not* leaning toward interpretation as a strategy – these are ambiguous currents contained by the poem, both in grammar and in content. In this way the speaker and the language in which the poem is spoken might almost be metonyms of each other. Both encounter phenomenal reality from a removed perspective; both are in a position to possibly make order from that phenomenal reality; and yet both also face the ontological dilemma that the conditional highlights, which is that any given situation, occurring in space and time, can accommodate any number of underlying causes, motives, or preceding events, as well as many different true and untrue statements.

Indeed, this is the basic ontological ground upon which philosophers, scientists, and the religious meet and hash out their differences. It is no coincidence that Dickinson enters this conversation by taking up and participating in their terms (the conditional is a speculative tool used by each of these sets of speculators), but in a slant way, undoing the steadiness of those terms from the inside, not taking their firm coordinates and certainties for granted. While this dimension of Dickinson’s use of the conditional is not my primary focus, this consideration is a useful side-note (and perhaps a central subject in its own right, to be taken up in another essay), as it allows us to ground this linguistic habit of hers historically. In the 1860’s, science was well on its way to becoming almost entirely professionalized. Many writers and thinkers

(such as Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau) mistrusted this trend and thought that in a democracy science should not be regarded as the province only of elite experts; they worried science would lose its humanity this way. For example, in 1854 Thoreau writes in his journal, "The inhumanity of science concerns me, as when I am tempted to kill a rare snake that I may ascertain its species. I feel that this is not the means of acquiring true knowledge." We find a similar sentiment in Dickinson's lines, "Split the Lark – and you'll find the Music - / Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled – " (Fr 905). In this poem she calls the act of splitting open this bird in order to get to at the scientific essence of its music a "Scarlet Experiment," suggesting the violence and folly inherent in such coldly analytical study that destroys its living subject in the name of knowledge. In a poem like this she seems (in both content and form – for this is another example of Dickinson's conditional) to be engaging in the language and the kind of analysis that's integral to science as a means to show its limits.

But this isn't always the case. We know that she doesn't channel this nineteenth century concern about science's future in a direct way. She doesn't, as Thoreau does, make clear, simple statements about the need for science to keep its humanity. For, while sometimes she seems to be obliquely poking fun at science by donning its idiom, she just as often inhabits the language of hypothesis and conjecture in a way that feels complex and vulnerable in motive. In this way, Dickinson's inhabiting of the conditional in such a multitude of ways seems an act of empathy and genuine curiosity; she keeps open-ended her questions regarding the relationship between our perceptions and the world, between visible (and invisible) phenomena and their underlying causes (or lack of causes). By using the conditional on her own terms and not adhering simply to either satire or pure regard for its value, she might be said to tamper with its

power and solidity – to defuse it and use it at once. In so doing, she translates science into something sympathetically human and also sympathetically inhuman. This seems similar to the way she inhabited the interior of language in “When bells ring” and “My friend must be a bird.” It also reminds me of the complex ways she inherits, inhabits, and tampers with the constraints of gender in so many poems, and of the nature of the “I” in a poem.

Dickinson’s poem “If He were living – dare I ask / And how if He be dead – ” (F 719), provides a good example of a poem that uses the conditional in an open-ended, vulnerable way (more, perhaps, than “To split a Lark” does). In this poem, conditional statements and elements of narrative become disorientingly entwined, stripping experience (as we usually think of it) of its temporality.

If He were living – dare I ask –

And how if He be dead –

And so around the Words I went –

Of meeting them – afraid –

I hinted Changes – Lapse of Time –

The Surfaces of Years –

I touched with Caution – lest they crack –

And show me to my fears –

Reverted to adjoining Lives –

Adroitly turning out

Wherever I suspected Graves –

‘Twas prudenter – I thought –

And He – I pushed – with sudden force –

In face of the Suspense –

“Was buried” – “Buried”! “He!”

My Life just holds the Trench –

From the get-go there are at least two possible scenarios allowed by the formulation of the conditional. The first possibility is that the speaker has a burning question (not revealed in these lines or anywhere in the poem) to ask the “He” and faces the emotional riskiness of it (be he alive) or the difficult logistics of it (be he dead). The second possibility is that the question is set up in the first line and is not a mystery—namely, she wants to ask if he “were alive”—a difficult thing to do, if there’s a chance the person “be” dead. In the first case “were” is a hypothetical, conditional were—signifying action that is “up in the air,” so to speak—and the “were” is a bit disorienting, as it signifies either the simple past conditional or a conditional cast slightly into the “future,” for lack of a better term (i.e.—she either means, “If he were to be found out to be a living being,” or “If he is alive”). In the formulation in which “If He were alive” is the concrete question being asked, “were” could serve tense—a question based in action occurring in the past—or could be a modal.

What’s at issue in the narrative here is not just whether or not she asks the question mentioned in the first two lines. ‘If’ it is asked gives way to ‘how’ it might be asked (under

certain conditions), which gives way to ‘what’ is being asked. And the conditions under which any of this can be determined are not themselves determinable. We do not know whether this poem is an unrequited love story, a story about religious belief and resurrection, or a ghost story of sorts. (And what seems most likely is that none of these possibilities should be omitted—that they are *all* sustained by the poem, because the conditional allows them all to be sustained.) A large portion of this narrative confusion is due to the initial two questions phrased as conditionals: “If He were living – dare I ask – / And how if He be dead – .” What all this amounts to is Dickinson tugging at the border between temporal and possible worlds, and this seam she plucks is built into the structures of language. She’s not thematizing time (as she does elsewhere), but rather, she is manipulating time where she finds it deposited in language, in order to dispense with it.

The thread of the scenario above in which the question is unformed has an almost pre-Prufrockian feel. The “overwhelming question,” which Eliot’s twentieth century speaker will wonder if he “dares” to ask, takes center stage but is never named. Ultimately, though, “there will be time” for all his indecisions about asking (and everything else), he says. In Dickinson’s poem, the question might be formed or unformed, but either way, it not only takes center stage, but it becomes a physical presence she navigates. It becomes the physical locus point for the action in the poem: “And so around the Words I went – / Of meeting them – afraid –”. Here the words are made literally monumental, both to the speaker and to the narrative. In the case of the *unformed* question, the “He” being alive or dead is the *condition* of the asking. In the second scenario (in which the question is formulated), whether he is alive is both the concrete question being asked, and the answer to the question; and, in a convoluted way, it is also the

result of the question being asked. For in this case, encountering the words of the formed question is linked to a formed answer for the speaker—one that must then be known and accepted. So the two terms (condition and result) that make up conditional questions are interchangeable here. Cause and effect are sent swirling. The foreground of the poem’s “story” cannot be brought into singular focus—as in one of those drawings in which both foreground and background form an image, but *different* images, which can only be seen one at a time, in isolation. This is as close as Dickinson can get to expressing multiple thoughts or stories or meanings as a simultaneity. Language may be diachronic, requiring time and sequence to build meaningful sentences, but she tries to resist this linearity from the inside and aligns it with the interiority of loss or death, rather than the external nature of time-dependent narrative. Regarding the conditional particularly, Dickinson dwells in a grammatical site possessing deep temporal undertow which tampers with the sequential movement we associate with both language and narrative, and seems to create a space outside of time.

Adding to the prevalent feeling of illusion in this poem is the fact that we don’t know quite what the speaker means by “living” or “dead,” or which one would even be more desirable. If the poem’s subject-matter is literal, then probably she would prefer to have him alive (though this is by no means a “simpler” proposition, since it would imply the speaker is trying to suss out whether “He” is alive or dead in order to either ask or not ask a question of him—a mind-bending narrative indeed). But if the subject matter strays into the figurative (as surely it must also do), and into the pain of separation and unrequited love, then the initial two lines might be read in a *third* and even *fourth* light. She might be asking, “is he alive *toward me*, and how can I bring myself to ask him (or even just to pose the question to myself or the air), if

there's the possibility that he is dead (i.e.—hardened toward me)?" In this case, "alive" is still preferable. But what if instead the speaker is asking, "is he really living a life out there in the world, away from me? and *how on earth* is he doing that, if he is dead toward me – if our bond is dead?" In this case, knowing he is alive, despite her absence, would be nearly unbearable – unfathomable. She does not want to face the words of the question, put to the exterior world, because encountering the words would mean an encounter with *him*, and therefore an encounter with the frightening knowledge.

What we *can* say about this poem is that it literally hinges on language. The speaker goes "around" the words figured in the poem, tends and edits them: "I hinted Changes – Lapse of Time –". It is even possible to read the next two lines – "The Surfaces of Years – / I touched with Caution – lest they crack – / And show me to my fears –" – as figuring the surfaces of the words as "Years." The words are textured presences in the poem, subject to time and ruin, and yet, the character or identity of the words (and their placement in time or situation) is un-pin-down-able, due to the way the conditional multiplies the possible interpretations of the language in the first two lines of the poem, and, in turn, the language being *figured* in the second two lines.

This reminds me of the way the bells become lexical objects in "When bells stop ringing – Church begins –". As the discussion of that poem showed, the lexical category of the world "bells" is disorientingly transposed onto the phenomenal identity of the bells, thereby complicating and blanking out some of its phenomenal and semantic properties. She foregrounds the word as a symbolic, linguistic container that's tinted by its meaning in the world, but not wholly defined by it, as this strategy makes it unclear how much the interior of

the container holds or doesn't hold. In "If He were living – dare I ask –", the objects being figured are, from the beginning, words made into solid monoliths. The real world does not intercede or show through even as clearly as the bells do. A tentative, hypothetical question that hasn't (at the beginning of the poem) been asked, or perhaps even been formed in the speaker's mind, is figured as a construction of large tangible objects. And yet we cannot see them in totality – we see the words' solidity but not their shape – their properties but not their identities. Though the poem states that she is going "around" the words, it feels like her perspective on them is quite limited. Even the physical properties are called into question, in fact, since the variant of "crack" is "slit." They could therefore be made of stone, fabric, flesh, or any number of materials. They are either containers for meaning, or dumb objects, just as the "He" in the beginning of the poem is either living or dead, either literally or figuratively.

By the end of the poem, the "He" is known to be "buried" and the speaker's "Life just holds the Trench –". That "just" sheds various shades of possibility onto the trench, as does Dickinson's use of the word "hold." The trench might be "only" an empty hole (if "He" has risen, for example), or it might be a trench with a dumb, lifeless body in it that, despite this fact, is freighted with old resonances for the speaker; her "Life" might *just barely* hold that trench, or else can *only* hold it, at the expense of holding anything else. And the word "hold" can be either active or passive – full of desire and motive, as in an embrace, or entirely lacking in it, like a vase or a grave. The possibilities go on, but it is clear that Dickinson is walking the line of these interpretative possibilities without choosing any single one.

What is discernible, however, through the crowd of ambiguity, is that the poem aligns language and death and seemingly makes them metonyms of one other. The "Words" the

speaker goes around at the beginning of the poem are related to the possible death (and I mean “death” in all the literal and figurative possibilities described above) of the “He” in the poem; but the words also mirror the trench at the end of the poem. The trench may be an absence, an empty container, a container plugged with inert matter, a container with a body that was once loved and once itself contained a soul, a container holding a mystical absence following a resurrection, a physical or non-physical container holding the speaker’s grief – and perhaps it is all of these things, as far as we can tell. If the speaker’s “Life just holds the trench” then she, in a way, becomes the trench herself, calling into question its materials – shifting it to a living grave made of flesh that may as well be stone, or perhaps some more abstract material befitting “Life” abstracted from the body. Likewise, the words are of an indeterminate material. The meaning within the words are indeterminate and either full of motive, desire and purpose, or else inert and characterless, going toward nothing. They are mere containers but also *not* mere containers. They hold the possibility for meaningful interpretation in the same space as they hold the possibility of non-agency and non-interpretation.

It is a strange reversal, that the physical words figured at the beginning of the poem, which would presumably be rooted/originated in the speaker’s mind, are in fact *outside* of her (and no longer seem causally linked to her), whereas the grave of this other is now rooted *inside* her “Life” (that enigmatic entity). And yet this reversal only emphasizes the mirror-like resonances between the words and the grave. The speaker, navigating through the poem, doesn’t inhabit either space – she is inhabited by (the grave) and she stands outside of (the externalized words). Her Life is positioned in between. But the poem, through its own acts of language (not the figured ones inscribed within the poem), and through the kaleidoscopic,

refracted narrative proliferated by the conditional at the beginning of the poem, the poem does in fact seem to inhabit the interiors of language, death, and grief, all at the same time.

