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**Title Page - Poems**

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**Poems**

**Aborigine**

We rode this island bareback  
curled desert sand under toes,  
dug for honey ants. We looked  
back at Uluru whose red rock  
spirits sang our home to life,  
hummed us toward valleys,  
banks of mud. We rolled  
our bodies in brown soil  
wet with water, snug  
as second skin dried in heat.  
We masked our human smell,  
tracked downwind the sounds  
of night where ancestors dwelled.

We peeled back from trees  
in Arnhem Land, painted  
charcoal stories of our clan  
who sprung from red clay  
along with our lizards, turtles,  
sun who all renewed our lives  
during daily rituals

when we streaked our bodies ochre,  
chanted our history, our circle  
of feet moving fast, our galloping   
bones shaking a tune that lured  
women to men, moon to earth  
where we became one and no one   
could own this land, this black sky  
pricked with stars during Dreamtime  
when spirits created light for us  
who came first.

**Above the Liquor Store**

Social Services should be notified  
about those two youngsters, babies  
really, not more  
than three or four  
years to their names  
which the woman in the white Escort  
didn’t know

when she saw these two round faces,  
blurred by yellow moon, flickering on and off  
in code above the liquor store. Alone  
up there in that Detroit apartment,  
those babes teetered on the edge  
of the window ledge as if they drank  
vodka straight during rush our exhaust

and bathed in perfumed city dusk  
muffled, thick as lust, a touch  
of dust that woman wiped   
from her dashboard, from her lips,   
dry and chapped. She watched  
those toddlers rake the air  
with fingers spread   
down toward motor heat,

down toward her. She could,   
she knew, report those children  
or report herself as the woman below  
who braked on red, and waited  
for green, her signal to go.

**An Agoraphobic Explains Fear**

On television, you can watch,  
as I have more than once,  
some stranger’s brain  
cupped in a surgeon’s hands  
as she expounds on normal functions,  
how language lurks on the right side,  
while singing emerges from the left,  
unheard now. Death hushes all.  
No impulses jump, no neurons   
electrify messages or melodies.

Just me on this floral couch  
with my brain inside my skull.  
I can not reach past bone, can not  
unwrap ropes of my gray prison.

My brain misfires,  
my therapist says. Think  
of fireworks, an explosion  
of sorts. You want  
a safe place. Lock  
your brain, chain your door.  
Nothing is enough, though.  
The world will intrude.

I see, I answer.  
Outside my window,  
I can tell you how  
broken bits of leaf  
stick to rusted screen.

Ants trek along  
my windowsill, a line  
of broken bodies   
wrestle with bread  
crumbs, food for their queen  
who lives in sand.

Past this frame, seasons change.  
In autumn, wind rips leaves  
from red maples in my side lot  
and drops them helter-skelter  
around my neighborhood. Covered  
in winter by snow. If only  
you could see how squirrels skid  
across frozen surfaces, you would not  
ask why I fear cars on icy roads.

When crocus surface in spring, I  
recall the locust tree with no buds  
and the willow tree whose roots  
snuck under my basement floor,  
cracking concrete with stringy brown  
roots claiming my house. I imagine  
how roots can climb stairs, strangle  
me as I sleep in my own bed, unaware.

Let me tell you about   
last summer, when I walked  
these familiar streets  
needing some eggs for baking.  
Yes, it was test.  
I took my cane so I felt safe.  
But the neighborhood had changed.

The grocery store was gone.  
Houses had boards nailed  
across windows. I did not know  
those hooligans who sashayed out  
of the old Baker house,  
chains dangling from belts,  
rings in their ears,  
chests bare except for tattoos,  
horrid ones of red-eyed dragons  
breathing fire. Those boys  
smoked and smelled of drink  
when they got up close. I froze  
in all that heat. They had knives,  
all silver flash at noon blinded me.  
They grabbed my purse, laughed, shouted  
awful words. I keeled over and saw  
those fireworks you mentioned.

You do not understand.  
I have traveled in my days  
seen English gardens, Ohio cornfields,  
oceans full of salt and sharks. Even rode  
an elephant once, in India, I think.  
Every blade of grass, breath of air, pink  
petal, courthouse brick, city street, every  
one swims in my heart. We play together   
in waves behind my steel door.

You speak of brains and how they work.  
I speak of other body parts, even skin.  
There is no way I can let you in.

**Anatomy of an Argument**

1. The Head Violates Rules Logically

All day I fumed about what you had not done,  
my love. You did not  
cut the lawn, did not turn off the television when I asked.  
You were not at work when I called you there.  
My anger climbed like the red blaze roses on our trellis.  
Each petal shriveled to brown at the edges, brittle as my heart.

What’s that you said? You will do it now if I remain calm? I am not  
calm. Do not use logic on me. Haven’t you caused enough damage?  
I threw my antique Fiesta plate  
at you, the yellow one bright as the banana you dared eat as if nothing  
were wrong. That plate cracked down the middle and shattered. I knew  
where you were when I phoned. You were not able to answer  
anyone except the other her who has no plates and don’t you dare  
walk away. I am in a magenta rage.

1. The Heart Screams for Blood

Ah, you are not here, my love.  
You deserted me in autumn  
after the oak leaves flipped from green to yellow-  
orange as if they were on fire, about to explode  
with my hatred of you. I loathe the day  
you drove away with your books  
packed in boxes. You grabbed the *Da Vinci Code*  
I gave you as a gift before I ripped out  
all the pages you had not finished reading.

You write to me as if love can be   
reignited, as if passion does not  
fizzle like spent firecrackers. We end this chapter with a bang  
in a tail of smoke, in our free fall to hard ground  
where spectators wait for disaster to fall in their laps,  
something big like heart blood and voodoo hate,  
a spell of death I call forth with black, black words  
chalked on all our memories, an X that marks our past love.

1. The Soul Searches for Some Way Out

My love, you are no more  
than the lies you told me about her  
about you, about the way things were with us  
before you left. You lied or should I say  
you lost your path. Your fantasies moved too fast  
and you had no bread crumbs to drop. She was your mirage,  
a curved shape in the distance standing on white sand  
beside blue water while palm fronds swayed  
under a round yellow sun. Your mouth still twists   
with dishonesty and my soul trails ribbons of mourning.

I acknowledge the truth, how I bite through  
the thick skin of the bitter pomegranate that I eat.  
Red juice dribbles from my lips that once tasted of you.  
That’s the truth the best I know it.

**An Invitation to Answer**

Just a question. Do you mind?  
Not the big one like do you love me,  
yes, no, maybe  
today and not tomorrow  
or, perhaps, even yesterday  
when intimacy starts and ends

in niggling questions  
that tug on your shirt buttons  
prance through your bloodstream  
squat in corners of your eye  
while the tip of your tongue  
probes your eyetooth

betrays doubts  
you cradle all day long  
afraid to drop one splat  
on the floor, a ripe tomato.  
Black-seed answers  
skitter everywhere.

Just one question  
crisp as a peapod?  
You slit that green curve  
and three round pellets   
wobble out:

Have you tasted  
those three green globes  
plump with your betrayal?

**Anonymous**

We start and end in blackness  
like a period that ends the sentence  
of life or death – and all the in-between.

That man there is one of us. He swims  
in darkness. For nine months he is  
a blind fish in the Mammoth Cave.

No name for a day. Just baby  
at Hutzel Hospital. One scream  
among many open mouths. No teeth.

The glass streets of Detroit  
shave his cheeks, break his nose,  
light the night with gang fights.

At the Rouge Steel Plant, he sweats  
pieces of himself. Salty brine  
puddles in his left eye, an ocean of sharks.

Dirt collects in his hair. Each strand  
a tributary, a stream of muddy water  
eroding all he is, bit by bit.

His hair recedes. His eyelids droop  
beneath water. He floats under black cross,  
like us. He returns to *x*, the unknown.

**The Art Teacher and Her Granny Smith Apple**

Yesterday, the art teacher asked her third grade students to bring an apple to class. Today, one by one, the children arrange their apples on her desk in perfect disarray: Side-by-side, stacked in toppling apple towers, right-side-up or -down, brown stems poking out every which way. Twenty Red Delicious apples, no bruises anywhere. Just glossy red, taught skins and the smell of cider poems in the air.

Inhale apple poems through your eyes, the art teacher says. Let the taste dawdle on your tongues, rush through your veins and pulse in your fingertips. Now, close your eyes. Touch apples behind your eyelids. Move your paintbrushes against paper. Gently. Ever so gently, smudge the edges.

In the beginning, the art teacher tells the children, there was one apple that was plucked from the tree. Now, we have our pick from the grocer’s shelf. So many apples. It’s hard to choose. Twenty apples here: all tempting Red Delicious.

With a flourish, the art teacher pulls her white linen handkerchief edged in red lace from the sleeve of her dress. She gathers up the third graders’ nose – all their buzzing words, all the screeching of their crepe soles against oak floors, all the swishing and whirlpools they create when they dip their paint-soaked brushes into Mason jars filled one-third full with water run from the faucet. She muffles that noise in her handkerchief and draws it, again and again, against the palm of her cupped hand.

Silence now, just as it was in the beginning.

Twenty sets of eyes full of questions watch the art teacher’s hands shake out the handkerchief, spread it across her desk. In the middle of that white, she places one Red Delicious apple. Like your paint poems, she sighs, this apple absorbs the light. She lifts that apple to her lips and takes a bite.

One by one, twenty children choose an apple and eat. Red Delicious drips between their fingers an onto their paintings as they chew to the cores and catch seeds between their baby teeth.

In the palm of her hand, the art teacher holds something covered with her handkerchief, whiter than clouds. She whisks off the covering. Nestling there, a Granny Smith apple, green as the leaves on any apple tree. She cuts twenty small slices and drops them into twenty small mouths that pucker at the tart taste.

Remember this, the art teacher says. Whenever you paint a Red Delicious, use soft-bristled brushes or your fingertips. For Granny Smith apples, apply layer upon layer of green and yellow oil paints and shape your life poems: too opaque at the end for light to penetrate and textured enough to make it worth the taste everafter.