At this point I have strayed a bit from the conditional, in order to make clearer a few things about Dickinson's relationship to language more generally. First, I've tried to show that for Dickinson the entrance into a poem is often the structures of language itself for Dickinson, so that the "reality" of the poem feels oddly cut off from phenomenal existence and like the objects populating the world being described within the bounds of the poem is structured by its grammatical counterparts. In other words, events and objects seem to be structured linguistically and to take on the ambiguities and troubles and temporal distortions inherent in language (and *especially* in the conditional, as I've shown). The significance of this is that Dickinson might see in language more than simply a medium by which to convey a story or experience or feeling. She might find in it instead the texture of experience.

Secondly, I have shown that Dickinson at times aligns the state of death or loss or pain with the state of language. In "If He were living – dare I ask –" the mysterious words of a question that are (because of the conditional) not pin-down-able, and that are also made physical presences in the world of the poem, these words become metonyms for the grave we find at the end of the poem. So, I will now turn back to the conditional in particular, with special attention to the two issues I've just mentioned. But what I hope has become clear is that I see this particular grammatical site as special, but also as both "current and index," as Whitman says of himself in the 1855 version of "I celebrate myself..." The conditional resides as one current in the vaster province of Dickinson's relationship to language; but it is also particularly

indicative, in a special way, of how we might view that broader relationship and its significance to our understanding of her as a poet.

I would like to close with a discussion of Dickinson's poem "To fill a Gap" (Fr 647), which employs the conditional, but also seems to thematize it, and which relates the blank space opened by the conditional to a tomb.

To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it –
Block it up
With Other – and 'twill yawn the more –
You cannot solder an Abyss
With Air –

Within this enigmatic set of instructions, we find a just barely submerged conditional statement as the starting point. Here's the translation of that buried formulation: "If one should need to fill a gap, then one must insert the thing that caused it." In comparison to some of the conditional statements and questions we've seen so far, this one does not bend our brains so teasingly in its construction – and yet, perhaps that simplicity is partly the point. As in the relationship between bells ceasing to ring and church beginning, this speaker's understanding of the phenomenon seems reasonable in its conclusions at first, and then a shade off-kilter. For, surely there is a way to plug a hole with something other than what caused it. For example, I could find a needle that is the same shape and size of an original needle that "caused" a hole, and see that duplicate needle fit nicely into the original hole, though it did not make it. So the simplicity of the logic leaves something out – lets something slip between the cracks of

understanding. And this is not accidental, but rather, emphasizes that Dickinson might not be talking about just any gap, or just any cause. She specifies without being specific, and the result is that this “Gap” tightens into slightly greater definition by virtue of the contingency between it and its cause (a connection which has presumably been severed).

But if the gap is not just any gap, then what has its identity been narrowed to? The variant of the phrase “solder an Abyss” is “Plug a Sepulchre,” so we might entertain the notion that a person’s death and burial informs this “Gap.” And yet this possibility leaves one to wonder, does a person who has died truly *cause* his/her grave or tomb? Does his/her *death* cause it either? Such agency and rigid contingency seems strange. And, from the point of view of someone experiencing grief in response to a loved-one’s death, it also seems strange to focus on filling the gap of the tomb. So perhaps we should instead be wondering whether the “Sepulchre,” like the trench in “If He were alive – dare I ask –”, could be an imagined, internal one. In this case, the gap *would* seem of primary concern. It might be akin to the absence a griever senses in a room that a deceased person once occupied. Or it might be the even more impalpable counterpart to that experience: the sense that an interior hole exists in the griever that nothing could fill satisfyingly unless the person whose death “caused” the gap could come alive again and *unmake* the gap.

There’s a definite feeling of mourning in this poem, despite its didactic diction and its refusal to name an actual event to which we might fix our attention. The roots of this free-floating sense of mourning are multiple. One of the primary things the poem mourns is that we cannot go backward. (Though, it is important to note that “backward” in this poem must be implied; Dickinson leaves the temporal axis out entirely, making the relations in the poem

wholly spatial. The speaker wards off any sense of prior events with a vengeance.) Once a gap is opened and formed, it cannot be unformed. The best one can hope for is to fill it again with the exact thing that caused it, returning it to a state of original wholeness that bears no trace of rupture. But what if (the poem asks without asking) that cause – that object or feeling or person – can no longer be located? The gap remains there anyway, vulnerable and blank, without substance and without its *cause*, as it were. The only thing to fill it with is something “Other” than the original cause – which would make the abyss “yawn the more.” And we feel in this statement that it is not the physical ill-fitting-ness of this new object that would make the gap grow, but the fact that it wouldn’t be the original cause. Original cause and effect cannot be reunited, and without that contingency, what is left is a yawning “Abyss” – or “Sepulchre.”

We feel something similar at work in many cases where Dickinson uses the conditional – that what is identified as a “cause” is ill-fitting logically (and sometimes emotionally) – that it is not the original cause, but one groped for as a substitute, and which makes the utterance “yawn the more,” wider spaces opening. Also, when one reads a conditional statement (for example, “My friend must be a Bird / Because it flies!”) there is no going back to the original narrative events to find the cause of the statement. The conditional by its nature ignores the multitude of possible events that the simple statement of contingency might conceal – thus making it impossible to fill the gap between cause and effect, between condition and result, in reverse. The initial narrative, the prior events that supposedly led to the statement evaporates once the statement has been distilled from it. This calls into question the relationship between the terms asserted by the conditional statement, for it may have been founded on a faulty

(unoriginal) cause, or a faulty understanding of the events that purportedly *caused* the speaker to make the statement in the first place.

While the opening of hypothetical spaces is one of the capacities of the conditional that Dickinson is drawn to as a poet (she more overtly characterizes this positive side of things in lines such as, “I dwell in Possibility - / A fairer House than Prose - / More numerous of Windows –” [Fr 466]; “Conjecturing a Climate / Of unsuspended Suns - / Adds poignancy to Winter –” [Fr 551]), she also seems to recognize that once such a space of possibility is opened in the mind, there is no closing it. As we have seen in “To fill a gap,” the opening of such a space can itself constitute a vulnerability; if the cause disappears, the “Gap” gapes like an exposed wound. Along with the cause goes the stable sense of sequence – a sense of events being connected in a necessary way – and the rooted-in-reality “parent spaces” (Dancygier, 23) that the realms of possibility were built upon can seem to withdraw their stability as well; thus, the amnesiac blanks we find in so many of Dickinson’s poems. Part of Dickinson’s predilection for the conditional, for inhabiting it and thematizing it, seems related to this vulnerability of unclosable spaces, and the potential loss of connection they can leave one exposed to. Though she accesses this state via language, we feel in it the resonance of more experiential loss, related to death or withdrawn love or separation or other emotional distances that cannot be crossed. To seek out sequential or cause-and-effect connections between events through language is to leave oneself vulnerable to misunderstanding, to a severing of cause and effect (or a realization that one has been claimed that did not exist). Such a statement cannot be revisited or revised (just as someone who has died can no longer be talked to or touched), since the original events are not within the completed conditional’s reach.

To inhabit such a dynamic linguistic interior is to bear the weight and texture of other instances of human experience that resonate with loss and possibility. In fact, even experiences that we would *not* expect to resonate emotionally, like the observed relationship between bells ringing and church beginning, become transitively tinged with a sense of mourning, by virtue of the way Dickinson mines the interior subtleties of the conditional and its nonhuman participation in excruciatingly human concerns. She finds in the conditional a way to explore the human condition without being limited by bound-and-tied particulars, or narratives that reduce complexity to a flat line.

An extreme state of interiority has often been associated with Dickinson's work, but this has sometimes meant searching out underlying psychological events or causes by which to explain the more enigmatic complexities of language and context we find foregrounded by the poems themselves. By entertaining the notion that Dickinson at times inhabits the interior of linguistic structures themselves, we waylay the temptation to reduce her poems to just the sort of linear and causal rigidities which she powerfully resists and tampers with. We do her innovations more justice at the same time as we are leant a new tool by which to press on and open up some of Dickinson's most enduring ontological and epistemological concerns.

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Fire Pond

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ABSTRACT

Many of us are alone.

That's the specific and the universal
truth. Specifically, I feel alone
in & on the face
of the universe,
though I might not
if that stingy largesse might contract
into a face & a smile & a body
like the last one, dear
god; the soul of one
tucked away in one
whose face is still smooth
with infinity. How might I love
anyone less? How can I be more
specific than I am? Outside
a gray steel football turns
clockwise, wise as a clock
on the back of an idling truck.
Upside-down, *CONCRETE*
appears, disappears, reappears
in big red painted letters, turning
for someone I can't see
on the other side of the truck, only
right side up.

I.

COGITO

The maple outside my window
shakes its big yellow fever at me,
a spot-light in the wind. I'm in bed
reading *First Meditation, Concerning
Things That Can be Doubted*,
from a textbook with a neon *Used* sticker
glued to its spine. My throat
is lemon-peel sore, but luckily, like Descartes,
I'm disturbed by no passions
these days. I'm free
in my peaceful solitude
to draw the quilts up to my chin
and think. Elsewhere, a wail
of tires, the soft crush of metal
on metal on an unseen street
as fenders furrow like eyebrows.
The storm windows rattle.
Descartes is seated by the fire
in his winter dressing gown, the paper
in his hands bearing the reason
for doubting every belief in his senses'
deceptive creed. For, what if,
right now, he was only his own
dream, haunting the attic
of his true body (naked, fast asleep
between the bed-sheets in another room),
the fire only a painted fire,
drying on the twin, fluttering canvases
of his eyelids? Descartes is locked
in a vise, a bracket in black
ball-point pen. A boy named Adam
owned this book before I did. He paid
his money, read some
of what he was told to read,
then thrust it back into the world
when the semester was finished
hen-pecking him. Adam didn't like

Descartes. He scrawled insults, all caps,
in the white oblivion of the margins.
The delicate, imagined hem
of Descartes' dressing gown did nothing
to touch him. Instead, he wrote *DICK*
beside the fire scene, the letters large and hard
as the clang of a grate, slammed shut
in a silent room. I can almost see
the tough grudge of his shoulders,
fending off the intrusion of books,
which burden him with the suggestion
that he might not be everything,
or enough. What was this book (dead
on the shelves of cinderblocks
and two-by-four's lining the blank edge
of his room), compared to what he had suffered
in the space of a single day,
when he got dumped, maybe, and walked around
like a long, thin paper-cut
before it bleeds? Descartes drew a diagram
of pain, to show how it was separate
from the mind: a resigned cherub of a man,
one toe dipped in the furled cabbage
of a fire, parting the skin, opening a hollow
extension cord, hooked up to the brain,
for *the animal spirit* to flow through
and inflate the muscle, inviting the leg
to withdraw. Adam withdrew.
But his dreams stuck around like brick
tenements, blocking the view, the sun, his mind
pale, hacking up images
of people and places, gluing them
to 1989, to yesterday, to never,
with a hot, tacky shame that wouldn't dry evenly,
or hold. He woke each morning with half
an erection, aimed at no one, no place
in particular, the constellation of acne scars
on his roommate's back a sign
that nothing mattered, the closed curtains
a shade of green that said the same,
as dim, beer-thin watts of winter light
nudged them, the storm windows rattling.
Descartes recorded only the three

consecutive dreams (plotted clearly
as points on a plane, arcing upward)
that drove him to unearth *the foundation*
of the wonderful science. He was twenty-three
at the time, and had to believe
in a divine destiny, since his father called René
his one disappointment in life, *a son so ridiculous*
as to have himself bound in calfskin!
So the son could do nothing
but prove God—a God that made the real
him. His parents were responsible
for his body (that modest, restless curtain
concealing the open window
of his true, immaterial self). There was nothing
he could do about that—except doubt
everything but what he thought
they could not touch or ruin; nothing to do
except make them not matter—as perhaps Adam
made Descartes not matter, made everything matter
as little as possible, in order to ignore
the *other* edge of the knife laid down inside him:
hopeful, threatening to try something new.

WITHOUT

*Be—and yet know the great void where all things begin,
the infinite source of your own most intense vibration,
so that, this once, you may give it your perfect assent.*

-Rainer Maria Rilke

As if the reflected future of a stone in air over water, the summer's loose
collection of rings—its distraction of swimming pools and waiting

tables, errands listed and run, mostly for the sake of not being the one
caught standing still and alone, the music stopped—suddenly

assembled themselves and telescoped down to a single point, a single
moment, intimate, not mine: The drowning of a man who was once a boy

at my college, a boy I didn't even know, only knew him to see him—
tall, acne-scarred, strolling the paths of campus in too-big jeans, ears muffled

by headphones, hair slicked and impenetrable to the seasons'
small invasions. I wonder now if the moment of his death didn't also

travel those paths, a weightless freckle in his vision he barely noticed
but saw everything through. Who can say? It's puckered shut now

to all but he who has been licked clean of speech, clean of the relief
of retelling. What happens when the two finally have it out? when animal panic breathes

down the pale neck of consciousness and isn't forced back
to its corner by the fluke of regained footing, or an outstretched hand,

when the *puh* of relief is never allowed to surface? No sob, no laugh,
just the tough panic of flesh and muscle, staying tough, letting nothing

pass, the brain flapping open and shut according to some new will, dilating wildly
as a pupil in the impossible light of a dream. What if, in our last moments, nothing

but the water adjusts: if the mind *doesn't* take hold of the body's hand
as it dies—if the body dies alone, desperate, only a body, and the mind

darkens, a scrap of torn sail, tossed on the waves? As the final
breath dislodged from his lungs, what if he didn't know

it was his final breath? He was still just trying to breathe:
as an animal might, to the last, without thought or witness,
without groping inward toward that cold, intimate stone.

ANSWER THIS

Quick: It's your last night as you.

What, then, must be written before tomorrow

erases for good the chance you've been forfeiting all summer
to say something that matters to someone,

if only you? First thought: *My family, my friends, the homage to them
I've never written.* (Nothing happens.)

*What about the one I've lost, but have loved for years
out of habit, or else much more?* (Doesn't stick.)

Beneath this flash of forced connections—
between the brain and the quick diorama it reduces

the world to, under pressure—I notice,
in shifting, shallow light, a scene like a vista

opening, rooted loose as seaweed in last week:
Independence Day. Nothing to do. Went to a movie alone.

Driving home, still soaked in the movie's humid pathos,
I saw that storm clouds had gathered low, the small square

of downtown relieved now of cars, the shop-windows
vacant, absorbed. Pressed beneath the clouds

churning in frothy slow-motion, the town appeared
flimsy, made of cardboard, half-sunk

back into ground, a ship-wreck of a town, hardly recalled,
with only an unconscious life, or maybe a life

inside someone else's unconscious,
shuffling incongruously, imagistically beneath the hoopla

of fireworks and barbecues, sweaty beers palmed in dreaming hands
crowned by watches rescued just in time

from the hold of a shop now sinking away
from what little impression it made on the air, on the minds

of the departed ones. I was so glad to be alone
in this inside-out version of where I had lived, where the sky

had once tucked neat as hospital-corners beneath the edge
of town, behind the noon drop-cloth of gossip.

All that lifted now, a circus pulling up stakes, its many eyes turned
distantly toward the next arrival on its itinerary.

I was so full, suddenly, with that particular sodden joy
of being left behind, I thought something might actually

happen. I knew better, but was glad
to not know it so well that I couldn't hope this time

would be different. It wasn't. That's okay.
I knew, even without the high point overlooking a windy expanse

of sea or prairie I now found myself
craving, that this feeling would feed whatever good

came of my life, and went to sleep that night
amid the pop and soar of late, illegal fireworks,

launched from small yards I couldn't see.

FOUNDATION

I began to think of my body
the same nervous way I think of the world
these spring afternoons, when everything is so
jubilant, it seems the day is exactly
what it would be if it could choose
anything. Trees moving, slurred patches
of light, birds' throats strung with a wilderness
of joy. This can't possibly
be the whole story. I don't even understand,
though I can imagine, in my own way
of imagining, slow poison, alloyed with hard
violence, a thick atmosphere
the world cathedrals into, tries
to grow through, trying to continue
being itself, with Spring days that still
have that effortless feel, that show
without straining against the black, heavy cloth
we sometimes have to strain
to see, through so much green. The body too
keeps reeling through its actions, even
after something's gone wrong. You might not realize
some equal but opposite force has begun
to build, until your body begins to slow
against its pressure. In the mirror, my body
looks like itself to me, and will, I imagine, while I'm
still in it, no matter what may be tainting its waters,
soaking up, then draining its health, cell
by cell, until it's not about imagination
anymore, or the sets of images the mind
applies. Until it's nothing to do
with the mind, but with *reality*.
So I tried to peer hard
through what seemed the deceptive surface,
down into what I perceived
as the depths—the truth—the thing I could be
missing. What I couldn't see, I felt—
little twigs snapping in a thicket, deep inside
some woods. That's how the sensations began.
But the more attention I gave, the more
they flared, little campfires growing, trying

to light the entire sky. A pain
in my abdomen, a headache, a numb tingling
down my right side, the garish look of the veins
in the palms of my hands when I woke up
in the middle of the night, my heart
a thing trapped inside a thing, shortening
my breath, washing up little waves
of lightness behind my eyes so I couldn't see
anything, except that I might die, at any moment, no matter what
the doctors said, their tests
skimming the surfaces of me, while
the real threat lurked far deeper, and would never
risk itself for such paltry bait, would rather
wait—take my whole life
at once. I had to be vigilant, suspect everything,
even the man I lived with at the time, even he
was out to get me, to end my life, noticing other
women as he did. I know. I had a look-out.
I perched high above what could be called
the *actual events*—a meal at a restaurant, a walk into town,
drinks—and searched constantly for a flash
of subtext, a sign that something was amiss,
that I was right to keep watch—it was necessary.
Not being desired—no, not
being wanted—seemed almost as dire
as blood clots or tumors. I was afraid
of everything. No, that's wrong. I had a craving
for safety. Something in me sank
each time I saw a mother swinging her child
on the playground nearby, or a couple
laughing in that life-long way.
TV shows were square, wrapped packages
sent to me from the distant zip code of an ordered city
that would never have me. The room
flashed blue, and my heart drifted like bits of lint
through the light, not connected to anything,
not even held together, while everyone else
had the future in their eyes, lit like a road
they knew how to drive, a highway bright
with unquestioned speed, no thoughts
about how low were the concrete walls
lining the narrow overpass, no thoughts
about what happens if you're forced suddenly

from your lane.
The future didn't belong to me.
It was sealed off, the way that man was
in those terrible seconds when I'd realize
he was a world all to himself. His existence
had nothing to do with me. How could I accept
such disregard for the space I took up?
I might disappear with so little to hold me.
I wanted someone to look at me
and never stop. Someone to say,
I'll notice, I'll fix it
if anything goes wrong.

THE STATE OF THINGS

She is suddenly convinced
(before a sturdier thought
can push to the head
of the line) that she knows the answer, that if only
she had plants
(the room for an instant grows
green and comforting, vines curl down the walls
like pretty hair caught with leaves)
if only there were plants
everywhere, never
thinking, but breathing
the same light, needing
to be fed, hanging from the ceiling
as though it were a small sky, cupped close
to their sinless leaves—
maybe then
(the room empties; the walls
pale; the furniture
is sewn with dead leaves)
safety and health would reach for her too, hold her
as a mother would—as though
it might never be otherwise.

EN ROUTE

"Trust me, airplanes *want* to stay in the air,"
says the man who fills the seat next to me
with his physique, a fluid sort
of flotation device, charming, he thinks,
my hissing nerves from their basket.
The huge engine of blue serenity we see, hear
snoring, cool cheek pressed to our windows,
is not there. Instead, we hang among a salad
in the making, the blue vegetable world
being chopped and diced and tossed
as only the invisible can, while
the man's theorem chimes the chime
of a grandfather clock—with the benefit, I mean,
of never sounding wrong. A sound that sounds
as though it's torn from the cosmic palate.
I've always admired statements unedited
by any timid echo clouding up
from the heels of an inner waffler—
and up here, sound isn't encouraged
to travel. What alien loveliness
to hand something to the world, and know the world
won't shove it back; to be certain your guts are gutsier
than its, or else, more simply, to believe
a Platonic marriage exists
between your mind and the principles so vigorously underlined
in the world's dog-eared manual.
But can you blame a certain kind
of stomach, home to a crowd of butterflies—or
are they sheep?—a crowd of sheep
doddering harder and harder into the idea of 'herd'—
for hunkering deeper, and lurching
when such a dare, hanging operatically in the rafters,
is put to the wolves of circumstance?
Surely the plane can't pass up such temptation
to let go of the air
a retired engineer breathed so long ago
into the arctic lines and openings
of its blue-print. Surely it's too efficient
to be blessed or doomed
to want more than anything
the very thing you're good for. To always believe
in the circle, it's exhausting,

the thrice-checked fuel, the round-trip, iron-clad halves
of expectation and delivery. Failure is the natural response
to such innocence and completion.
How strange *all* the planes haven't fallen.

TRANSMISSION

Last night, lodged in my room,
 loose as a screw
in one board
 of a larger structure,
the dark was possessed

by the same dull static
 that had come alive
in my arm, dim sparks pricking
 the empty space
where blood had coursed easily
 before the weight of my body

restricted its flow
 to a keyhole. Thoughts came
incidentally, tinsely
 wrappers torn off and discarded,
trashing up the dark
 with throw-away noise.

This is how the Earth must look
 from space—obscured
by its own doing, in a hair-shirt
 of sound, light, trash, spinning
to avoid spinning's opposite.
 No.

I've seen, of course, the serene reels
 from the satellite's oracle eye:
Earth's "spin" a mulling over
 of motion, its revolution
imperceptible.

NEIGHBORHOOD

The young men in their bright padded uniforms
could—except for their coach with his muddy
tattoo, his shades—they could be young men
of any age, any day this century. I have no idea

of the thoughts that churn without center, inside
their close hair-cuts; or what climate, what private
weather has clothed the slow lengthening

of their bones. But, from here, from this
window—does it matter?

The sky is sufficiently blank.

You could never tell by looking
whether it meant to resemble a high marble ceiling, a pall,
or just someone's painting of clouds before rain.

You could never tell if it was a lid, closed
on peace or on war.
Or if an eye lay behind it, alive
in the dark, knowing
the difference.

Meanwhile, the young men practice.

MIRADOR

I'm so used to this view
 producing what's lithe, contained
 by leaf-shape or squirrel-form, fluster
of wings—motion with a shine
 of metabolism, a clear enamel
 waxing the *fixed & dead*
matter beneath it—that this, this
 lolling grotesquerie, this shaped
 undulation of mass and fur
balanced behind a quivering screen
 of leaves (flash of thick neck,
 masked face) ousts me
from internal drift.
 A dampness has been darkening all day
 in the upper reaches of the maple.
From my bleached state among the bed-sheets,
 the lime and jade tense-shifts
 of the leaves
around that body, those small dark eyes,
 shame me into view. Something
 my mother told me just yesterday
about our muscles, our six-hundred
 muscles, eager as mice
 in the walls, or empty traps
in a wilderness, poised to gnash
 their aluminum teeth, and most of us
 setting only fifty or so free
our whole lives. This is the root
 of arthritis, plus other difficulties,
 according to the theories she's learning.
Those fifty muscles are over-worked,
 grown sore, then almost numb
 inside the condition of pain,
while the others lie about, pale
 with leisure: *To a diseased degree*
 disconnected from motion & action,
says Coleridge, sulking
 over his failed imagination.
 What's not in motion is basically dead,
says my mother.
 If my muscles were metaphysical

I wonder how my life would move.
Which reflexes do I over-use? Which shrink
toward the grave too early, having learned
morbid helplessness?
Has the growing dark outside
made mirrors of the windows,
so the air inside is a reflected pressure, stale,
more barroom than soul?
Last night my friend said on the phone
he's been thinking too much about death.
What if some evening he has to see his wife
alive one second, gone the next?
What will he tell her
just before she leaves, when no comfort is left
in words? His two-year-old daughter,
how will he tell her
that she too will go someday?
This is why we shouldn't have given up God,
he said. I finished his sentence
internally: *so there'd always be something left*
to say. So we wouldn't have to feel
still, powerless, silent,
in the face of someone we've failed
to love forever, and find
our own death there, a sentence
trailing off, unfinishable
thought. I barely remember
the little girl, same age
as me, who didn't come back
from the eastern shore, who slipped
beneath the bay's smooth blade for good.
Her death didn't come with words,
but salty green pictures of water, rocks, parents
on the shore, the voice of the sun
in my mother's throat as she told me.
The girl's wet hair.
The space where she was, then wasn't.
Now I imagine her six-hundred muscles,
tiny, alive, straining toward what
she barely knew yet, with complete loyalty.
We must not go on this way, friend,
knowing what we know about things.
Why not lift all our six-hundred muscles

to joy? We can. *We receive but what we give.*
The raccoon begins to climb down.

HOME AFTER A WEEKEND WITH OLD FRIENDS

Who knows what will happen to me

if I stretch out beneath these bleached marine fossils
of last week's sleep,

or sit still long enough, with a book, in this atrophied muscle
of a chair?

Thursday's hasty arrangement
of old poems in a new order
retires on my desk, a fan of frozen tail-feathers.
It makes my jaw ache, the way an old candid snapshot can:

force your lonely, park-bench gaze
on the lively gloss of its countenance, and the expression
within the expression

falters, tries to turn
back to the coliseum of gossip, being built beyond the precipice
of its shoulder. It's hard to tell sometimes

if this world we inhabit
is a sacred convent of souls, or merely a convention
of nuns, dressed in plain clothes, driving cars
between prayers. Never mind

these rooms' melodrama of spells and swoons,
the walls and furniture turning pale on a dime
beneath their ruin,
beneath the fine frost of apocalypse ash

they make-believe—this apartment
still won't get what it wants from me.