**Archeological Dig**

In my father’s garage, I uncover artifacts of his  
past lives – my third-grade math tests boxed with   
his wife’s valentines, Merrill Lynch statements  
filed back to the 1950s, his mother’s note when he  
escaped the Ohio farm and hitchhiked to Detroit,  
an empty box of Miracle Grow.

What I do not find speaks loudest.

**Ask for the Moon**

Why settle for moondust  
when you want the whole rock?

Lasso that silver love disc.  
Loop the rope around your wrist.

Let the silver balloon bounce behind,  
reflect luscious lips open tonight.

Lovers desire moonlight,  
the fury of fire once removed.

**Aunt Amaryllis in the Dead of Winter**

Before Detroit can shake its winter skirt  
free of tire tracks, Aunt Amaryllis  
jitterbugs under January’s quarter moon  
while juggling her loose change

usually kept safe  
in her back pocket. Her bulbous rump  
girded in brown cotton and crinolines  
for over sixty years – all that rich-veined flesh dormant  
through spring, summer and fall  
sprouts a fleck of green  
inside the boxed night

where two husbands left her  
alone and barren,  
wondering what to be  
or not be, just her

tiny voice squeaks  
as she pushes cash register keys  
at Farmer Jack’s for forty years  
and bags bananas, soup cans,   
skimmed milk for mothers cutting back  
calories every day in denial

these mothers crave new bodies  
not wanting an ounce more  
while she hangs pounds of fat   
on her bones – over two hundred  
bones converge  
into her

into this fleshy, green stalk  
of a woman, into Aunt Amaryllis  
who unravels her layers of brown  
and blooms four crimson heads:

One blushes the blood of birth.  
One gulps the scarlet moon rising.  
One ignites her curls of fire  
while the other one winks

one red eye for Aunt Amaryllis  
who struts her green-booted self  
into this night of reckoning.

**Aunt Glory’s Estate Sale**

Just spread out your life  
why don’t you.  
Leftover dibs and dabs  
of forty years  
laced into Grandma’s colonial  
brick: two stories

or so I’ve heard. One   
full of knots you tied  
when your lover left  
unnamed. One  
a gothic tale of midnight  
and morning glories forever  
closed, tight-mouthed  
prim as you

who want more than a dollar  
for that bone china  
cup of your life.

**Bag Full of Fall**

*Fill this bag with pretty, colorful  
leaves. Bring it in Wednesday.  
– Miss Amy.*

The day the leaves dropped  
higgledy-piggledy at the park, my grandson  
squeezed two maples and one birch  
in his bare hand, crumpled them to bits  
he threw in the air like confetti,  
pigments of marigold orange, red,  
dusty brown he breathed in when  
he heaped leaves over his head,  
over his green-leaf body.  
He licked dry oaks from his lips.

My grandson crammed the bag  
with crinkled leaves, acorns,   
two beach stones, a Canada goose   
feather and two pretzel rods,  
salted away for one more fine fall day.

**Balancing on the Barstool at Tommy’s Tavern**

She sat tilted to one side, her fingers wrapped  
around the beer mug, touching the glass center.  
Ice melted at the edges,  
puddled in the palm of her hand  
as if the glass itself had returned to sand.  
Her fingers traced the path, down  
onto the napkin, soaked and shredded  
by the cherry red nails of her other hand.  
She refused to drink beer, warm now,  
and called for another, colder one.

**The Balloon Man**

His eyes bounce  
around the crowd,  
float like two balloons,  
blue as the sky,  
light as hope.

One more huff of air.  
The balloon man flicks  
his wrist. He locks a leg  
in place, another leg,  
two more. A neck, a face  
and one slender body.

A green poodle  
prances into the arms   
of a pink-ruffled girl  
Two long puffs  
plump the giraffe’s yellow neck.  
The balloon man breathes  
blue tulips into bloom.  
They dangle from his fingertips.

Faster.  
The balloon man blows,  
pulls balloons tight at their   
mouths,  
lets out squeaks of air,  
twists paws and muscled legs,  
curves backs and turtle shells.

Hands reach out for colors:  
gold, green, purple, vermillion.  
Bluebirds and parrots feather his hands.  
Deer leap from his lips.  
Elephants trumpet silver surprise.  
Red ladybugs speckle the air.  
Daisies spring from children’s toes.

The balloon man burps each balloon,  
leaves space for breath and unicorns.

**Baptized in Suite 225**

Every day, our 22 female voices  
hoarse with conviction  
galloped through phone wires  
sold insurance: home, health

life full of catastrophic   
exclusions, commissions we counted  
with gusto, shrill vowels rose  
a torrent of words wrapping

our sound around fluorescent tubes  
too hot for fantasies while we were  
crammed behind this door, stuffed  
in tweed swivel chairs where

we were worn thin as upholstery  
rotted by dry air, recycled each one  
knew this job would last long enough  
unless we wanted more like the woman

fired yesterday for ushering in a creek  
its sac of water breaking just in time  
to birth 21 other women whose lusty screams  
melted ice, fed buds on leafless trees

ready now to sprout foliage, shade us  
when we dip bare toes in currents  
as we follow wetness wherever it may lead  
us without flood insurance, without question.

**Becoming Unraveled**

Loose strings marked my trail  
as a child so I could find  
my way home. Blue threads of me,  
dangled down from the apple tree  
on the corner of our street  
where I climbed to sky,  
plucked Red Delicious globes,  
shined them on frayed jeans  
before this big bite I savored,  
letting juices dribble down,  
scent my clothes as if I were  
an apple burnished in the sun.

As my body curved into woman,  
I gathered up my threads,   
rolled each piece into one big ball.  
Out of this tangled skein,  
I wove myself into a Detroit scene,  
my bones a loom. I wrapped  
the waft around the warp,  
and created the tapestry of me.

My boss did not think  
I could weld bolts on those chassis  
at the GM Assembly Plant.  
Faster than men, my bolts held  
until I got too hot from all that fire  
spurting from my welding gun. Even though  
the money was good, I burned out.

My weft was too loose  
when I welded bolts and screamed   
at voices in my head. Those voices   
were like liquid steel. I bubbled up  
and no one could melt me.  
Such heat was unbearable.

I was becoming unraveled.  
All that held me in place  
were loose threads, a loom,  
strings of my childhood.

**Bedtime Fables**

You speak to me of wolf stories,  
pull me close against your waist  
like some benign tumor growing there,  
hard, solid tissue, a fist against your skin.

The wolf sucks up straw houses, you say,  
spits out grain baked into biscuits  
I carry hidden in my basket.

Your finger spears and slices words,   
serves them up on paper plates,  
a picnic in the woods with wolves  
who prowl in daylight and howl  
all night. You, father,   
warn me of the cutting time.

When father works  
the night shift at the factory,  
you, mother, tell tales  
of mythical beasts who rise  
above my bead like bread.

Your hands,   
kneading knuckles,   
shape unicorns with horns  
of ivory bone  
and hoofs of ebony.  
You carve spaces I can mount.  
My head bends low into the wind.

We ride, we two, you behind me.  
Our legs straddle both sides,  
giving birth to the morning dove  
who circles the ceiling  
and nests under my pillow,  
fluffing feathers  
soft as down on my arms.

Your voices melt, merge  
at the bottom of the page, thick  
as raspberry brandy, fermented  
fruits piling, peeling my brain.  
I toast with crystal flutes, head back.

I am tipsy with wolves,  
fur brown as beer, full of malt  
and hops. Lips sheathe teeth, wet  
with blood, mere camouflage.  
Out of silk pouches, I shake  
unicorns. Free of bridles, of reins,  
we canter past churches, cemeteries.  
The mourning dove’s message  
covers my heart like a sheet.

**Betrayal**

Pin up Bertrum that twerp  
that snail whose slimy track  
wound around your neck,  
his lies a velvet choker.

Your turn. Now breathe out  
profanities, a whole string  
and spin the fiber, tough   
enough. Leave him hanging

in the name of love and all things  
clean as your bleached cotton  
towels strung on the line, rows of hands  
waving down truth, the bits and pieces

once scattered, now unite and whip  
the breezes into a gust, a whirlwind  
of dust and pollen grains, a funnel  
full of yellow powder. You embrace

the fertility of the goldenrod. You  
bury your face in towels of truth,  
fold each oblong scrap of white  
and wring out Bertrum wet with lies.

**Between Me and Thee**

My camera clicks  
quick again. Again,  
in rhythm like birdsong,  
I frame, aim, shoot.  
These mountains blur.  
White clouds shroud dark  
peaks sharp enough to pierce  
white sky with gray.

Snow streams carve crevices,  
a parable of black and white  
where any man can sink. I  
capture still shots,  
freeze the lake, the blue  
wet smear feeding green  
pine. A dense forest  
speaks of elk, deer, men lost.

I need a tripod, a time  
exposure, a steady hand  
in wilderness. If I survive  
this journey, I may catch your image.  
Just between me and thee, I confess  
I am an amateur. I cannot find  
the right setting for destruction,  
for stripped logs floating to market.

**Beyond the Horizon**

I am the woman  
who touched cumulous clouds,  
shook them in my teeth as if  
they were laundered sheets,  
pillowcases where you and I  
sunk our heads in down  
and slept our dreamless sleep.

I am the woman  
who found a toehold,  
shimmied belly to stone,  
from one red rock ledge to the next  
where I sucked water from stone.  
Alone I climbed, your shadow buckled  
in my backpack. At peak, I set you free.

I am the woman  
who strolled lake bottom,  
sifting sand between my toes,  
each hard bit held against skin  
and released. In this postcard I send,  
you can see me, my blue ruffled skirt, my head.  
My arms spread open to what lies beyond you.

**The Big Brass**

I have never seen  
the big brass, the faceless one,  
all angular arms. His pinchers  
grip our round: a few countries  
or maybe even blue oceans  
wet enough to drop. No safety net.

Centuries of wars, famine, plagues  
tarnish our ball, pile weight on one side,  
then the other. We all scurry,  
here to there. We slide past  
his brass forearm, past his wrist bone,  
right into his palm. We dangle there.

The big brass can not   
be bribed with gold. He will protest   
declarations, explanations, proclamations,  
tallies of wrong that may be right. No,  
he commands balance, up, down, across  
and around. Resist and go to jail.