I light a candle, set it in the window,
so someone else can burn
with rootless, night-dwelling envy

as she looks up from the dark street, wishing to stop
herself from wanting
to pass through that keyhole of flame.

PERMANENCE

In Iowa, it is late afternoon, going on evening. It's early Autumn,
and if it were years ago, I might be walking back to my dorm
along streets with enormous changing trees, houses

with families inside them, thoughts of dinner warming
their windows. That yellow light paled my heart, dried it up
like a piece of fruit because of how much I missed myself

inside it. In the dorm, light was different. It fell from every direction
at once, sopping up the dark completely, uniformly,
as if the future had sat down upon us—bleak, durable,

sordidly aloof—and I had no idea how to get out
from under it, or act like myself beneath it. So I spent long afternoons
in the library that felt permanent, the sunken hours

till dinner sewn tightly into the blank fields outside by the pulse
of quiet glances over the tops of books—books
in which I recognized smudged shapes that had roughed the surface

of my heart for years, encased now in the elegance of form.
Those readings braided themselves with my lonely obsessions, home
being farther than it had ever been, the feeling that time had washed me

onto a strange, shoreless land, then slipped away again, depositing me among hours
that didn't leave, but hovered, at times like bees
or relentless light at noon, at times like moonlight, sloshed

through the trees, over the cold grid of the fire escape. I held still. I listened.
Sometimes, leaving the evening's vacancy
of soccer fields for the warm ringing angles of the dining hall,

I felt I was entering a great heart, swollen to its rafters
with solitude, lined all over with bright, ecstatic nerves,
the glint of poised cutlery.

LEAVING SYKESVILLE

There's never an ill fit. Nothing snags or catches
in the sleeve of its own existence. Through

mountains and crops I drove, each town a tarred knot
of freeway, clotted with food, flores-

cence, gasoline, A/C. From one edge, out
to the middle, the Mid-West. As if a map

long anchored by its two dotting oceans
were suddenly let go, and scrolled inward

between tidal waves—that's how it was
to leave again that old Maryland landscape

so comfortably married to its own features
it began to turn inward, and run like water-

color, or subject-matter, beneath
the physical lines—the ceremony

of being leaving itself behind
for the river of eternal forms

collecting downhill of my life. But not really.
Objects, landscapes, walls we pose to dam

the slosh of space—they are what they are, don't pace
in or out the doorways of themselves.

Each one is a perfectly-packed trunk:
no gaps, no wasted space. My departure

was no more departure than the act my hand
rehearses right now, wading through an apparent swell

of emptiness, mild heat rising from what appears
an ordained path, cleared for sake of reach

and mug. But never for a moment
does it tear a margin, or knock a chance

clearing in the evening element
of existence; never is it not

a perfect fit, despite our experience
of friction, striking a spark among the dry

grasses that live behind our skin, nerving an interior
expanse we can only know, or say exists.

CLIMATE OF REFRAIN

From down here the hill steeps up
not to the blade peak of a vanishing
point, but to a dull line staffed
by trees. And yet the hill must lumber
toward me, a stone wall being inclined
to dam the crash of earth's trajectory, as if
by necessity, though with no real effort
I can see. Perhaps the crook
and lean of individual stones
speak of strain, interrupted as they are
by moss, that willing waylayer of any
measure not its own. Still, nothing
a little upkeep won't fix. Wilderness, this
is not. I sit out back of a rented home,
steeped in the windy husk
of leaves. Squirrels leap and swing
overhead, as though squirreling
were the only real business
these days. Each time a local
gust drops by, some wooden chimes
I never bought pock the air
with the sound of closed mouths
bumping into each other.

ROTATION

When a day is bright, when we can see everything
nicely, because some energy moves

behind and inside the air, wholly separate
from it—an energy that travels quite quickly but appears

still, and unscientific, as lives do, as does
one moment inside a mind, full and muted

as a lake—when this thing called light looses
upon half the earth, it is for a reason: the earth

is suspended in a great clearing, having rooted there, and grown
over a very large number of moments,

each one thick as the meaning that swims, more
ancient than turtles, beneath the word *now*—

and when this earth turns one of its faces
a certain direction, and someone driving to work squints, curses

the light, it is because, rising up from behind the highway,
between the trees where birds come alive—singing,

a bright pattern crossing the stark inner walls
of their biology—is a star.

The woman drives slowly into a star, half-swallowed
by exhaustion, but relieved to at last be rescued

by day—at last she is no longer crushed by the pressure
to sleep (sleep!) through the unignorable stillness

of the house, of everything but the trees and the clock,
and herself, wandering through dark painted halls, down

creaking stairs, with fresh concerns for the sturdiness
of her mind—for she wondered last night, stuck inside

the confusion of a single moment, revolving and divided, somehow,
from all other moments—she wondered about rooms, what a house is, what

one is for. She thought (though by morning she would
forget) that no matter which way the earth is turned, we are still stuck

in moments like this one, full and muted as a room with someone
inside it, as the meaning that sifts like dirt under floorboards, like

one instant of pain, like her whole childhood, toted around
inside, an entire life beneath the word *now*.

FAREWELL!

Out walking last evening (past stables, the fireflies
low along the tree-line, a brief warm gust
quickenning some current that repeated
in me), I watched as I climbed over
a blurred version of the fence, and broke
into a wild tear toward the horses
dining solemnly together on the hill.

And, at first, as just after a dream, it wasn't clear
which was *me*—the one who ran, a cry dislodged
like red magician's silk from her throat,
or the one who continued to trace with her steps
the simple intention of the fence, economical
inside her life. It wasn't clear who was who
until one let go—the way a child lets go
of balloon after balloon, across years,
and only with practice is able to watch
that bright shape float away
and not feel herself go with it.

II.

FIRE POND

(Peterborough, NH)

I

Lately, there's never not a reason good
enough to call; though, come on, you—you know
you're treading serious ground, the minutes low
on your cell phone. No... Low is being wooed
like water by a stone—hours of whirl
bending round conversation with a man
who's married, who's your friend, who, there, again,
tickles the boundary from straight line to curve
where silken, almost-not-there feelers fringe
the ground between the cloth of his marriage
and you, out here, wheeling newish luggage
around the weedy periphery... O, cringe
no more, you. You're just where you've always loved
to be—the lover, skirting love, but moved.

II

Gun-fire in the woods—just rifles, just
deer. We wear orange vests when walking there
so no mistaking what we are. Discussed
my poem on the phone today, aware-
ness like a rain, that you've become the new
coarse knot my child-etched wood-grain aims its flow
toward, dam-flown. Swallowing to join. That blue
starvation game. No oar. A man's rib-bone.
At dinner, I told a poet, I'm scared I
think I might write for love. Seventy-one,
she smiled, said nothing, and then, *Well, why
not*. More was said. We're almost never done.
Outside, the world dilates, puts on its night,
and wonders what today we took for sight.

III

Today I took a walk to Fire Pond.
I brought the map, forgot the orange vest.
Into the silence I made human sounds,
coughs and heavy steps, proclaiming, *Yes*
I'm here, but apart, I can't be folded
into whatever this is. My steps pressed
words onto my mind: *Fire...Pond...Fire...Pond...*
which changed to my own name. I let the cadence
shield me. Early dark narrowed the spaces
between pines. Still I followed the map's lines
which trickled down toward that dark, labeled place,
an ink blot deep in the woods. But no sign
told what to do once there. *O*, it said to
no one. *Oh*, I echoed, embarrassed, new.

IV

Of course I want to send you these, how else
to know if they're good? Feels almost like be-
trayal, poems handled, cube by melt-
ing cube, to build a distance between me
and you... Is that what I've been doing here?
Keeping something to myself, just to prove
I could? *I need to send out more this year,*
I said last time, responding to your drove
of acceptances. *What you need's to date*
a poet, you said, a man who'll send out
for you. Rather do it myself, I waited
to hear myself say, but suddenly found
it wasn't true. The first law of childhood
reclaimed its reigns; I let it because I could.

V

This fire is the first I've ever built.
Outside: rain and gray. Thanksgiving's passed.
A man just left my room. Each second, *past*
re-limns itself, takes one more log and wilts
away its frame. I'd think that I'd be through
deciphering another *You*. Look hard
enough into that center, it will shard
and burn. But *You* always returns as *Who*
then? just before the fire's died. So, off
I go again. I've noticed through the smoke
a little word that's pitched its tented hope
near every conflagration: *Yes... Enough*,
however, stays away. There's no such thing
when wanting is the hinge on which you swing.

VI

Okay. But what about when we make out
through screens of need and difficulty some
essence, faceless, still (the rain of doubt
sky-bound) behind another's eyes? I fumble there, abashed. Or other times, I wait
for what will change: the shade re-drawn, the light
put out. But sometimes—now—with you, up late,
I forget to think—don't want what might
be real, but *you*, in front of me—beside,
on top, below... And when you shook and groaned
I held you like an animal that's tied
and needs my help escaping rope and bone,
the grip of flesh. I held you while you died
and hoped when you awoke, we'd smile, confide.

VII

People are leaving every other day
it seems. No. Not leaving. Leaving *me*.
All the difference there: falling or being
pushed. Old ache re-finds me, in the way
aches do: a bloom inside the chest that hums
its hot fragrance to every sense, till nothing
isn't hunger. Nothing isn't loss.
The new *You's* gone already too, the sum
of him dismantling, as time begins
to trickle, flow, between set features, drifting
landscape that was briefly home. The rift
of air, where something was, no longer is—
that is where we live, our true landscape.
And *now* is light condensed, a magic cape.

VIII

I leave here soon—a matter of days now—but
this place will keep on, without me. Others
will walk these paths, pine-needles underfoot.
They'll look for Fire Pond and find it, hover
among the winter weeds or summer weeds
and feel the vulnerable indifference of
a place they've come to new, which hasn't need-
ed them so far, though they hope it will. Love
is similar. And so are other things.
From one hot lump, a thousand nerves that stand
on end like filings toward a magnet, sing,
at planetary pitch, of homesick, fanned
by ordinary wind—the world—its gall
for touching one, with gestures meant for all.

IX

Last night, your voice, re-submerged in New York's held breath, sounded frozen as the Fire Pond, which I visited today, a queue of thoughts trailing. You said, *I'm only tired*. But I saw through, my white-knuckle woods-vision dissecting grays and browns with fearful glances in order to discern the threat. My questions, How *are* you... *Sure* you're alright? were tense lances cast at that moving target: your mood. I begged most casually, in code, to know where you had gone, what I could do to lift what sagged between us. You contributed no clue, said, *See you soon*. My stomach sick with failure, some voice inside was steady: *Not another*.

X

So many strands. Can each be true? Must strum
them all at once. But chord implies a mood,
and mood's a screened-in porch, and watching from
there, only one view wears the tint of truth.
The trouble is that truth can overbear
what's true. Or what feels true: the constant reach
of detail's hands into the always-glare
of moment. Faces, phone calls, walks, the peach-
pit of fickleness that doesn't end
the world, or change it much, a willingness
to let the self loop out and back, to thread
each *You* anew, with special thread, a *Yes*
particular and voiced, but unbroken
from air—the blank thrum of need, awoken...

III.

WOMAN DRIVES PAST, CRYING

How can we trust ourselves
when one emotion, hot and bitter
as tea brewed long in the pot, pours
without permission into another day, which turns
into many days, until it cools
enough to feel almost comforting, until
you are sitting on a porch
one evening, mug pressed between your hands,
small lump of something like sugar
in your throat, and, squinting
into the distance (the only place
sunset or horizon can happen)
you look back at some loss
as an item on a list of things to do
turned up in the pocket of last year's coat,
and you think it touching in a way
when the sky quiets to ash, meaning
that it's time to go back inside
and tend to life—whatever that means
that particular night, when it seems
no one, anywhere, is suffering.

INFIDELITY

In my mind it's
 silent, colorless, violent
in its lurching grabs
 of motion, which is the only
kind of motion
 the mind can fathom,
unburdened by life's actual
 flow, which, by some dull
miracle, connects moment
 to moment to sound to thought
to weather to a nearly broken
 bedside table, as seamlessly
as the wet tissues
 of the body hold together
planes of existence
 that should never meet. Absurd
how effortless is the architecture
 of being. Intention, judgment,
forgiveness, these
 have no business being bound
in the same warm knot
 as those industrious veins
ushering blood to the gray in-roads
 of the brain. Nothing
is contained. No. Not true. If it were,
 conversation would have welled up
between them and the objects
 so perfectly near their bodies.
When moving from the porch
 to the bedroom
with wine-deepened lips,
 a breeze lifting the corners
of poems lying on my desk, why
 didn't he see? And why
did those words
 not seek out the warmest entry
to his mind? Why
 did my clothes hang quiet

in the closet, and never reach out
 their empty sleeves
to touch him?
 Then again,
perhaps he did feel them
 hanging there. And so the question
becomes not one of physicality
 or even lapse of memory, but a personal one
for him—of ethics I guess—something
 I am not able to connect
to that meeting (solid, undeniable
 as the black street below)
of his body with hers. A word
 like love, with its substance-
like confidence, has come unhinged
 from its shadow of meaning.
What if there never was a point
 of intersection, after all?
If they've only floated in each other's vicinity
 for convenience's sake, the way
a body suddenly feels more
 like an airplane seen from the ground
making its unswerving descent
 on aluminum wings
through incidental clouds.

FIRST FLIGHT

The man next to her wore a suit and a gold watch
which he often looked earnestly
in the face. He did not look her in the face.
Sometimes he pretended to look past her
out the window, but she felt his eyes
graze her body, as though it were the open field
below them, receiving the plane's shadow.

She was fifteen, and his look got inside her
like electricity, voices driven down
phone lines, clamoring over top
of each other, impossible to make out.
She wanted to cover herself, and also
to open her body completely to his eyes
where eyes had never been. She hated him, his

bovine calm, but also she felt
as she looked down at the green checkerboard
of farms, the river beaming into the distance,
the houses with their tiny roofs, fragile
as fingernails under the weight of so much
sky—she felt, as he stared at her, staring
at all of this, a power unfolding inside her chest.
Life had inched nearer like a warm body
when she wasn't looking, and suddenly—
she existed. Her confusion
was life's confusion.

Once, in the car with her mother, hurtling
through early-morning fog, a deer appeared
at the edge of the white curtain the light hung
in front of them. She saw its eyes
shine, its muzzle twitch, the slender leg pause
mid-step. She had not been able to shut her eyes
or say a word. And then, like a secret, it dissolved
into the dark behind their car. Her mother changed

the radio to a country station, one hand
on the wheel, blue light on her face, not seeing a thing.

ELEGY

(after Rilke's first *Duino Elegy*)

But the springtime refused me and went on living
right up to the horizon of my skin, where
it paused, patiently rusting the parentheses
that divided its meaning from mine—mine

an afterthought. What followed was accumulation
of nights, one opening the next like the concentric
neck of a telescope, stretching its armored vision
toward the sky—till one swampy July I found myself

in a cabin at the edge of woods, celebrating
my birthday with a man who loved me, though
with difficulty, as I loved him. He was trying, I think,
to drag a net up through our unfathomed

season, and retrieve only what was solid—
summer's objects—sturdy, recognizable by
anyone with eyes. I wanted to be anyone
with eyes, for a while—looking at fireflies, a lake,

some woods. We ate mussels, asparagus, crusty bread
among dim lamps and candles, the expectation
that recasts the marrow of such places. I sensed
we weren't alone, but lodged between ghosts—those past

vacation couples, who spoke smugly through the flowers
stitched into the matching sofa and chairs, about
the tradition of love. We poured more champagne
and moved to the porch. The dark was a unified mess

of cricket-rub and heat, condensed among the trees.
We were *surrounded*, but not *inside*. He held me
separate from the night. Our voices sounded extra, in-
essential, painted on dark water. How could we

compare? Our talk, our silence, our finite touch,
weren't dense enough to hold me in; I trickled out, awash
between him, the night, included in part, so excluded
in whole, panicked by the short-fall of the moment's

promise: my birthday, night away, a man whose everything
I hoarded. I had wanted to cross the distance
between us, as the crow flies: above the restless clock-
work rooms perform on our hearts, horizon a rush

of wind. I wanted it hard and soon, for years.
I barely had time to learn our customs—those
bright curtains, between which the world appeared
opaque, arranged to go on without us—

THE END OF THINGS

When I said what I felt
but didn't want to feel
the sky pressed down
our heads, bent and nodding
as two trees in adjacent yards.
The windows dulled
to glass in their panes. Above us
our children crawled back
from the edge of heaven
and melted into the public dark
all around us.

TRUE NORTH

Here at the edge of winter
 where the sky says *enough*
of all that, and begins to scrape
 our faces
of the inessential, lick tears into our lashes
 then freeze them—

where the wind is firmer
 than any voice, and strips
the pines, then dresses them
 in white—elderly
virgins, standing tall and straight
 in their nightgowns—

It's here I want to lay my body
 open to the ground, or melt
into the gray angles of some rock,
 to feel desire
loosen its attachment on any one
 object, to lose its focus

on *one*, and dissolve into its own
 expansion, a starker
passion, relieved to find nowhere
 a home.

SELF-PRESERVATION ODE

I've been trying all day to write an ode
to Spring—to its *fuck you*
froth of dogwood and crepe myrtle
quivering from a lip-raised snarl—
its cocky teenaged refusal to answer
the insipid red *Thank You*
the plastic bag offers, as it clutches
the edge of the creek—
its defiance of those
who would scold its green mind
and lack of guilt toward those who suffer
beneath its windy circus tent—

But how much of this is about the Spring?
All day I've been observing myself
trying not to observe myself
being weak—Because screw
being weak, being
a tilled, fertile field, shrugging
its crops away. I want
to be the sun, pre-emptive and cruel,
scorching the fields to husk and ash
so the ground won't feel it
when the sky won't rain.

What I admire in Spring is its focus:
One needs a point to hone
to keep the peripheries at bay.
So I'll happily close down
those surrounding parklands
where friends and lovers pitch
their small tents, roughing it for a while
before they pack it up for home.
At night, flashlights bob and hold
inside the domes; they look, from a distance,
like paper lanterns, invisibly strung
on the wind. Still,
I'll be glad when they're gone.
Might as well be now.

Here, I *record* as the Spring records.
There will be no, *This too shall pass*, no
cloistering of my throes behind stone
till they run clear of whatever bile
caused them. To *recognize*
really means to re-think
events, from a more reasonable
point of view (not mine). But
here, I *record* as the Spring records,
with attention to the details that matter
to Spring, blotting out whole histories
of hurt and wrong-doing, with impressions
of wind on a deep lake—

EPILOGUE

One last thing: I forgot to tell you

about the small gray mote
that rides the air before my eyes.

I don't remember the proper name
for such things; possibly I never knew.

But it swam, it rested, among the features
of your face; it was part of how I loved you

(I think). I see it now—that's certain—drifting
down the page. But these past years,

can I be sure? when no one moment
shoves forward from the crowd?

I can only know it was around the way
I guess the sun was too, proving each one

of our days to us. Isn't it enough
things disappear when we look away?

PILGRIM

I've been attended (in my efforts to fall in love this month) by the mouse in my apartment, who's nested its image everywhere: in a wadded receipt beneath my bed, in the long-tailed phone charger, dying beside its socket. It's hidden in the thistled ditch my bed becomes when I sit up in the night, possessed by a dream whose paws are still pressed to the smudged side of my eyes, searching the sheets for what they see.

"Something ate that poison," I told you on the phone, *"It's got to materialize eventually."* *"Not necessarily,"* you said; and later, *"Don't be afraid."* *Afraid? Is that what I am?* I was surprised. I imagined what would change if you lived here too—how my private late-night vigils would un-green, snapped free of their source, collected for kindling to make a fire in the clearing, and see if there was enough to talk about (or do) till morning.

With you so far away, and us so new, it's been hard to discern the likelihood of love. I've culled a nice image of you as Pilgrim: earnest, straight-necked, boyish New Englander—and found I was tickled by the thought of your hard-working love, not yet called to its task—the city still a wilderness, the hill stifling its light. I can see it much better during the sprints my vision does in the unmarked fields between our talks. But,

when you speak, each of your best qualities reveals itself to be the uncomplicated twin of a subtler brother you never knew, whose sense of irony, whose mind like a sweep of moor, and eyes that aren't always averted to the sky—never had the chance to rub off on you. If one such brother had lived, I might tell him on the phone tonight, how the mouse has finally arrived dead at the foot of the stairs. How it was midday, not night,

when I found it. How it didn't seek a shoe or a pillow or a kitchen drawer to die in, but curled up beside the front door, as if wanting no more than to leave—

but how really the mouse lay down where it happened to be
when the poison sponged the last fluid from its body.
How its feet are tiny and simple at noon. How
my landlord will come in the morning and sweep
the bare gray fact onto the dustpan's gray-blue range.

THINGS SAID (ME & OTHERS, DREAMS & WAKING, YESTERDAY & YEARS AGO): AN EXORCISM

Red sky at night, sailors delight.
Tenure's a steep water-slide to death.
He's chairman of his own river, to be consulted before we decide if I drink.
It's your taste I can't stand, it's so bad.
Red sky at morning, sailors take warning.
If I were head-over-heels in love with you, time wouldn't matter.
You're like an evil superhero who uses her powers for good.
I feel like a vacuum cleaner that's never been cleaned.
There are worse things than being alone.
This headache is systemic.
Are there any spirits here who want to talk to us?
Whiskey's warming its hands at my soul.
If you see the whites of the leaves, rain is on the way.
Driving is an eye-contact sport.
What can I say? The Devil knows my name.
Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings.
Every morning I get on this bus all hard. Then I see you and go limp.
Attaboy, Clarence.
Please stop pursuing me.
Was anyone with you when you died?
No moon tonight. She's in my lap instead.
Since the moment you got here, you've been a terrible guest.
You are not your thoughts, you are much more than that.
If you conquer your subconscious mind, then you win the world.
What do you miss about being alive?
You're more a poem than a poet.
Your lips are soft as rose petals.
What about Platonic making-out?
Your face looks blank.
You opened your eyes too soon.
I want to be anywhere but here.
How old were you when you died?
Could you be a ticking time-bomb and not know it?
What am I, chopped liver?
I knew there was something I liked about you.

EXPRESSION

Making love, for example. I've been trying
to consider how that phrase implies artifice,
production of something abstract, by means of physical
labor; but how, in Jane Austen's time, *making love* meant something
like flirting on garden paths, or skipping promises
deep into a reflected tree-line. Yesterday,
Stephen's Lake never looked so made
for nothing, the public trail circling it so paved
against all possibility, as then, walking the long oval, balancing
abstruse monkey-bar thoughts
toward a poem, which is really toward—what? Making something
from another disappointment? Or, making fun, maybe,
of the guy who looked right at me, said,
Let's make love
right before we did, not two full morning hours
before he helped me toward the conclusion
that this was only an expression—
not of feeling
but of syllables,
chosen for their flow, their gauzy, filmic effacement
of all we didn't mean,
which courses now
beneath the network of remembered events—
watts of electricity, expressed
by the dull shock of streetlights, coming on
one at a time. That's over now. An expression full of hubris,
making love. I've hated it since I was fifteen and learning
how to park & execute
lean five-point turns in the lot of *Bushy Park*,
my old elementary school. As I made

one last slow round
about the island of paltry shrubs & trees,
my driving instructor leaned forward, lifted

his fat, wedding-banded hand
from the smug perch of his knee, and said,
There's two people *making love* in there.

His mouth sounded thick and full
of satisfied knowledge, of mothballs that know
all about the world of mothballs.

The windows of the white pick-up we'd been circling
were opaque. I craned my neck
to check for on-coming obstacles

charging from the sidewalk or soccer field behind me.
When a woman emerged, stepped
down, lingering first, leaning back in, then glancing distantly

at us (one, now, inside our bright bulb
of windshield),
my instructor tried to hide his smile

behind his cluck of disapproval. *Marital affair*,
he said, the words rolling sumptuously on his wetted tongue
as he gazed out the window toward the woods

where decency still lay. Surely I *coloured involuntarily* then,
as I did that morning with Make-Love the younger too
(just dressed, frozen, over-night case dangling from my hand),

the way characters in *Pride and Prejudice* keep *colouring*
these early-Autumn afternoons in my room, when
what seemed the dignified property

of personal experience
turns out to be public
ground, muddied by impressions

others make and leave
behind. There's shame, of course,
in being trespassed, humiliation in standing still

at the center, a leaky fountain
in the shape of a woman, giving itself away.
Have I, then, abandoned myself

to motion, for vanity's sake? To take control, reinforce
the perimeter, through sheer kinetic energy?
It's true, even nothing

can inscribe its presence on the sky's
thick mind, if it flees
the swarming dark of stillness

and takes off, an icy draft of solar wind, kicking loose
human signals, scripting cursive flares,
forging bright blown-glass

from formless sky. A universe of vanity
in such comparisons. I wish sometimes
I could quit talking, quit giving

it all away. Public displays of rejection
and love never made should know better
how to conceal pride's concealments, the center

from which the spokes escape; should know
how to edit the limp from its tracks—unless, I
suppose, the limp defines the style of the gait.