The strategy of brass is white button.   
A fingertip temptation.

**Big Pink**

All girlie stuff whispers pink  
as a flamingo’s neck turned   
right. Go ahead and stare us down.  
Play the checker game. King  
us with red glory. We prefer  
warrior queens, the scarlet hue.

We can rope you in, you men  
who do not gaze past big pink.  
See, we are  
all sweet flowers, a garden of round  
suns with petals curved. No danger  
there. Just wrap your shoulders  
with our quilt, warm yourselves to hot.

Arms bare, we transport our arsenal.  
No help needed. Together, we women  
untangle strands of life. Our hair  
is curled and brushed. Our shining locks  
radiate, beckon you. Your man face  
winks. You lick your own pink lips. Beware  
the hair spray. That fine mist holds in place  
our shining glory. Our blood-red nails claw.

**Bits of my Dead Self…**

…burrow into grey-haired angora  
bunny fluffs under my king-  
sized bed where the pink-nosed  
congregation mates all  
wiggle-eared and warm-blooded.

…waltz in triple time  
with pollen flecks as partners  
in the step, slide, step, the whirl  
and dip. With quick silver stitches  
I hem the sunbeam’s yellow skirt.

…swirl off my skin in one day  
as I shed the outer layer  
dust of who I was.  
Now my iridescent flesh   
revels in the possibilities.

**A Black and White Photograph of the Cosmos**

Four snowflakes ride brown wing feathers  
to earth, marking their space in the cosmos.  
A white satin sheet covers the ground.  
All is slick white ice. A crunch before the slip.

White ground rises up to meet the muddy sky.  
The sky turns black at midnight, crinkly,  
blank as a big sheet of construction paper, the kind  
children have drawn stars on since the beginning of time.

**Blonde Showgirls**

When I narrow my field of vision,  
squint a bit, I see only daffodils,  
blonde heads lined up  
in the roadside ditch by my house  
where drivers toss empty beer cans  
and McDonald’s bags full of trash  
that seem to disappear under paper  
petals spread to conceal what is  
out of place, what will not grow.  
I will not pick these daffodils,  
will not disrupt the show.

I preserve yellow petals  
as they drip from the sun.  
They melt the winter snow  
storm raging in my head.  
With my eyes shut, I can’t see   
daffodils, can’t see anything  
except the darkness they come from.

My gaze penetrates the surface  
soil, slices deep, all the way down  
to the roots that anchor the bulbs  
in place. They sprout brown  
underground. Stems burrow upward  
until they burst the crust with buds  
like long-legged women in a chorus line  
invisible   
until the curtains part.

**Blue Chenille Tales**

I nudge my ratty-tatty bathrobe  
from the white plastic hook  
behind the bathroom door.  
Worn blue chenille slides  
across my bony shoulders,  
thins down my back  
and falls just below knees  
bent repeatedly against wood floors  
when my grandsons raced tiny metal  
cars around corners, chased whatever  
lingered around the curve. I, too,  
roared my souped-up Mustang,  
behind theirs, my knees slower.  
Back then my robe ripped   
on an exposed nail.

I finger the blue torn fabric,  
reel as if caught in a whirlwind.  
A spiral of memories spin me,  
wrap me in lightning flashes  
of stories found in the folds of my robe:  
Blackberry jam stains the right sleeve,  
dragged across the sweetness of surprise  
when my husband flashed two tickets  
to Hawaii for our 40th anniversary.  
My daughter’s tears rained  
salt on my shoulder  
the day she left for school.  
Coffee stains sloshed and dribbled,  
marked all those mornings  
Mary Jane slipped across my grass  
into my kitchen. I admit  
I lost a button, stitched a seam,  
removed spots, washed that robe  
until almost all the blue is gone.

I wrap my history around me,  
glory in its blue chenille tales.

**Blur the Edges**

That splotch of black  
speckled with orange spots  
pretends the dog flames  
the fire. Watercolors run  
while the scruffy mutt gallops  
across fields and its silky mane floats  
in the sky where an upside-down tree  
roots in the cloud. Leaves  
round as plump clocks ready to drop  
a newborn sparrow,  
a tiny blotch of brown. Tick-  
tock before noon. The child’s fingers,  
wet with color,   
curl around wood,  
tilt the brush  
so edges smear,  
lap the shore  
and kiss the lips  
of this child  
who paints  
his own swirly world.

**The Body Cast**

Yesterday,  
You broke all my bones  
and patted wet plaster into place  
promising with kisses, hugs, and sweet words  
that everything would be better.

Today,  
you cut off the casts  
and exposed grotesque flesh and limbs  
crippled from confinement.  
There I stood—a parody of your dream woman.

**Box of Disquiet**

If you were here  
you would see the bruises,  
purple blossoms on my knees.

For you, I knelt all morning,  
tugged weeds from April soil  
so they would not seed again.

Nightshade roots dried white  
in heat like your lies  
wilted into the warm room where we slept.

I still remember the season of snow  
when you left, how your tail lights blazed  
red as two tulips against white.

Yellow daffodils opened at noon today  
while I sipped chamomile tea, hoping  
yellow petals would bring you back.

Even though I rid our garden of winter debris,  
my heart is a box of disquiet,  
buzzing with honey bees. Like you they sting.

**The Boy in Blue Boots**

the boy in blue boots  
kicks stones into mud puddles—

water drops lead home

**Breakthrough**

No one called him Richard ever,  
never called him anything,   
could not even remember him,  
but, then, he could not  
say himself who he was  
or what he wanted,  
only that he did not want   
to be who and what he was.

For an hour each week  
he was mine, a case study  
I would write  
after I heard him out.

“Richard,” I asked,  
“what happened today?”

“Not much,” he said.  
“I punched out my boss  
when he docked me one hour,  
as if he had the right   
to clock my life.  
Who does he think he is?”

“And who are you?”  
I had the answer   
written in the chart,  
the diagnosis  
of this man named Richard  
who never had a father,  
who was passed from place  
to place and acted out  
or acted in. He was lost  
and no one cared but him  
and me, of course.

Last week, Richard dreamed.   
“In my nightmare, I was buried  
alive in wet cement  
that hardened, gave me shape.  
I punched my concrete shell  
until it cracked.  
Then I could breathe again.”

I, too, have had that dream  
many times. I need Richard  
to tell me how  
he inhales and exhales  
when the world is too much  
with him, with all of us.

**Bronzed Baby Shoes**

Above the open loops   
of laced up, bronzed  
baby shoes, her mother  
could conjure the whole.

The curl of birth, the wobble  
steps, the shush of leather,   
the slide ahead before the fall,  
the awe of it all, the sudden hush.

Two bare legs mosquito bit,  
a waist, the reach of arms,  
peaches picked and dripped  
from her baby’s lips,  
hair static with electricity.

Purple rhinestone heels  
tapped against Elvis songs  
as her baby’s pelvis tilted  
into purple satin pinch.

Even when her baby   
left for hotter states,  
her bronzed shoes poked,  
jabbed her mother’s  
memory of soft  
shaped by  
years of hard shells.

**The Brown Spotted Dog on the   
Dining Room Table Last Thanksgiving**

dipped his snout into the blue-rimmed bowl  
of mashed potatoes, then snatched a turkey leg  
and gnawed and growled as he hoarded the juicy   
bits between his front claws. No one from the family

or even guests dared say anything unkind. No one  
fussed or shooed the dog off the table. No one mentioned it  
in their bountiful words of thanks. No one even saw it  
except maybe in their minds when my sister

giggled at some memory of having  
a white purebred poodle that rolled in horse manure  
in Mama’s garden when she was into girly pink  
tank tops at fifteen and disowned the wayward poodle

while no one else recalled such a dog. Maybe   
her brother or uncles were the dog lovers.  
They once went to the pound, they agreed,  
and brought back an ugly mutt with floppy ears.

Both turned out allergic to dander (or so they thought  
today) but were grateful, indeed, the rescued  
such a misfit even for one starless summer night  
as they laughed now at what boys did back then.

My papa contradicted the boys (now men) while he cut  
turkey breast into small pieces for my palsied aunt  
who remembered owning a goldfish she won  
at the county fair but never a dog, never ever a dirty dog.

I witnessed all the passing of butter and broccoli casserole,   
all the retelling of family stories weaving us together  
at Thanksgiving, another year when no one dared acknowledge  
that brown spotted dog on our table gobbling up the best parts.

**Camellia**

waxed every limb:  
two arms, two legs  
hairless as four river stones.

Even her platinum mustache  
which no one could see but her  
and twin eyebrows   
she whisked away  
with chemicals  
that puddled,  
sunk through open pores  
and burned her roots.

All this fire dammed  
behind pink eyes  
stoked her clay-red Georgia heart  
baked in this clay-red Georgia heat

and scorched those souls  
who dared  
sit on funeral folding chairs  
buttocks pressed against polished oak  
when Camellia preached

re-creation of ourselves  
in our own sweet scent  
in our own sweet time.

**The Cape Verde Hurricane***September 21, 1938*

Radios blared,  
promised rain,  
the hurricane was lost.  
At equinox, Apollo sailed into the eye,  
his twin, Diana, at his side. They waltzed  
the seas from Cape Verde, hiding in the bays,  
the same dance floor as 1815  
their feet remembered the way  
through New London and Stonington,  
even the great South Bay.

Apollo breathed deep, spit out the salt  
that stained church windows in Vermont.  
Diana wrapped women in clouds  
and pulled them to her breast.  
Python rose from the washed-out roads  
and lurked in lofts  
until Apollo’s arrow split the serpent’s skin  
and people prayed, said their rosaries.  
At Napatree Point, cottages crumbled  
and bath houses washed to the sea.  
Parrots played uncaged.  
People clung to shingles  
sat atop the trees   
and fox trotted with the gods.

**Case Closed**

Turn out the light, mother hollers. Windows slam, doors lock on the first floor, shut tight against hitch hikers, rabid bats who fly by   
radar. At 12, the midnight age, I open shades she pulls, call forth witches and the Seven Sisters from winter skies.

Heads bent low, we read mysteries. Under sheets bleached white with dreams, we spot clues sprinkled like cherries over mother’s   
buttercream frosting. We dig for chocolate cake buried, layer upon layer. It crumbles in our mouths. We guess it is the short bearded stranger or even the vicar, never the girl in red polka dots. Motive is all, we say. Where is her intent? We like her, recognize innocence. On the last page, her sentence is life.

Mysteries crop up everywhere at school. Like what dress to wear   
or not wear for luck. I solve algebraic equations, where *x* equals *y* squared and unknowns become known. Answers are right, teachers say, or wrong, depending on the answer key. I hope for multiple choice, a chance. When I check Patrick’s papers, I give him a couple of points for trying. Trying to kiss me last night, with Mother flicking the porchlight off and on like some lightening bug. Still, his fingers touch bare breast and rest, a period on the page.

So much blood flows every chapter. Hard-boiled PIs, names like Mike Hammer and Sam Spade, go it alone. Tough guys, quick with their fists, they pound flesh and pavement. I fall in love with these characters. They’ve seen it all. And, they have done it all. At least that’s what I tell Thomas when he wants to know why I quit my job and how we expect to pay our bills, much less make it and get ahead. Ordinary questions, I guess, from someone who prefers reading biographies of dead men, models to live by.

Locked room mysteries confuse me since what can’t be is. The key usually is in the victim’s pocket. When Thomas hires a security firm to install electronic sensors, I can never remember the code. Mother says I’m lucky he’s such a good provider. He puts deadbolt locks on her front door and back, showing her how to work them fast in case of fire. At my house, I set off alarms, punching in wrong numbers. Finally I’m fed up with all the noise. No one understands why I want a divorce. Of course, he says, you’ll change your mind.

Miss Marple clicks her knitting needles, knowing all the time. Liars and murderers are no more than microbes in a glass of water set on the kitchen sink. I drink gallons of well water, live dangerously.

**Casino Confession**

Dark does not descend  
in this house of neon lights  
where I play all the angles,  
grab my chance at life.

My eyes do not close  
against the probability  
that I may toss snake eyes  
when the red serpent bites.

Venom pumps in my veins,  
the promise of a lost paradise  
I must regain. I shake two die  
and watch them as they fall.

I confess I am no innocent.  
I have slept with Lady Luck  
more than once on white sheets.  
When I woke, she was gone.

I search for that woman  
who abandoned me when I held  
all the hearts. Flush with losing,  
I will lure her back again.

**The Catcher**

Hunched over,  
his text cradled to his chest,  
the student scuttles sideways into the room,  
a ghost crab.

I sit on the desk,  
dangling my feet in  
seas of books I read  
as a teen, a fish hooked  
on Holden Caulfield.  
I, too, waited  
for the worm to wiggle,  
spotted plastic flies,  
called them phony.

“Did you,” the ghost crab asks,  
“run away?”

“In my head,” I answer.

He buries his eyes   
in pages.  
Words at high tide  
wash his cheeks.  
He catches  
specks of sand.

**The Cats**

Poe’s raven led them.  
Of that I’m sure.  
Those two cats outside staring in  
through black and glass  
electric eyes green before the flash  
heating these arthritic hands  
until they melt  
red against students’ words  
that come to life  
like stick people  
and loom large  
above my head.

Those dripping, purring words  
like claws against my skin  
begging, pleading for a way in.  
Angora strands stroke my throat.  
Those gentle sounds are soft meows  
warm against my breast.

Those two cats the raven brought  
crept into my house.  
Their lightning eyes  
illuminate  
the words  
my students said.

**Caught Driving at Night Without Glasses**

Just like that  
death zips up beside us,  
flashes candy stripes of red/blue light  
strokes the night  
and streaks our eyes. As if

Our radar detector malfunctions,  
doesn’t register the signals sent  
by the cop behind the wheel. The one  
who cruises beside us or waits ahead  
under the overpass, wrapped in its shadow.  
That officer wants off traffic patrol,  
tired of entrapments and tickets he signs  
with his name and ours. Our infractions

Are merely minor violations. Nothing even  
criminal about our refusal. No, sir.  
We preserve our rights. We can   
not breathe into the breathalyzer,  
not strap ourselves into seats that hold   
us down. Snap and unsnap. As if  
it were decreed somewhere

that we must wear our glasses, must  
magnify the 12-wheeler zooming toward us,  
blot out its headlight halos. As if  
we need to update our driver’s license,  
appear in court on the date written,  
lock all doors against carjackers,  
press the accelerator only halfway down. No,  
we will not be caught in his jurisdiction. We will look

out windows and see the woods. We will  
count bristlecone pines and red maples.   
Watch dinosaurs as they lumber  
into the clearing, winter wheat caught   
between their toes. Must be the heat

that drives them out. Or the alligators  
with hooded eyes, back again. Our woods  
are greener than their marshland. Forest  
green. Too green for alligators. Maybe  
hunter green. We pray for rain

and dinosaurs. Their breath,   
moist with maidenhair ferns,  
mist our window pane.

**Cherry Poem**

Through the black-stick winter,  
I snapped words underfoot as I waited,  
watched for the burst of white buds  
the cloud of cherry blossoms  
pale as my poems, no more  
than fragile petals I picked  
and flung, snow in spring wind.

When the cherries came,  
I rushed to pick them  
before they dropped,  
before the cardinals claimed  
these red tart poems as their own  
globes of wild life  
plucked from my word trees.

Each cherry was not a cherry.  
In my mind, beneath the skin,  
the pits grew orchards of poems,  
spurts of pages clustered at the ends  
of branches, a dangle of words,  
a flash of green visions fruited cherry red  
with glossed stanzas as far as the eye could see.

**Chicken Bones**

Go where fear lurks, back  
behind the garage, hunkered down,  
no more than a dog pound mutt  
digging up chicken bones, too fragile,  
too sharp for any dog, for any human who might  
gnaw through that skinny thigh bone,  
yearn for the crunch before the final break.

Wear these blanched bones in pierced ears, dangle  
them in sunlight. Let every friend ooh and ahh   
as they caress such slippery truth hanging loose  
enough to pinch between two slim fingers.  
Such a gem bone tantalizes, tricks thieves   
into thinking they can heist something  
beyond the pointed toe of fear.

Rub bone edges smooth so they don’t snag  
the wool pockets of anyone’s red plaid mackinaw.  
Don’t tangle the dog’s hair after the groomer brushes  
each strand clean of burrs, shapes butterscotch curls  
along the ribs, marks every vulnerable spot with gold swirls.  
This dog guards chickens as they eat. Their beaks  
peck grain and puffs of bone dust from the dry, dry dirt.

**A Child’s Game**

Little sister, you are it.  
Your turn to shout out sunlight  
while crows flap wings.  
With plump fingers splayed,  
you peek at ragged bark,  
count numbers out of order.   
Ready or not

you warn me  
as if I am not  
older, as if  
I have not   
played this game. I  
who ran out of bounds  
when father left us living

alone with his blood, his whiskey  
wife. Our mother hid  
in a bottle, a secret   
message to us, if only  
we knew where to look,  
how to wake her, how to  
break brown bottles

labeled with a crown we  
would not wear until later  
when we rousted crows, tagged friends  
hidden on dance floors, in red   
vinyl booths or at Formica tables  
in plain sight waiting  
to be found by me, by you

by men who knew   
how to count to one hundred.

**Chroma: Gloria Colors Her World**

Gloria spins the globe   
on her office desk,  
faster and faster  
until blue oceans gobble  
green land. Whole countries blur,  
longitudes and latitudes merge.  
No equator circles earth.  
Such a plastic world tilts, gains  
momentum. The whirl of speed   
sets it free. Nothing holds  
its place. One sphere  
jumps its orbit.

Gloria, the gray dove, plans her retirement, her wing-  
flapping revolution. She opens   
white Venetian blinds, saturates her  
office with morning light.  
Her faded flesh turns pink.  
Her fingers move rat-a-tat-tat  
across the keyboard. Her nails  
frosted robin-egg blue, not natural.

Gloria flings one fist  
full of rubber bands  
across gray carpet.  
She empties boxes  
of brown circles  
she once stretched  
over piles of reports,  
binding black words on white  
paper, filed in beige drawers  
alphabetically trapped in darkness.

Gloria whips off her sapphire   
blue jacket she bought for today,  
spreads it over gray carpet.  
She scoops rubber bands  
onto silk lining, fills two arms,  
three pockets, one back with elasticity.  
Each band soaks up one color: emeralds  
she dangles from her ears, garnets   
on each finger. A flurry of color   
lurks in light when mundane rubber  
bands snap Gloria back to life.

Gloria weaves a band of red, a crown  
for her feathery gray hair. She tucks  
her blue world under arm, struts  
office aisles, tosses color everywhere.  
She flies out into open space, her birdsong  
lingers: Glo-ri-a, Glo-ri-a, Glo-ri-a.

**Collage**

Rising from the streets,  
the yellow fog cradles  
bits of voices:

curse words, shrieks,  
prayers, absolutions.  
Confusion

balloons in her brain  
in her third floor flat  
where she rocks,  
clutches her cat,  
strings street words  
into nonsense lullabies.

She ignores dust,  
settling on her windowsills

while he struts the streets   
costumed in yellow, purple,  
green. All the time, he

fingers the switchblade  
warm through his pocket  
against his thigh,  
remembers edges  
sharp as butcher knives.

Forgets. He hums off key  
a mating call  
to whores who turn their heads  
toward storefront mirrors  
and vacant buildings

while the newborn  
Salvation Army Band  
dressed in heavy coats  
blast their trumpets  
ring their bells  
count their change  
tinkling in the brass bucket.

“The Savior will come,”  
or so they say  
to the kid magician  
conjuring cards  
for the salvation crowd,  
collecting money  
meant for the bucket.

**Collector of Petty Grievances**

My grandfather hand-fed each slight  
as if it were a gerbil, a round  
ball of fur in his pocket he could  
stroke, feed a fistful of sunflower  
seeds until the creature expanded,   
exploded. With each telling   
he added a phrase, another reason  
why the world took against him:  
a man who did his best,  
a man who never gambled  
except on luck.