BROOKLYN, FEBRUARY

Below this gritty sublet kitchen
cars unnerve the puddles'
light, the sky a lukewarm taupe
hosting two spires
from the church on Montrose.
Beyond, the flat hope
of windows, checkering a tall
apartment building. The walls
here are insulated
with noise—close-packed batting
of TV and voices, defining
where this room ends
and everything else begins—

*

Earlier, speeding under-
ground, each stranger seemed to be sinking
great volumes of energy
across that private event
horizon: the face.
It feels sometimes
like danger, this possibility
of being sucked like a room
through its own window—the fall
not a freedom, but a clawing
at condensation, a cawing
into a city with no buildings
to give back sound.

*

I miss lately the grounded feeling
of being *with* someone—the sense
that someone, always, is looking
even when no one is
in the room—I miss that knife-edge
verge of seizure
by another, every second
of the day, every second

the fear and joy of apprehension
by the eye's authority, threatening
to forever absolve me
of myself. *Grounded*,
meaning not being allowed
to float away or apart—being held
together and down.

*

The view from his bunk, lofted
and narrow, is a corner in Prospect Heights
where men yell, and strollers
clatter, attached to swaddled mothers
who race with bowed heads
to beat the yellow light. I ask
if he's ever seen the corner empty,
no movement.
I ask because I'm new
to the city, because he likes to think of me
as new. He doesn't know
I moved here because of him.
We argued earlier over drinks
because the play we saw was worse
than his plays, but more
successful. I tried to comfort him
which only made him angrier
since what he wanted was to be angry.
We barely know each other.
Now he's climbing the ladder
into bed, wearing purple pants
and no shirt. We've no choice
but to lie very close.
We don't kiss, but squirm
against each other
as if trying to stay away.
Our hips move
the way wasps move, when pulsing
a threat with their stingers.
Our cheeks graze.
We're still pretending
we can't help it
right up until the end

when I'm looking down at a man
on the corner, both of us crying out.

*

Today I felt our passenger motion
as if from outside
the train, which nosed
into the dripping dark, over-
taking it, leaving it
behind. We were part of things, caught
in the narrow intimacy of that car, joined
to other cars, to the destination
and the people at the next station, facing the dark
tunnel, willing our train
to arrive. A feeling of pure
saturation: the this-ness
of moment, saturated
by the world, the world by us, us
by the world, all of it brimming
but stark, revolving, heartlessly
in motion. In heartless motion. A young couple
embracing; a nun folded
inside her body like bed sheets,
purple half-moons
beneath her eyes; the old feeling
that a glass thermometer is heating
my chest, its silver giving rise
to the red bulb
of anxiety, each time I face
the long commute to work
for S., who treats me
to miniature versions of myself—
each one a bit of lint, somersaulting
into corners, lacking
the gusto to fuse a whole
sweater, or some other
useful garment.

*

This flame pulsing from the candle
on the kitchen table, lives in what looks

like empty space, and looks
itself like matter. But it feasts
on invisible oxygen—touches
but cannot be touched.

*

Arrived to work early
(each train luxuriously
roomy, on-time), my feet the first
to mark the new snow
tidying the back porch
of S.'s house. I unlocked
the door myself, entered
the basement office,
its two broad windows
eye-level with the lawn
that slopes down to the white-cliffed
Hudson. A new brisk pride
in what wasn't mine
frisked the bruised peach
that had been leaking for months
in the closed paper-bag
of my chest. But now I was someone
doing a job. I heard no movement
from the rest of the house
until one of the Retrievers
came scuttling down the stairs
to lay at my feet and sigh his confidence
in the shared facts of our morning.

*

Reading through the *Emergency
Instructions*, affixed to a window
in the train, it admits
to three kinds: *Fire, Medical* and *Police*.
For each, the first plea:
“Do not pull the Emergency Cord,”
followed by the rational
actions to take. Outside
the windows, black margins
show us thin pictures

of our faces. It may as well be water
out there, the tracks guiding us
through gritty, treacherous
depths. The sign warns, *Never exit
the train, unless instructed to do so
by train crew or emergency
workers*—people who work
an emergency, who grab
at the ribbons blowing wildly
from an invisible fan, who try
with gloved hands
to extract the wind
from disaster's manic furls.
Every so often
the walls outside flash with pictures
some teenager sprayed
in the cleared throat of the tunnel
before it screamed.

FASCICLE

I come to your shores on a wave of disposable coffee cups.

 If you won't have me, I understand.

 It's Easter morning, and clear

I gave up nothing this season. A few specks of snow

 drift past the maple's red buds

whose birth and infancy you've remarked on

 from bed. I love that testament

to time's fruitful passage. Not for nothing,

 these late attempts. Never

 mind. The trail of coffee cups leads not

to consolation. But what about concentration

 on something that isn't you? I wish

to be the devoted scholar

 focused wholly on the perforations

 Dickinson's needle made

when she sewed folded sheets of paper into bundles

 of poems, dismantled after her death

 by a hand brutal in its lack

of clairvoyance; the scholar wholly focused

 on getting this crime undone—

 through his belief

in retrospect, in the tedious alignment

 of absences, slant similes

between the crested edges of pin-holes

 that might string together

 a past. Not just a past. A way of seeing

down the impossible well

 into her mind, what she intended

to make her poems into. *To fill a Gap*

Insert the Thing that caused it –

But if that cause is gone? Resurrect it, says the spirit

 of the scholar.

You cannot solder an Abyss with air. Meanwhile,

 you. Burrowing deeper

into the space you've made, smiling

 because we're at the diner

and I've just spilled ice-water down my shirt

 while trying to simulate

 spilling ice-water down my shirt. If I'd practiced

giving something up this season, maybe

I wouldn't feel so attached
to the way you fill the space that will one day fill
with something less fitting,
something that won't even pretend
to be you.
Is it a sin, or only a boring lack of faith
to miss someone before they're gone,
to compulsively reassemble what has not yet
come apart? Your smile fossilizes
in the wall of a duplicate diner
that has no walls; it will live longer
there. I'm laughing too, I'm there. Must not forget
that the needle, leaving its blank wake, is a point
of fact, not thought. You too
are light-sharpened and real. But I day-dream
all the time now, when you're not here.
Sometimes when you are. Sometimes I think
I could stitch all the hours of my life
into that element of blank
between facts and happenings, between trips
to the store, the bar, the library,
Mass, if I went to Mass
anymore. I could stitch all my hours
into the airy, un-owned pools
that are the overflow, the glinting excess,
of life's completed actions.
Not isolated; connected
by being left behind, apart. I could give up
everything, anything, a disposable coffee cup
traveling a current: filling, sinking, rising, emptying.
Or else I could be
like this plastic bottle of salty soda water
standing still in sunlight on the yellow table, trembling.
No. I suppose that's being
self-centered, and less
like giving up everything
than nothing, more like sinking so far in
to the leaden season of Lent, as to arrive
in its dark reversal, an over-ripe underworld
of moveable feasts: Spring, broken into
through its absorbed, wall-eyed mirrors, then lived in
for good, as happy ghosts who love love-
making better, now

that nothing, not even their bodies, can come
between them.

Notes

“Cogito”: the title comes from Rene Descartes’ famous dictum *Cogito Ergo Sum*, or “I think, therefore I am.” The italicized phrases in this poem were gleaned from John R. Cole’s book *The Olympian Dreams and Youthful Rebellion of Rene Descartes* and Genevieve Rodis-Lewis’s *Descartes: His Life and Thought*.

“Without”: the epigraph is from Rilke’s *Sonnets To Orpheus*, II, 13.

“Mirador”: according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a mirador is “a turret, window, or balcony designed to command an extensive outlook.” It stems from the Spanish/Catalan *mira(r)*, meaning “to look,” and the Latin *mirari*, meaning “to wonder at.” The italicized phrases in the poem come from Coleridge’s letters, the *Biographia Literaria*, and from his poem “Dejection: An Ode.”

“Fire Pond”: Peterborough, New Hampshire is the location of MacDowell Colony, where I was a resident for two months.

“Things said (me & others, dreams & waking, yesterday & years ago): An Exorcism”: two phrases in this poem are taken from the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

“Fascicle”: the thread-bound bundles of poems that Emily Dickinson left behind are referred to as the “fascicles,” though the word is also used in anatomy and botany. R.W. Franklin is the scholar who tried to discern the original order and groupings of these bundles of poems by examining the pin-holes in the paper left behind by Dickinson’s sewing needle. The two italicized phrases in the poem are from Dickinson’s Poem 546, “To fill a Gap.” Other phrases are taken from Dickinson’s collected poems.

NEW POEMS

New Poems

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THE SIN OF NOT BEING SEEN

Isabella, tepid house-cat of a girl, was beneath
Heathcliff's gaze. He wouldn't consider her
unless forced to, then stared

as *at a strange, repulsive animal, a centipede*
from the Indies, for example. But in the dark
of his foreign eyes, she translated

a violent capacity for love. Only Heathcliff
could burn through the fog of lamplight
that made her soul unclear.

It's almost unbearable to think
of the color and substance, the dense immersion
of story she must have seen climbing

up through her, climbing north, toward
pure, icy latitudes, toward
the raw, infinite self

she'd always known she could become,
were she exposed to the blast
of experience—were she allowed to give in

to that violence. But when she calls Catherine *a dog*
in the manger, for keeping Heathcliff to herself
simply because she could; when her anticipation

of Heathcliff's love shows up
on the humiliating surface of her body
in blushes and stammers, frustrated tears,

she begins to dissolve
into nothing. We know she is nothing
because she can't gather herself

into focus, or see what's clear
to us, to them. Heathcliff hates the lukewarm broth
in her veins, will never cast her

into *someone* with his gaze.

Catherine laughs at the sight
of her silly interior, and her interior shrinks back

into nothing. We can't forgive Isabella
her trespasses, her sin
of not being seen. It would degrade us

in a most personal way
to empathize with her lack of necessity.
Pity is the strongest feeling

we can waste on her,
and that, only
from the distance of the Heights.

But surely the objects filling Thrushcross Grange
weren't simply sunny mirrors,
waiting to reflect the storm

of Cathy and Heathcliff's love; surely
they were dense with the hours that seemed almost
hers, of un-asked-for leisure, the hours sinking

their anchors into the crimson carpet, the *crimson-*
covered chairs and tables.
Her afternoon epiphanies

depended on stable distances (waste-basket
to book-case, curtain to floor, chair
to window).

What's constant becomes necessary.
That's the philosophy
of the mind's eye. Looking out

from the only mind she knew, she must have felt
as Thrushcross Grange seemed: a root
held fast in the path of time's deluge.

A constant. Necessary. Almost everything.
But how do we become necessary
to anyone but ourselves? How do we find

enough centrifugal force to escape
Cathy and Heathcliff, their love
fastened to the *eternal rocks beneath*

by a collective romance now, a wish
(hopeful as Isabella) to believe
that love isn't historical,

that it can survive the times, being
beyond them, a lone figure, thin
with desire, wandering a landscape

lunar, featureless, sublime
as the moors? If we believe love to be
indigenous as minerals

to their local topographies, then
it's hard not to feel panicked
by gas-stations and stoplights,

by the red light,
there, not there,
on top of the water tower,

that quartz temple of pure function
shining against the mustard dark.
What sort of love is part and parcel

of this? What reflection
slouches here
to return our looks

to tell us what metaphor
of necessity survives them, or else
has yet to be born?