Always, he fretted  
the mill might close  
before he filed his grievances.   
His supervisor chewed him out  
for steel shavings on the floor  
when he punched in late  
after his lunch of spoiled tuna  
which he never liked, even when  
it was on white bread that   
would go down better with  
a beer he couldn’t have. His  
superintendent called the union rep  
when his work slowed and he  
threw a punch at no one  
in particular, just whoever  
got in his way which was everyone  
back then when he was too young  
and had no luck and now he had  
one grandson he didn’t really like  
and a pocket full of gerbils  
he poked and coddled.

**Come Here a Little Closer**

In my father’s closet, I find  
bits of you in old Polaroids  
faded from black to brown,  
stained by the many hands  
that held these photographs   
exposed in sunlight,  
stored in shoeboxes  
rippled from damp  
days before I reclaim my life.

You are now a shadow shot  
without features, a familiar  
shape yet ghostly as if seen  
through gauze. I would draw  
you back, color your eyes  
black as watermelon seeds  
or were they a lighter shade  
of brown, more like   
peach pits and apple stems?

I smell your rose fragrance  
from when you leaned   
your head to mine,  
when you read Golden Books,  
told me I could do it all,  
tugged my braids, teased me into bed  
laughing, carrying the scent  
of peanut butter cookies warm  
from the oven every day, our snack.

I remember the purple sundress  
you wore on my fifth birthday  
and the chocolate cake with my name  
on top. I blew out all the candles,  
wished for a dress like yours  
and your long straight blonde hair  
or did it just touch your chin  
back then? Had it turned to brown?  
I cannot sketch your mouth, your nose.

You, my mother, were gone for good  
before I started school. I felt your hand   
in mine as I walked through that door,  
vowed you would always roam my memory.  
I painted my mouth with your red lipstick,  
creamed by body hoping to bring you back.  
Even photos blur, have wavy edges.  
The acid bath of time burned your image  
from my mind. Please, come a little closer.

**Continuing View**

Pretending is a delicate wing  
layered with ebony feathers.  
You are crow in air. You see  
below, above, beside yourself  
all that is and can be. You

become that sage green ribbon,  
weave a fluid fence. Your tapestry  
sprouts trees that reach toward yellow,  
curve toward shades of life. Lavender  
hues, all purple and red. A puddle  
of children. Call all  
crows. Glossy feathers perch in trees,  
speckle air, draw close  
as children stoop to ground.

Begin the lesson of feathers.   
These children open eyes.  
Their pupils dilate. They continue  
their view through veined leaves  
up close, transparent and forever real

until they blink. Dark lashes  
skim their cheeks silent as a wing.

**Cross Current**

The undertow yanks me  
just below the surface. Sucks me  
back to birth, that long canal  
of dark. I wiggle to light,  
crawl to beach. Rest where   
I am defined. A woman wreathed  
in seaweed, damp with promise.

Like you, I have a soft body, hard  
mollusk shell on my back. I can  
creep on shore, retract my head, leave  
a trail of where I’ve been. I have once  
risen from the salty brine, the ocean floor  
safe, now with deadbolt locks on every door.  
I hang suspended, a shell of myself.

At midnight, I will come where you are,   
baptize myself in ocean. I will drop fathoms  
to where you swirl in quicksilver cross currents.   
We will bathe ourselves, braid Neptune’s beard.  
Let us embrace a wayward current, etch its moves  
on our armor. We will jitterbug a storm  
full of white lightning and thunder words.

**Crouching by My Desk on the Fifteenth Floor**

Ready to spring, sneak out  
mitered doors, hinged to swing  
outward. I freeze in the glare,  
fluorescent headlights hold me  
there, a doe dodging the hunter’s bow.  
At dusk, phones ring, machines answer  
in bullets, ripping flesh.  
My voice spouts numbers.

**Cupcake Cathedral**

The bishop of chaos reigns.  
His scepter is a peppermint stick,  
his puffed hat a marshmallow.  
He anoints his congregation  
with soda fizz miracles,  
clears stains. He will not

hear confessions of gluttony  
or counsel hyper spirits fueled  
by sugar: white, refined. Sweet  
heaven on earth, two cupfuls  
per cupcake. We praise confectioners:  
buttercream frosting a sin

we commit. We redeem ourselves,  
bear witness in this sacred place.  
Helter-skelter, we rush the altar  
where the bishop stands, a potholder   
and cupcake tray in each hand. We supplicants  
lick crimped paper clean. Each crumb consumed

sparks visions. We speak in tongues,  
a babble of birth and maroon spires rising.

**The Curious Affair at Sampson’s Used Bookstore**

I bought a bagful of murders  
half price, pages dense with clues.  
The blonde behind me  
sucked lemon drops. She nudged  
*Death on the Nile* along the counter,  
the same book  
I traded last month.  
My splash of black coffee  
still scarred the cover.

My worn recliner squeaked  
as I pushed back with *Dead Man’s  
Folly* in my lap. A later Christie  
mystery with Hercule Poirot.  
I exercised my little gray cells.  
No name inside the cover.  
A faint sniff of lemons.  
A blonde hair at the start  
of chapter two. Darker  
at the roots. This woman lingered  
today, behind me  
at Sampson’s Used Bookstore.

Pale pink lipstick smudged  
the upper corner of one page  
as if it were licked open by this blonde  
greedy for words on her fingertip.  
I, too, chewed these inked phrases,  
pressed my prints against hers.

**Daylight Savings Time**

When the light goes on  
and on, refuses the moon  
its rightful place alone,  
I inhale scorched stars falling  
unnamed, lost

and found by the arson squad  
sifting through ash and serial killers   
who month after month in Detroit  
crave the ritual death, and April hour  
snatched in spring, returned in fall,  
too late. No identity. No challenge  
for those who dare tinker with time

impose what is false. Those bureaucrats  
sprint for office, fast  
off the mark and breathless  
as their minds turn back the hands  
and alarm clocks lie about waking

and sleeping. I rise in fog,  
in rain and darkness, maybe.  
My dreams are a dull pulse, no  
more like a forgetting, more like  
a lost hour when a woman  
who resembles me

meets a man who takes her life  
in that abandoned hour.

**Death of the Bird Child**

As I slide one sunny-side-up egg onto her plate, I smile  
 an upside-down frown, at least  
from her view looking up at me looking down. Her five-year-old  
 arms sprout red down.  
She is becoming a robin, a sweet warble of a girl, my girl who  
 wants to fly high, higher  
than a tree, higher than the sky itself. She collects feathers.

All along the beach, my bird child dips and rises. Her pockets spill  
 yellow, green, purple  
feathers, especially black. The glossy black of a loon’s wing feather.  
 Grey fluff from the   
chest of a ring-billed gull. A splash of orange from no known  
 species. A long tailed  
duck dives for a round goby, a flash of black and brown fish scales.

Within weeks, feathers wiggle with bugs and slugs. Wet,  
 moldy feathers drip from  
mounds of bodies. Dead from eating gobies, dead from botulism.  
 The common loons,  
long-tailed ducks, gulls, white-winged scooters, red-necked grebes,  
 red-breasted  
mergansers, double-crested cormorants have all fallen down from the sky.  
The rot along the  
 shores of lake Michigan, decay  
at my daughter’s feet. That summer my girl threw away  
 her feathers.

**Deathwatch**

Prognosis poor. Scalpels slice,  
cut statistics any way.  
Just hone the blades, razor-sharp,  
metal scraping stone. Faster,  
grind edges precise  
as doctor words. We can

cauterize old wounds. Let’s burrow  
into ourselves like earthworms,  
into the darkest loam  
never turned, fertile still.

Dig deeper. Past sand, clay,  
shale stained red. Veins  
of green, of gold paint promises  
in stone. Colors pale under ground, under  
words crisp as the earth’s crust. No

more skulking behind skin. Shed the stuff  
that holds us in place, in time.  
merge with me, a single cell.

Let’s circle the world. Leave the tropic of Cancer,   
cold. Scuttle south:  
a zodiac crab, tail tucked, a major constellation   
brighter than the fourth sign. Nurses can chart

malignancies and biopsies. All positive  
negativity spread on a slide,  
magnified twenty times. We will

channel through granite, open passages   
straight to the iron core.  
Liquid thick as lava, hot,  
erupts: Come ride the waves

white as shark’s teeth,  
black as raven feathers.

**Delivery**

Days passed hang  
heavy on my calendar.  
Pregnant women  
outwait due dates.  
Edges curl.  
Red magic-marker months  
newborn pink, fresh  
from mother’s womb.  
Stretch marks, stitches  
across bulging bellies  
shrink now.  
Years are so much   
afterbirth.

**Dementia**

All direction is lost. You move in concentric circles, ever  
closer to the center, your earth orbit charted, hung at the end  
of your hospital bed.

You linger, some ancient memory calling. You glide through  
earth-shadow, await the total lunar eclipse.

I cling to your copper glow, fear reflected sunlight, the new  
moon rising.

**The Demise of Eloise Insane Asylum**

*In Memoriam, 1832-1981*

Windows never closed tight enough  
at Eloise where night slipped under sashes,  
carried the odor of skunks cornered by a dog  
dumped in this wilderness where wood rotted  
and brick crumbled inward like my grandmother  
who once lived there before she died an insane death  
full of empty spaces she swallowed with her final breath.

When I was 10, I visited my grandmother five stories up  
inside the walls, below a clouded sky, above the place  
where fire engines waited for the burning time. The powerhouse   
spat smoke that rode my shoulders past the screaming man  
who reached out to me but Mama yanked me back,  
back from all humanity as if I might catch what they had,  
as if I might drag home the musty smell of death.

On the highest floor, in the furthest room, we found  
my grandmother huddled in the darkest corner  
where she stared straight ahead and spoke to no one  
except us who knew she wanted to go home, wanted  
nothing more than her dress of morning glories she wore  
on summer Sundays when she hit all the high notes. Her  
voice once raised in celebration now slides down the scale.

Bit by bit, Eloise lost pieces of itself.   
The wrecking ball swung death at the end  
of its steel cable while late night lovers carved   
their transient state of craziness on walls and floors  
about to fall as land reclaimed its ground and sprouted  
green leaves with ivy twined like voices harsh with hope,  
ragged with longing for one last chance to save themselves.

**Detroit**

Rising from the streets,  
the yellow fog cradles  
bits of voices ­—  
curse words, shrieks,  
prayers, absolutions.  
Confusion  
balloons in her brain  
in her third floor flat  
where she rocks, clutching her cat  
against her shriveled breasts,  
stringing the street words  
into nonsense lullabies,  
ignoring the stillborn dust  
settling on her windowsills

while he struts the streets  
costumed in yellow, purple,  
green, all the time  
fingering the switchblade  
warm through his pocket  
against his thigh  
remembering fear  
forgetting  
whistling into the night  
a love call  
to whores who turn their heads  
toward vacant buildings  
as he slinks by

while the newborn  
Salvation Army Band  
dressed in heavy, navy coats  
against the darkness  
blast their trumpets  
ring their bells  
count their change  
tinkling in the brass bucket.  
“The Savior will come!”  
or so they say to   
the kid magician conjuring cards  
for the salvation crowd,  
collecting money  
meant for the bucket.

**Diary of a Night Watchman**

In my nightmares, it is noon.  
the sun sags,  
round as a pregnant woman,  
flushed with sin, silent,  
waiting to drop  
behind clouds or ride  
elevators to the top  
floor where I can’t track

her footprints, crushed in carpet,   
which lead to unlocked doors. She   
smiles through mail slots, vanishes  
at five o’clock, full of life.  
She ferrets out riverbeds,  
drinks carp and seaweed,  
her belly a fish bowl.

On my shift, I turn out lights.  
I beat my head on concrete walls,  
read scripture aloud. My own  
voice rises to ceilings,  
splinters giant redwoods  
rooted for centuries. Behind bark,  
concentric circles mark off ages.  
These rings, like her, forget the axe,  
the prophecy of bones.

**The Diet**

I’m going on a diet tomorrow.  
 No more frosted, spongy words,  
 sauced phrases, or  
 mashed truisms that soften  
 my sharpness. I’ll snack,  
 instead, on crunchy, cuss words  
 and lean, bloody images  
 until my bones poke through  
 my skin and people see  
 the stuff I’m made of.

**Dissonance**

I answered  
nothing, not doorbells  
or phones ever silent  
since I lost myself

when cash registers jangled  
me deaf at Piggly Wiggly  
where I cashiered for 20 years   
too long, grew used to dark

green money clutched by hands  
callused, knotted with worry  
at rising costs of bread and milk  
without honey which I gave for free

when no one asked but the manager  
who fired me for giving too much  
when all I yearned for was a way  
home, where ivy flourished

teemed with life, sprung from dirt  
unnourished, tough as its own green  
leaves shiny with hope, with climbing  
brick by brick upward and over  
my window, lush as eyelashes

each leaf winked in wind  
trembled in storms I knew  
its roots would hold  
no matter what

when ivy green rustled a jazz tune  
I answered with rain  
sliding from tone to tone  
improvising leaf to leaf

**Distances**

You, in the black leather chair.  
I, on the floor mounting photographs  
while TV people drag  
their leaden legs through scripts.  
Your video voice measures distances  
across frozen ponds, between titles and credits.  
My winter eyes check your marks  
against the glassy surface.

Our dubbed voice-overs:  
marvelous, mechanized genies  
rising, falling, cursing the day we joined   
like Siamese twins  
in our own circus  
tearing at our flesh  
even as we touch.

**Dispenser of Good Will and Spotless Garments**

Mr. Thomas Granite piles his stained clothes  
on my stainless-steel counter at Glendale Cleaners.  
Juicy plum lipstick greases one shoulder  
of his wrinkled, white shirt  
entwined with the blues and yellows.

A blotch of red wine taints another  
shirt that reeks of cigar. Blue ballpoint  
slashes diagonally across the right side  
of his striped shirt as if he had  
awarded himself a blue ribbon.

Mrs. Nora Menton, a pale newlywed,  
plumps the heap of pearls, satin,  
and tulle. She will pay to have her dress  
preserved as if her wedding can be   
folded into a box and sealed.

She may not even notice   
black shoe polish on the soiled hem,  
the ripped train she may have forgotten   
to detach or hold when the music blasted  
her into the curved arms of other men.

Mrs. Arthur McKinnon, no first name  
of her own with her husband still alive  
although his hands wobble when he eats,   
so she told me once, and he drops  
bits of Sunday’s pot roast on his wool pants.

As she smooths each garment  
into shape on the counter,  
she tells how ever blotch happened  
when her husband’s attention wandered  
and how difficult it is to get him back.

I examine their dirty clothes,  
pin on tags, pre-treat spatters, clean what  
they wear, press garments flat before  
I give them back just like new.

**Diving Lessons**

My sister dives off the high board at ten,  
head first on a downward trend. Her body arcs,  
an apostrophe in air. She hovers there  
above the pool, her body slick with passion.

Under blue spruce, she sheds her skin for men  
who wash over her, zip her into wetsuits   
dark as pubic hair. She walks on ocean bottom,  
marks her path with cowry shells, a ghostly galleon.

At fifty, my sister hits a drought year  
hard as a bellyflop. Her arteries clog with sand,  
with men who dig dry ditches and stand guard  
with tubes and latex gloves, their second hands

plunge into unlit caves. Her eyes sink inward,  
two divining rods pulling her toward salt springs  
where she bobs with pirate lovers who baptize her  
in the name of the red moon at night.

**Divorce**

She sold the washing machine  
the dryer the cups the sheets  
even the bed—sliced mattress  
and all except the letters  
no one bought or took for  
free: even the garbage man  
returned them tied  
in butcher’s string.

**Down a Long Hall**

Father makes sure everything is in good repair at our house,

the back screen door barely squeaks as I slip out.

Into the night, my black hair dark as a black bear pelt,  
my brown eyes fertile as the trail we tread, my arms barely able  
to grasp the daffodils with their trumpets blaring.

My blond doppelgänger will not go away. She appears  
in the right-hand bottom corner of every screen. Her outline is  
stronger, darker, more threatening with each intermission.

I pull the shades, turn her off the big TV and computer screens and   
cover the mirrors. The blond scampers down a long hall,  
disappears into the corner.

As my father turns to face me, I see he has become Zeus,  
gold flecks in his arched eyebrows and severely cut beard.  
His lance of lightening lifted, ready for the blond.

**Dream Forest**

I dream myself awake  
in this misted forest,  
caressed by fog’s fingertips.  
I rub face against bark,  
wrinkle to wrinkle. Every crease  
of flesh and wood converge. We  
speak in oak and ash, the way  
lovers merge. I nest  
in your lowest branch,  
fluff leaves not yet rusted  
orange-brown or dried to dust.

Here I rest, cradled  
in your gnarled arms.  
Droplets of mist  
collect in cupped leaves,  
bowls of nectar we sip  
together. We embrace  
in this quiet space.  
I listen to  
the rustle of you  
who know autumn days  
break early and wane.

Explain, if you will,  
why your branches flutter  
in wind while I sway,  
lulled by whistling breezes.  
A few moist green leaves cling,  
not ready for the fall.  
They brush my cheek, whisper  
of seeds, the growing time  
come spring when you bud again.

Our roots grow deep  
in solid ground. Our bodies  
sweat sweet melodies,  
as each note rises, drops  
with songs of us.   
We reach for moon,  
a slice of light to hold   
as tunes blanket us  
this warm night of fog.

Owls hoot their eerie sound:  
who, who, who drapes mist  
like a white shawl  
warming bare shoulders?  
Who will wear my wing  
feather full of flight  
in her onyx hair?  
Who walks among trees  
in dense, wet air?

I do, I answer.   
I dream each tree,  
each forest, each night as I sleep.  
When I wake to day, night sounds  
echo in my heart, rattle my soul  
until I breathe in night truth,  
exhale a cloud of fog,  
a royal cloak for trees.

**Driving Lesson**

I cupped speed under my toes,  
held it down hard on the accelerator,  
curved my whole body into the snake turn,  
heard my father beside me whisper  
slow down, slower, as the wheels   
jumped the curb. The man on the ground  
mowing his grass saw me,  
dropped the handle and ran.  
He pumped his legs, jumped on his porch,  
opened his mouth and screamed loud,  
called me names, bad names.  
He spit those names. I whipped past.

My father stretched beside me,  
lapped his leg over mine, jammed the brake.   
My chest bit into the steering wheel.  
My heart flew out the window,  
a red bird feathered in flight,  
a flame of fire across the noon sky.

**The Drop into Sleep**

My balance teeters  
as I walk the tightrope  
of twist your knee and fall.

Heel to toe I totter on the invisible  
hemp stretched across the yawn  
and stammer of one foot up, one foot down.

The slush of slippage  
pools in my silver slippers,  
drips from one worn sole.

My legs tremble my mind  
into memories of toes uncurling,   
an arch falling, the letting go.

**The Elephant Man**

The elephant man chases me.  
His whirling trunk is a lasso  
dropping neatly over my head,  
tightening about my neck.  
He, ever so slowly,  
lifts me to him.  
My legs, like palm fronds  
in the African night,  
slit the darkness  
until my heart bursts;  
the blood flood blinds him,  
soaks the leathery noose  
shrinking around my neck,  
crushing my scream.

Rearing back,  
he unwinds his trunk,  
hurls me to the ground.  
Dead.  
Until  
tomorrow night  
when the elephant man chases me.

**Epistemology**

Not knowing what  
to call those two birds  
by name, by species,  
indexed in field guides,  
lost alphabetically.

In the same way,  
your name melts  
on my tongue, tart  
as cinnamon candy. Red  
dye stains  
tongue and teeth.  
Our talks, our touch  
too tentative, too full

of nothing but  
sugar, spun at high speed,  
puffed with air, not enough  
to grab onto. Like planes,  
our marriage recycles oxygen,  
dry as old arguments.

Just that once,  
I spot them  
at the feeder, wings tucked,  
heads cocked like guns

before metal hits flint.  
Detroit on New Year’s Eve,  
near dusk. Their saffron crests  
burst brown night,  
two lone crocuses above  
snow. The whole world

upside-down, in flight.  
I see two  
birds, feel feathers  
brush my eyelids, listen  
for wings fluttering

against my lips, the sound  
of breathing in and   
out. Not even words,   
hard as sunflower seeds,  
can soften the spaces  
between us.