GEOMETRIES

i. The Tenth Muse

Oh, there she is. I was beginning to think her
without coherence, shreds of thought
for eye-lids, unbanded bundle of neuroses
for a heart. But anything with a background
must be real, and now she has a sky
full of sand-flecked light
clothes-pinning her to the world. Now
she has gold hair and blue barrettes,
a bush boiling steadily, statically
with bright orange blossoms, behind her,
the better to hide her
from the house on the corner. All the houses
in this neighborhood are rented,
more or less. Those who are, like her, young
and in love, do things inside the sun-blind windows
they don't want her to see. She watches with an intensity
that says the skin is optical
illusion. It's no ornament. It's one
transparent nerve, on fire. She bends
awkwardly at the waist, a vision of strain, muse
of paranoia and surveillance, her slim form
a torqued hourglass, inside which time has caught
in its own throat on purpose, or
without purpose, but as a result
of time having stopped
for her. I keep walking, my gait
a practiced mirror-face
of asphalt absorption. She mustn't see me
seeing her; she must (I want her
to) believe she resides entirely
outside of time, inside her shape, the bent-waisted strain
of shape. And it's working, I don't fit
into a single form that flies, shucked
from her eyes, hungry as mouths
for what's inside the ramshackle
house on the corner, one lopsided gargoyle
(unseen by her) guarding the stairs that lead
just one direction. I want to say her golden head is

*bathed by blithe air, and uplifted
into infinite space*, but I suppose she isn't Emerson's
end to egotism. She isn't a muse
of the transparent eyeball, seeing all,
circulating God and wilderness through
her veins – though I want her
to be. To protect her from being
only what she is. What
sad words – “only” – “is” –
when linked flat as the syntax
of gargoyle eyes. Look at *yourself* now, you,
lurking along these tip-toe streets
with a desire you bury inside
a figure for yourself. She's made
of flesh and blood, but you wrap her gingerly
in Emerson, tie her up
with horizon-string. The only only
is you, with your detour soul,
denying you want to be seen –
to open them to her, the cells
of your skin, like eyes
that do more than see –

ii. Couplet

In the car, in the dark, in my driveway, dash
lights glowing, me not knowing what

to do or say. Already kissed – *I* kissed *him* – last
weekend – he should be

kissing me, he isn't, I can't
control my expression, it's weird and caged, I can

feel it, a smile made of bars, an animal locked
in the shadows, saying, "well, I guess – next weekend? I'll

see you?" More talk, endless talking, talking covers everything like a dust
that's human made. How things

usually go for him – friendship a bud that can blossom and
spring – this is not what he says, but

what I remember – the "whole concept," they call it
in charades. Most other guys, says me, well, the bud

sprung sooner (whole concept).
Really? really?... *Strange... You seem so...*

cerebral. Cerebral? I say. *Yes, in a way.*
(Grimace, bars, teeth aching.) Usually

a bit more fluid, this part, I say. *I guess I'm meant*
to take the reins? he offers, and reaches out, but the reins

they elude him, maybe don't want his hands on them, because
he leans in, he begins, then leans out. They slip.

Leans in, begins – and thud – soft kiss
like a plum bitten-into one afternoon

still hunched on the counter
at midnight. Not good, no

good. Harnessed, useless
hands. And suddenly (I remember it

so clearly, even now) I know what I am – I see it
as you see in a dream you know you're dreaming – I'm

a strange creature (pre- or post-
history), come upon deep in the woods, looked at.

Part animal, part human, and part the creature they've
become, caught trying

to become two. Awkward mess, embarrassing
mess. Deep in the woods. No one supposed to

see, but seen, and so, caught between, one indivisibly
climbing out of the other, into

this. The human trying
to think, to explain, the animal trying to run, chewing

its own leg, its human leg. Embarrassed, come upon
deep in the woods. The desire

to maul him or run, explain to him,
but run. Can't run. (Can barely kiss back, forces equaling, canceling

out, a null.) The need to run holding the thing
together, making it one, unable to run, a Chinese

finger trap – tighter, tighter. He's
a nice guy, a nice guy – he's

weak, get rid of him. Just get us out of here,
or dig a hole and let us be.

iii. *Straight*

My first time in love, really
in love, my love was still in love

with someone else. A thumb on the garden hose,
she was, this other, this “ex”

love of his – keeping me close and
thirsty. She was blonde and pretty and harbored

coolly the secret of young, hometown love, which, being
twenty-three, I piningly knew

I’d missed out on. And so, this love she lived
in an apartment

not so very far from his, down a network
of gravel alleyways that burned

a neural map, squared and ancient, onto my thoughts
if that’s what I’m to call those encircling

materials. The dimensions
were classical, I’d say,

mainly because I was translating
The Aeneid for Latin class, and registered

the sight one morning
of her pick up truck parked in his driveway

as the hot black snap
of a bed-frame – its vertical legs and lined

palm – becoming kindling
for a pyre that would starve with a vengeance

no matter what it ate. I thought myself a present-
day Dido back then, but knew too the thin pressure

of the real, shifting
the view anemically: I was

a single match, struck at the strike
of noon – mid-air, mid-thought, nothing

to touch, and so wavering unseen at the edge
of the yard, until I pressed

back, until I crept to the door
and held my thumping breath, until the breath came out

knock, knock. It's funny
how boldness sets in, how it grows

from a lack, then over-fills it the way
un-called-for laughter fills the lines

of a forbidding auditorium hush. My knocking
grew and frothed this way – cresting to the thought

that it must produce
an answer, this rage – though

none came. I considered sitting down
in that chair there, on the front porch

and waiting patiently, if I had to wait
till dark. But then I remembered

the back – the bedroom
window, the metal blinds that crooked

this way and that, and so I crept around the side of the rented house
where I would eventually live

and, still later, not live, in a protracted
future that was (at that moment) an impossible conclusion

to this blaze in my chest – and
stood where I could see the A/C unit

hanging its rear-end out one bedroom window. I tried
to inch closer but the motion stayed inside

and revved to a high
vibration. The window seemed to tremble and hallucinate

my face, pressed to the glass
where it would stay

forever. Once it happened
it could not not happen

forever. I felt ashamed
that my rage could take me so far

and no farther – they deserved
to see my face, and to know I knew how they snaked around

behind my back
and each other. But – oh, that cruel quick shift

known to the jealous, a switch flipped somewhere
in the gray slice of atmosphere

between *mind* and *event*: it refuses to hold you,
the anger, it gives

way, and something else becomes bracingly
clear instead. It was me – I

was the interloper – the one with a desperate
scampering pulse

hedging secretly between the hedge
and that hulking black truck, taking up

two spots. And beneath this epiphany, how many
more, flicking their tails, nosing the surface?

To choose to see that bed and its
contents, its

forms – at a time like this – when hidden fault-
lines shook like laughter, to ruins,

the clear mapped lines I'd come to
rest on – what might I see

about my own desires? I still don't look
full on, straight in

the window – but watch from a distance, fixate blindly
on the closed blinds of a man

who can never want me *enough*, not ever –
a man who divides (I'm always certain

of this) his maddening interior
between myself and another woman – one

with thoughts and skin and fine hairs lining
her living arm, which I can know excruciatingly

well, through his mind's eye. That indirect route
I would come to crave & hate

is what I took that day. I fled
down the alley and, within the blocky neighborhood,

spun wide circles
that would take me away

and then back again. Back
and away. I paused to sit on the fire escape

of an apartment complex, and cried till I gasped
toward another element

I hoped would hook me, draw me up, head-first
from this fire I kept choosing

to rely on, to lean on
like a sturdy plank of wood

leans on a pyre. Then, inexplicably, I stood up
and walked again. I was

wrung dry, a wick licked clean, standing
soldier-straight. I walked, limp and absent,

back to his house, knocked calm
as a metronome on the door. And what

do you know. He answered. He stood there
in front of me

in gray shorts with elastic waist
and bare sweet chest

with a tender smile
and tender blanket lines

etched into his cheek. He'd slept late and hadn't heard
my knocking. Why didn't I

come in now and lie down with him
till class? There was the matter

of the truck, still parked
in his driveway, of course. I mentioned it

casually, and he – well, he
explained. And there was nothing to it, there was simply

no more to say. The morning
behind me, it slunk away in private shame

that had nothing to do with me. This
is where you belong, the moment

said. And I looked with wide, bleary eyes
into its face

and into the warm house
that unexpectedly

wanted me again, wanted to hold me
in its future, and I didn't look back, and

I felt we had everything straight.

iv. June

Jealousy's pyre is made and unmade
like thunderstorms in summer, or heat lightning that mouths with its eyes
a threat it's not quite behind. Summer

is just beginning, I'm afraid,
and the days are sealed inside
the air, soldered shut. You and I, apart, are reduced to two
mirrors in a room, empty
space reflecting empty space, the light arguing a mote between
into a pyre that resists interpreting.
I'm afraid. I can't explain

but it feels like this jealousy
contains me. I am a symptom
unnoticed in a body. A symptom asymptoting toward something nameable
surfacing. Late last night
(me in bed, you at a bar in another town)
a thunderstorm beat at the window and the body in which I live
was a story

I came up with – and you, the main character, played opposite
by a girl
usually cast in supporting roles; her big
break, thanks
to me. A story that began as breadcrumbs

for a detective to trip on, then blooded
with detail, then motive
stirring time into the long-legged potion
of *event*. I'm afraid
I won't tell the story. It would be like trying to speak
the body's language. And I am a symptom
wordless inside a body.

But you – you live inside a house
just down the road. You've been away
and now you've returned, and your daughter plays playdoh
in her sick-pajamas,
coughing and laughing inside the home you hold especially close
around her, now

there's only two of you
to tamp down the edges in a storm –
now your wife has gone to live
a mile or two away,
on another street. But I imagine
sweet things are happening right now –

a reunion all comfortably upholstered
in breakfast and buttons and baths and things
that can have nothing to do
with me, must not, things I would give
an aura of symptom to, were you to let me in. There's a way in
which I'm always a gesture
away. So I stay where I am. And last night
(me in my storm-tossed bed, you at a bar in another town)

is a blind detective
novelist, still poking around
and over me. I'm a body, almost found, under
ground, or else
a symptom in the body of a crime she can't quite find
a way to write yet. A link in the chain of a mystery
still hanging slack
above the unlocked dead-
bolt on the door, before anyone knows
to be afraid. In the margins of this unwritten body
of work

is the place where we will meet
when you call me this afternoon, or tomorrow, when there's time, and the fires
we eventually light will be real and external and I will be
uncontained.

APRIL 15

The world that just yesterday felt sweaty and personal
as a swamp with hands, I pass through today
cleansed and free, a mere attendant
to public matters. The Municipal Building
so grand and out of place
facing Lucy's diner
received me this morning
into its marble interior, and a slick thrill
residing between *sureness* and *humility*
frisked me as I approached the window
holding with both hands
my bright yellow bouquet
of parking tickets. I paid heartily,
for this morning I discovered
a neon green sticker, stuck relentlessly
to my car's clear breast like an "A"
implying the town's power to drag her
away in shame. After I paid, I peed
in a sunny, immaculate stall
that made me (I'm a little embarrassed to say)
feel *safe* and contained,
tucked out of harm's way,
perhaps because it (like me) was drawn
to the human scale. Outside, I
descended the grand stone stair
to the street.
Now I sit in a very different
sort of room, in the basement of a building
at the university – the one dedicated to the study
of architecture. But today
we convene for another, a national
purpose: to get our taxes done
at the very last moment
for free. We've all waited longer
than we meant to, and for that, we'll wait
especially long today
in this long narrow *waiting room*
with a hodge-podge of chairs
placed too near for us to feel separate
from one another. Things rise

irrepressibly to the surface, like cream.
A quite large handy-man across from me
suddenly says to whomever might hear
that he got his stimulus money, but it's caught
in the revolving door – circling straight
back into what he owes.
Now he laughs and looks serene.
Now the young woman
with the honey-sparrow voice,
which suits the green shirt perched
at the ledge of her dark shoulders, flirts
with the college student behind the desk,
the one responsible for “intake.” And
now the young blond guy,
handsome in a sailboat
sort of way, mentions to the “intake” fellow
his desire to be taken in. He has a voice
and I can only guess it comes
from deep within his body.
Something about this space,
its gray carpet, gray chairs, gray walls and flimsy
partitions, makes bodies
seem more like bodies, more full
of their own blood & movement.
And suddenly, from the nowhere hallway,
in walks my former
student, Katherine – the one who couldn't
stand me because I asked her to stay
awake. Look
away, focus
on the questions the guy is asking
someone else now. They are
calming and standard as water in a sunlit creek
that melts something in my calves, and moves
upwards. But Katherine's
up now, it's her turn, and she sits across
from the gatekeeper, disturbing
the water's flow. She didn't
like me. That compulsion that punctures
so much of our time, until time
begins to feel like a compulsion
to be liked. Did you know the root of *time*
means “to stretch or extend”?