**Even Wonder**

Woman transforms herself,  
chops off her hair,  
pinches strands into spikes.   
She blends in  
crowds, cleavage mounded,  
rounded and held  
up with Madonna’s bustier  
featured in late night  
shows she can’t escape.  
Without her tiara, her bullet-  
deflecting bracelets, she lost her  
jangle. She is one of us  
who battles on technicolor pages.

Now she paces Main Street, enters Walgreens,  
circular in hand, her camouflage.  
On her own, she goes  
straight to comics, aisle 2  
at the end of the rack. She thumbs pages,  
where Superman pales in fluorescent light  
and Spiderman spins his web. She will  
break gossamer threads, free herself.

At sixty, we both court  
peace, a quiet space  
where votive candles  
scented with orange  
burn black night  
into day. We will rise  
refreshed, lick dew from ferns,  
make our way across Stoney Creek.

**Everyone I Know Is Dying**

Even me and my green-feathered parakeet  
whose clipped wings ground him  
to this birdseed life.

In Detroit Aunt Gloria sleeps  
with a steak knife under her pillow  
just in case she wakes to breaking glass.

A baby boy forces his way headfirst  
into life behind Miller’s Bar  
where his mother tends the men who gather there.

All muscle, my ex-husband benchpresses 300 pounds  
at the fitness club in Birmingham where young things,  
exercising their rights, watch him sweat.

Friends lose parts of themselves:  
a breast, a bladder, teeth, a bone.  
Even hearts forget, bypassing what has been lost.

Each day now I cram my pockets full of peacock feathers  
and watch for iridescent green wings  
flapping in this hardscrabble year.

**Face to Face**

You mapped your face in mirrors   
for fifty years. Traced  
every open pore, closed  
mouth bracketed by worry  
lines. Two furrows

cut deep between your brows  
cradled your babies, clutched them  
close. You swaddled  
them in your own imperfections,  
reversed reflections.  
Skin to skin, they knew

you inside out, out  
side in

as I did, my friend. Do you   
want to chart again  
your whole geography? Change   
our ways of seeing who  
you are, where you’ve been? All

this medical sorcery  
the cost of skin  
pulled tight, holding  
in what should be let out? Do you

choose a pattern  
in your size? Does it fit  
with seams, stitches, tucks  
like a child’s outgrown smock?  
Will it

make your skin transparent,  
luminescent, hold your death  
day in abeyance: a distant  
fluorescent green glow?

**Fill ’Er Up**

I left behind my blue sweater  
and unmade bed when I went away.  
These familiars spoke of me and this place  
I was born into without having a say.  
Here I grew and learned from you, my father,  
how to:  
grow crops in the foothills  
irrigate this rocky land below mountaintops  
bale hay for the winter months.

The chill of snow shivered my body.  
My vision blurred. I could not  
see where sky reached out  
and touched the land.

I left a note,  
told you how mountains blocked me in  
when I needed open space. I hovered  
on empty.

I fueled myself and my red pickup  
with regular at Lou’s. No high octane needed.   
Just a full tank of gas could carry my mutt  
and me past these dusty roads  
I navigated on the darkest nights  
without stars.

My tires rolled.   
I crossed borders,  
arrived in other states unknown.  
People asked my destination,  
that point on the map I headed toward.  
Sometimes my mutt chose the route  
as simple as a paw on a squiggly line  
and we followed.

We saw what we saw,  
went where we went, my mutt and me.  
We lost ourselves in open space,  
on crowded streets, under Red Rock Lake.

If I had been born  
here  
or there  
would the snow still drop to ground?  
Could I have been content with rain?

Hard to tell if we were coming  
or going  
when the calendar read spring  
From what we’ve seen of city faces  
and roadmap places, we were   
headed back to what we left.

I would sew the button on my blue sweater,  
tuck the blankets under and fold them tight

**Feet at the Funeral**

Follow the prayers.  
Cross and uncross. Re-cross  
four hundred legs covered  
with tweed wool trousers or taupe  
silk stockings tapered to toes  
rigid with reverence. Some legs

encased in synthetic fabric  
waver and wrap one long limb  
around the other. This ancient dance  
choreographed: apart, then together.   
At the chord, tap the carpeted floor  
twice and move forward, caught up  
in long, tangled embraces. Their

dance an offering, a sacrifice  
to distant foot gods. Their best guess  
at life. They rise in unison

a morning glory vine in bloom. Heart-shaped  
bodies fill space along the pews. So many  
leaves. Each face pink, lavender,   
white and funnel-shaped. Upturned   
eyes above their open mouths. Ready

for the preacher whose thirty mouths hang  
slack like wet laundry. His head droops  
on his neck, dangles above his feet  
in prayer. Shoes resoled and polished.  
A black shine beneath his robe. Now  
behind the pulpit. His hidden feet

are flat against waxed oak floors. Rubber  
soles slide an stick, a squeak  
of music, his own refrain  
drains away.

Spider veins wind around  
old women’s ankles,   
streak their legs red. Break  
even as they unlace their shoes,  
knead flesh, swollen like some  
exotic flowers. Maybe magnolias  
or white orchids turned brown  
around the edges. Their corns,  
calluses, bunions throb to the tune  
of the preacher’s prayers. Our Father,

who forecast plagues and floods  
and death to all things on earth,  
does not wear shoes, does not  
have feet. Only His son  
washed disciples’ feet

clean of dirt, caked on thick  
from daily travels up  
and down the hours. They slipped   
on pebbles that cut through

flesh, through leather sandals  
buckled tight  
against the day of one betrayal, one infidel.

Today, friends, family, neighbors  
and complete strangers converge.  
They drag their feet across  
the sepulchral floor. They  
search for a foothold, settle  
for the static charge of nylon  
carpet fibers created by  
four hundred feet sliding.

Through the valley of death,   
bent heads and withered vines.  
Small, tortured cries and whines.  
Amen. Amen. Amen.

**Final Approach**

Two great egrets whiten the sky  
with wing feathers, an omen  
I cannot read in darkness.

I am not a superstitious man  
who thinks  
death would hitchhike south.

Like me, these two birds have simply lost  
direction. They will mate on this island  
refuge where life writes itself in sand.

Palm fronds illuminate  
the runway as these two messengers  
drop their long black legs and land.

These birds follow me into the center  
of mystery where some say  
dinosaurs once wore egret wings.

I do not need proof of ancient wood  
or fossil bones. I have charted the sun,  
held one blue egret egg in my hand.

Under moonlight, I read my fortune twice.  
I swallow one white feather,  
chew a huge chunk of blue sky.

**Fireflies of the Manic Moon**

I have reversed the straight line  
of time, curved it back on itself,  
traced the trail leading to my child

days when time evaporated  
at dusk, when fireflies fed my lunacy  
carrying each crazy dream above

over the manic moon back to   
where I lived inside my skin,  
inside the grey-shingled cottage

outside where the soft swish of shadows  
were moving toward the center, somewhere  
near the muscle of my heart

which remembered all  
my body houses, all  
my body craves:

lust luminescent as fire  
flies who flash their promise  
of procreation, their legacy

of life. I have come back to where  
no map can record the terrain,  
where daylight gives way to night.

Under the ribcage of this cottage,  
my memories dangle from curved bone.  
Hope flaps its wings, feeds its young.

**Five Women in Their Baths**

1  
The white feather of a dove. Soap  
so soft against her skin, fragile  
as an eggshell membrane. A splash,  
a water drop from above. Another  
trickle. Another hand wipes her skin.  
Not a bath.  
Not a bath.

2  
Her soap dreams whimper,  
rise in mist, pop in humid air.  
Droplets dribble bit by bit  
back onto her bony shoulders.  
Old now,  
bones bent with the wet and heavy load.

3  
Lavender petals lick her skin purple.  
In her bath, she soaps her wet body.  
Water breath whispers  
promises into her cupped ear.

4  
Water still runs. Soap slips  
from her hand. From the other side  
the tap, tap on the door,  
the voices of her kids, the phone,  
a heavy thing hits the floor,  
the dog barks.  
Part of her life goes on   
without her. She is not  
ever alone.

5  
At 10, she molds her breasts with strawberry bubbles.  
When such roundness floats to the ceiling,  
wipes away with a washcloth,  
drops into bathwater,  
dissolves into her hand,  
disappears,  
she pulls the bathtub plug.

**Fluttering Heart**

My heart skips beats  
while yours pumps too fast.  
We survive our hearts,  
ignore days we forget love.  
Our blood thins to pink  
after thirty years of marriage

Tonight I reach back  
past all those years.   
I pull myself forward  
and am still what I was then:  
a prom queen in peach organza,  
shoulders bear. I show you skin,  
raise one shoulder,  
beckon you for one dance,  
then leave.  
That blue-eyed crooner  
caresses piano keys,  
lures me back to you.  
We nestle,  
shuffle across the floor  
like two lovers hanging on.

My love, the black vinyl is scratched.   
The needle cuts deep,  
skips some grooves.  
That man’s voice  
meanders through heartaches  
we have embraced all these years.

**From My Watch Tower in the National Forest**

I spiral upward, round  
and round such angled steps.  
I grow dizzy, live on less  
oxygen up high where few go,  
where wax faces burn to bone.

My bare feet blister  
against sun-heated iron  
steps, rusted from rain,  
from too few feet rapping,  
tapping their metallic tattoo.

One orange-vested hunter below  
searches for signs: bent twigs,  
a white-tail flash, pheasants,  
even a rabbit. Something, anything  
out of season, worth the risk.

One family pounds in stakes  
strong enough to moor canvas to ground.   
They lose themselves on unmarked trails,  
argue over the way back, wondering if  
their green tent houses brown bears.

I scan for smoke, for fire  
during this drought month when I run  
from air-conditioned life, yearn for heat.  
I am far above ground, an aerialist who swings  
from earth to air. I can just let go and burn.

**Frozen Fantasies**   
 (or, **The Ice-Cream Lady’s Modern Romance)**

The ice cream lady cruises slowly  
 ringing the ice cold bell  
 reading a *Modern Romance*  
 closing her eyes against children  
 running alongside screaming

wishing she were a heroine  
living between glossy pages where  
men are constant  
women beautiful  
and children all grown up.