Funny, Liz said
just yesterday, *we always think of it as*
a constraint. It stretches
beyond us, leaves us out, like
a herd of girls leaves one girl's heart
constrained by the middle
school bathroom. Like
students who talk or sleep in class
as if you are a TV, plugged in
at the front of the room.
It looks at us blankly and looks away
and thumbs private messages
on its cell phone. Or is that too con-
temporary for time? Maybe time's look is more
like the sea. The sea. The
illustrious, consuming, unfathomable
sea. Sounds so funny here, almost
impossible, almost
repealed by the sound
of copy machines, calm pleasantries, the *tick-TOCK*
of the stapler, giving order
to each *return*, all of it free, and, therefore,
unhurried. I could stay here
all day, all week. A beautiful
Indian woman walks in now.
Perfect timing, she says, since she arrives at just
the moment her name is called.
Perfect timing.
Her shirt has a cartoon drawing, to scale, of ribs
forming an empty cage, a cherry-red heart
beating outside of them.
Katherine emerges from the back, and she is –
oh, my – she sits down
next to me. We speak
and it's as though we
are long lost friends. She tells me
she will start reporting at the campus
station soon. She's excited. Only one
year of college left. We hold each other's
gaze, and feel, I think,
forgiven. *Perfect timing*,
says a young man in gym shorts
whose friend will get to prepare his taxes

due to *perfect timing*. And now – oh, it's something –
the woman sitting with the gatekeeper, her nails
are like the long, curved rinds
of a strange fruit, fallen a long way, long ago,
from its tree. Really, they must be
seven inches long, *ten* even,
and are painted midnight blue,
with enameled stars bursting
the length of them. She is
looking for something, looking
in her gray purse for something
important, and the nails, they drag
along the gray table-top
with an eerie, animal sound,
and they carve cosmic shapes
in the space around her purse, around
her tax forms, which rustle and slide
on the table. I can't make them up,
these figures floating against a milky gray screen,
more body here, in the free
tax office, in the basement
of an ugly building, used for the study
of architecture, gotten to
by hallways and stairs and doors that lead
back out into the sun-waxed wind, the 65 degree
context, ribbed
with trees, lined in blue silk and bells
ringing from a tower meant to inspire
grandeur and hope, a public dignity
to time and its effortless reach.

INVITATION

A dinner party? I'm too temporary to hold
a dinner party. What would I serve, or say?
How would I keep the walls from looking
rented, or turning to tent,
should the moon suddenly strike them
as funny? It's spring, no time to change
my dress from this wind-loved *Here I am*
to the tailor-made *I am Here*. It's pricey, that
new one, and hangs toward the middle
of the future's spring catalogue.
I am Here means making arrangements
with the water: *Settle down, now. Freeze.*
Divide and tinkle into useful cubes
that melt so beautifully into gin-lit
laughter. But it must not rise above
our noses, or much past midnight
if any work's to be done tomorrow...
if we are to keep from drifting
away. The candles too must be coached
to lean and sway their flames in such a way
that to see them is to feel their solid inner
atmosphere (parlorized in cherry
finish), not their weakness
for breath. But how will I keep
the crickets from playing a creaky
adagio on their limbs? They will sound
like lonely children
gathered at the windows, too happy
to explain. Maybe I'll give in, give up on the *given*
the windows provide
and welcome the jigsaw wings
of the bats who swing on strings
in the gravel alley, the raccoon
who sits in the tree. I'll invite
the little girl who lives down the street
and talks to me from her front yard
on my walks to the park in the evening.
She once played a joke on me regarding
a cat wedged tightly into a box
with blankets risen all around her
like a swollen, peaked soufflé. *I just*

*found this cat on our doorstep –
in this box – just
found her! Gonna keep her!* And I said, how
remarkable, that the cat stayed put
so patiently – it must *love you already*.
April Fools! she yelled. *She's mine! She's*
Mildred! But despite this revelation
Mildred is temporary too, so the girl
could bring her along to the party if she liked
where I would serve nothing – would make
time, not keep it or kill it, not
salmon or quiche
or claws plucked from the floor
of the sea. Let us go then, not stay.
We'll have a dinner that lacks all
temporality, that's stuffed to its tender gills
with humid, uneven space that makes us
lopsided, walk funny, free.

Tourist's Attraction

“But what is it all about? People loose and at the same time caught. Caught and loose.
All these people and you don't know what joins them up.”

—Frankie, from Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*

Living by myself in this house
which others have called home and then
not called home, each for their own
good reasons, reminds me to wonder
if what I have is a tourist's
attraction to love. I'm reminded
how hard a tourist falls
when she feels herself set a little apart,
when she feels that old ache
in the eye, to see clear through
the signage that drew her
in the first place. To see through
is her mania – to see down
to the sacred bones of a sacred site
and through the bones
of the others who have traveled there
(even those who traveled *with* her)
and clutter the air with their bright
t-shirts, their voices flashing
with a present tense
so annoyingly unshadowed
it won't survive the glib back-glance
of Tuesday. Can you blame her
for wanting to dig down
to a bedrock *Now*? But I do. I
blame her. Looking through
has something of a look away
in its heart. An old desire of the young
to strip things down – dear
things, some – to an essence, bared like teeth
of the no longer living.

I'm thinking
of Machu Picchu there, if you want
to know. The skulls, the sacrificed
virgins' bones, the unmoved sacred stones...

It's on my mind because this morning I stood
out on the porch of this house in Georgia
where I'm living temporarily,
and where a novelist (now dead) once lived
as a child, less (but still) *temporarily*, and I set up
a card table – a pretty good copy
of the card table my grandmother put out in the den
for Gin Rummy with my sister and I
when we were kids – and I sat out there
on the porch with the deck of cards
I bought earlier this summer in Peru
for Rummy with my sister
on trains and in the airport,
but today (and all week) I played Solitaire
in Georgia's late-summer, late-morning
heat, and on each card I slapped down,
a new dull snapshot shone
of Machu Picchu, blue sky
an ageless tapestry behind it. White spackle
of clouds. In a few, tourists
who must each, in that moment,
have felt the uncomplicated ground
supporting their feet, the reliable arch
of the world as it poured in like concrete
to meet the clarity of their eyes,
and not known another perspective
made them small, then guarded
by a two of spades, a jack of clubs, a diamond,
some hearts. It's September now and still
nothing's lined up, not once,
on the Solitaire front, so I go on
with the contented mania
of a slot machinist, more at home
with disequilibrium anyway.

At Machu Picchu, I felt steadier
once we were off on our own,
my sister and I. We found
a grassy terrace, hidden and narrow, with a view
of very few tourists. It looked sharply down
to the sappy twig of river – almost a satellite
view – and up to Wayna Picchu, that dark god-like
peak, laced with Incan steps, risked now

by hikers (we see *them* from our perch)
dressed in bright “gear,” they call it.
At least two of them fall
from that pass each year, I’m told.
And what is the view from inside
that fall? There’s no evidence
in the deck, or in the bones,
if they’re found –
no evidence
in that sunny afternoon at Machu Picchu,
my sister and I looking around
from our perch, talking idly
about the two men absorbing our separate
attentions, then some more minor ruins
we spotted below. Then our parents
came up – the way
they seemed to be getting older... older
faster, now. A silence, a cautious peering
down. Then I wondered aloud
whether the bird there, making tight verticals
in the air, as it snatched some winged scraps
from the dizzy opening before us
was a species around
when the Incas lived here, in this temporary
hundred-year posting of theirs.
Manda had been wondering exactly
the same thing, she said, and then,
*I bet two Incan sisters sat here once...
I bet they talked about... the same things as us...*
You think? *Uh-hunh*, she said,
and we could feel the boldness of this assertion
like a giddiness of the height –
and it seemed right, just then,
to be brutal – not
about the truth (that binocular
virtue), but about our chance to feel
like members of something – of one thing
dilated far beyond itself – before and beneath and ahead
of itself. We were sisters. We belonged
to each other, and so we belonged
to the world. It was
simple, and seemed important now
that we not throw sheepish glances

off the edge, at that mountain mirroring
this one, and see ourselves reflected back
as distant tourists, unrelated
except by category – our American
bones and money and bright
costumes, blooming
momentarily, unnaturally,
on this ledge. And was this foolish
to have what could be called imperial
faith in –

what? – what was it
we believed in so perfectly right then? Our
impressions? Our right to make leaps
from the tangled nest of our
perspective?

Was it a bit like Frankie's
foolish faith? Frankie – who fell
head over heels, up from the wide yawn
of her twelfth summer (which never held her
a member of anything), and
onto the ledge of a great consuming love
for her brother's wedding, coming up in Winter
Hill, a town she pictured as pure, unearthly
white, and arctic as the heart
of Alaska, though truly it lay
a hundred miles north
of her home here in Columbus, Georgia.
Well, *truly*, Frankie never lived
here at all – not in this town, not in this green and white house
on Stark Avenue, where I sit now
at a card table that looks like Grandma's,
on this high-ceilinged porch in Georgia
where today I write with sweat slowly
climbing steps down the back
of my neck, facing
an unbelievably expressive bird
I hear but don't see, who I think must perch
day after day in the same uninspiring tree
across the street, calling
to less precocious birds, farther
away, with such range, such insistence, such
grave, mutinous joy, I want to hold it
in my hands, and also, sometimes,

at bay – the way I wanted to hold
Frankie, when she said to Berenice:
*The world is certainly a small place. I mean
sudden ... The world is certainly
a sudden place.* And later, in a different key,
The son-of-a-bitches, regarding
the neighborhood girls
who left her out of their club, their clubhouse
in the tree. No, this neighborhood

was not home to Frankie, but she was born
here, in a sense, in the room
on the other side of this wall
to my left. That was her bedroom –
Carson's – where she wrote
(as a kind of small, ruined cathedral
inside which Frankie could live) her novel – or
bits of it, anyway, back home
from New York with the flu.
Carson, I'm told, never stayed anywhere
longer than eight weeks at a time.
She seemed to want her life set up like that –
like a card-table she could sit at
for a while, with companions or alone,
and then fold up and off
to another place. Though I imagine
the unspoken shape of the word *return*
rounding in her throat
as she left.

Still, in this house,
there's a permanent collection of sorts
on display in glass cases in her old bedroom
for tourists to look through
when they visit. There are photographs
and a number of her belongings:
a pair of glasses,
a single dingy white glove,
a single personal check, number 444,
her typewriter,
a box of stationery, personalized,
a tarnished silver lighter,
a child's record player, opened like a small suitcase,
a watch, stopped at 1:25 and 37 seconds,

a dinged-up metal trunk with her name on it,
a yearbook for Columbus High School,
laid open to the page
on which Carson's face is half-way down
a staggered column of faces, and across
from her scowl, a quote she picked:
Music, when soft voices die,
vibrates in the memory. It's Shelley
and I swear to you – I could not
make this up – below her is another
Shelley – a fellow named Shelley
Swift – who might have rolled
his eyes up to his handsome hair
when he read that quote, and whose own
motto – oh, it's grave – reads: "Fame
comes only when deserved."

Sometimes I write in her bedroom.
I sit like a tourist among her things
and I make eye-contact with her life-
sized visage, a blown-up glower, propped
in the very corner the photo
depicts. The typewriter (now on display)
is in the photo too, a sheet of paper caught
in its works and smudging the wall
with its shadow. Her piano is out of range, but
present, I'm told – to the typewriter's right.
I'm looking at that corner
right now: where the piano was,
a display case instead, and in it
my own reflection. And I don't know
how much being here means
I know anything about her at all.
I don't know the nature
of the trace we leave behind
when soft voices die, or if a trace is even
what we leave, strictly
speaking. But – I'll say it
anyway: All of us, I think, are here –
Carson, Frankie, and I – an odd
triangle that looks nothing like a triangle
unless you're sitting, just so,
in this very room. From a distance,

the spokes are hitched and undone
by a crazy wedding of dimensions.
But here I can see *and* see through.
I'm *caught*

and I'm *loose*.

Like these bits of a life, let go
but here. Like the sun-baked, looked-at
stones, leaning together at the top
of a mountain, tourists
of the centuries as the centuries
pass. Like Frankie, old Berenice
and little John Henry West
around the table in the darkening kitchen,
playing 3-handed Bridge
with an incomplete deck
their last summer together. Caught
and yet terribly loose: Frankie
a tall winter ache
lashing painfully against them and every
familiar edge, trying to scrape out
of her skin. And that last evening
in the kitchen, bound by nothing
and everything, their voices began all at once
to harmonize in a three-parted sorrow,
their crying caught up together
in the known dimensions of the kitchen,
but loose like a moment is loose
when you know for the first time
(it is always the first time)
that it will never come again.
And I haven't fallen
from this knowledge, but
I think that if time really is
a long, straight measuring stick, with no give
or backward glance, what it must measure
and re-measure

are the infinite dimensions
of a particular place. It must measure the inside
of each temporary view, where
the sight-lines of temporary residents
tangle and loose endlessly
with each other, and then
(every once in a while) vibrate all at once

in a bright shiver of heart-strings
when a certain key is struck. Here,
it's September and evening
at 1519 Stark Avenue
and outside the windows of this room
the shadows press their long hands
together as they lean away.

VITA

Jessica Garratt's first book, *Fire Pond*, won the 2008 Agha Shahid Ali Prize in Poetry, selected by poet Medbh McGuckian, and was published by the University of Utah Press in 2009. She earned her PhD at the University of Missouri, where she held a Creative Writing Fellowship, and has also held a visiting teaching appointment at Wichita State University. She has received fellowships from the Carson McCullers Center, the MacDowell Colony, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin, where she earned her MFA. Jessica's poems have appeared in journals such as *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and new work is forthcoming in *Literary Imagination* and *Western Humanities Review*.