But the white truck claims her  
 wrapping her in steeled flesh  
 drawing her into frozen depths  
 whispering with frosted breath  
 hinting at the age to come

while she dreams of raspberry swirl orgies  
where chocolate melts into vanilla cones  
flows over butterscotch ripples  
and smothers mint surprises  
in the heat of the day.

And the children feed on her  
 licking off her rouge  
 combing her darkest curls  
 kissing her earlobes  
 drowning out the bell

until she accelerates,  
escaping   
teeth white as picket fences  
and hands full of gravel roads.

**Garden Tour**

Come view our landscaped life:  
a labyrinth of green hedges, lush,  
leaves wide as lily pads, cut  
back against their own growth

daily. Prune with gardener shears  
the mazes, the complications.

Over there, earthworms  
aerate soil, rise in rain, plump.  
Worms dry out on our concrete path. No more  
than leather laces, fit for fastening   
boots, grounding souls (yours and mine)  
against electrical storms. Sudden,

your words hang like dust motes  
suspended. Air currents crackle  
around us full of light. Rise and fall

tall as red cedars, deep  
as willow roots spread  
underground. Crack reservoirs full  
with water, pounds of pressure. Push

against walls. Flood lowlands, valleys  
dry too long. The rush of it all.

Cup hands. Drink  
from white water rapids  
with me. Abandon rafts.  
Touch boulders smooth  
as skin, wet with moss. See

overhanging branches bend, red  
with berries, very tart. Taste

curls our tongues: two pink buds   
flower, unfurl petals

fragrant as spruce trees,  
wide as sails spread to the wind.

**Gemstones**

Anger is her jewelry box,  
wormwood worn thin, a veneer  
of voices fill the grooves.

All day she mines gemstones (a word,  
a look, a thing undone) and hoards them,  
pins them to her breast, hangs them  
from her ears, her neck, her wrists.

She strings amethysts. Purple as plums  
her husband’s sighs peel skin, chew   
pulp while juices puddle on his lips,  
a slick patina. Their marriage holds  
the pit, the center shrunk to size.

In this season of her sanity, she   
wanders, wonders if  
she lets go, drops down abandon  
shafts, she’ll find  
herself or at least carbon  
traces of her in dreams, crystallized,  
she’ll wear in her hair.

Under the hunter’s moon,  
she pirouettes, a circle of light.  
She dips into her jewelry box,  
drapes her body in opals.  
Her ruby rings click  
like castanets, summon forth  
old arguments, her dancing partners.

Her legs incandescent, flare  
into flames, a conflagration  
of recriminations. She swallows  
fire, face flush with new desire.

She twirls faster, calls forth winds  
that whip white coals, strip her  
naked. Ashes smolder,  
harden into black onyx  
under her feet, solid ground.

**Genealogical Descent**

Three living ancestors escaped  
their right-angled boxes  
and splattered my lineage  
with third and fourth marriages  
to fifth cousins of uncles  
I never called   
uncle, never

called my father  
anything but father  
the same name  
as the priest on the other side  
confessed to me  
and I forgave him  
his absolute faith  
without relatives

without blood family like mine  
who all flaunted gold-plated crosses  
and glittered in stained light  
as my Irish Aunt (on my father’s side)  
went straight to Troutsville  
Virginia from her northern island home

and in that southern state  
she lost her virginity  
and her rosary of beads broke  
under her feet, rolling her right  
past the ticket taker, past  
the driver of the Greyhound bus  
who winked and drove her straight  
to us in Detroit

where the Ford factory  
promised her work  
tightening screws on dashboards  
as she assembled her life  
under twin black smokestacks  
rom which clouds flamed  
and burped grey ash  
igniting her stories   
of paychecks she frittered away  
on men who swallowed the fire  
in her red, red hair

and smoked her brand,  
unfiltered Lucky Strikes,  
she lit and puffed  
out in perfect circles  
I impaled on my ring finger  
as she and my mother dressed  
for high mass every Sunday  
at the Sacred Heart Catholic Church,  
not missing a white-glove chance  
of coaxing nylon  
over their slender legs,  
checking that the dark seam  
ran straight up the back

where four covered buttons  
dangled from elastic hands  
front and rear.  
Snap, snap!  
Snap, snap!  
End of the line.

**The Girl Who Wanted to Be a Heroine**

In the northeast corner of our basement,  
I huddled under the rough wood  
of my dad’s workbench where he fixed  
whatever broke. Only I filled space  
below as wind scrabbled,  
clawed locked windows, wanting  
everything inside. Even my small body.

The screech of Detroit’s emergency siren  
split the dark, rainy June afternoon. Even  
the transistor radio in my hand shone grey  
as it spouted static-filled tornado warnings  
and watches when I didn’t know what  
I should look for or what I should do  
if I spotted a tornado twirling  
down our street slicing houses in half,   
picking up, then dropping  
whatever stood in its way.

The rattle-tattle wind rumbled  
down the steps, and intruder full of threat.  
maybe it would swoop down on my mother  
pulling her grocery cart behind her  
as she hurried home from Kroger with carrots,  
hamburger, milk, and oranges  
we might never eat. Or what about my father  
at his jewelry store, glass counters  
jammed with diamonds, emeralds, and precious  
stones that would never be found if glass  
cracked or if my father was already gone  
on his way home where he would find me  
safe under his workbench, radio sputtering.

**Giverny in April** *for Claude Monet*

blossoms with slate roofs,  
pink and green houses—-and life  
plump as rhododendrons. Fuchsia

petals cluster into constellations,  
a whole galaxy you can clutch. You  
clean fine-bristled brushes.

You embrace lily pads stroked  
by weeping willows kneeling at pond’s edge  
before they shed leaves. You crave truth

the reality of transient light, breezes  
and pigment. You dig in dirt, paint  
sunflowers---reflect life from the ground up.

Your paintings hang now  
in museums, noisy with tourists.  
You can be found

on postcards, in guidebooks  
jammed in canvas bags. People want  
a piece of you to carry home.

**Giving Directions**

“I was a student once,  
still am, in fact,  
a student of students,  
ready to learn  
from you about me  
ready to wear  
your faces if I must  
when I read your poems  
late at night, alone and tired  
of lies and words you think  
I want to hear about  
‘nice’ friends and fun.  
Tell me instead  
about Uncle Ed who  
drinks too much and dances  
late into the night while  
Aunt Martha sleeps, hiding  
from words  
better left in the book  
on the bedside table.

“We’ll awake  
together and clutch  
at words…”

“How many,   
words, I mean, for  
tonight’s poem?”

**Glaucous**

Gaze long enough at me  
you see  
yourself. You   
lead me to blue  
where pieces of sky  
plummet into Stoney Creek.

Your arms are bare. Blue rivulets  
flow under your skin, warm currents.  
You dip my finger into blue  
and I touch liquid green.  
We reach for white, those strands  
clouds leave behind  
when they rise moist.

Look there. That heart-rock  
plump with age-old mystery.  
All those river rocks in bed  
lulled by dragonfly buzz.  
We stroke lichen sun drops  
that line of green-yellow fur  
on blue rock road.

Come let us soak  
in wandering waterways,  
our toes gripping river rock  
as all that wet murmurs  
the ancient blue-green song.  
Who we are.  
Who we will be.

**Grandfather Never Gambled**

My grandfather misplaced himself  
one cold Ohio morning when he cracked  
one hundred years. With double zeros  
like unbroken egg shells, he cheated  
those small town gamblers,  
his farmer friends who never believed  
so many years could accumulate while  
they hoed and harvested crops,  
patched their own roofs and gathered  
eggs for breakfast, met at the barbershop  
and never said much beyond  
what they did that day when grandfather  
never showed at the collection celebration,  
even though he must have known  
they all had the wages they owed  
stuck in their plaid shirt pockets.

When these men found my grandfather  
alive and upside-down, his ankle caught  
between branches of the green apple tree,  
I figured he was whistling  
as he watched the purple waves of sun  
drop behind the ridge, waited for  
the start of his next century, knowing  
his friends would come on foot  
whooping and hollering, calling him  
home from the field, home from the tree.

**The Great Backyard Bird Count**

The green webbing breaks  
and hangs down one side  
of my aluminum lawn chair  
and I worry  
I might break  
in that same unexpected way,  
maybe even today,  
this February day of the Great  
Backyard Bird Count,  
this frozen day everyone will recall  
as snow blots out the sky.

The town closes  
and everyone stays home,  
even me who huddles in my back yard  
in my dilapidated lawn chair  
just waiting to jot a check   
mark in the box next to the robin,   
the hope of spring clutched between its beak,  
its promise of damp soil and fertility.

I am prepared with my Field Guide  
of Birds, binoculars, thawed birdbath,  
a thermos of coffee, two sandwiches,  
some cookies, blankets, my check sheet,  
and one pile of small rocks to chase squirrels  
from my own backyard. I yearn for birds.

Mourning doves coo but I cannot  
spot them. The starlings, crows, and grackles:  
all those black birds blend into dark branches.  
I cannot see even one feather.  
I cannot see my boots  
covered with snow below me.  
I am afraid the birds have eaten all the birdseed  
when I wasn’t looking,  
have flown off on their journey  
and left me here alone.

**The Guided Tour**

1. At Pioneer Square, Seattle

A ticket gets us in  
and we descend, step by wooden step,  
into the subterranean city  
below Doc Maynard’s Pub. Above in the Square

tourists perch on our heads,  
flap their arms and shake loose dirt  
that dribbles onto our bare shoulders,  
logs the guide’s upturned mouth  
with fire dust and a city buried  
in its own ashes all the way up  
to first floor windows  
through which we view

more dirt. Enough dirt  
to smother us in open catacombs  
beneath our crepe-soled shoes.

1. Tourists Once Removed Automatically

We load our auto-focus cameras  
with high-speed film  
in one second flat and snap up, down,  
around, and close up if we dare. We do it  
from far away using telephoto lens  
unscarred and clean of lint

for the clearest shot once removed  
and framed in the viewfinder.

Our flash backfills unnatural light  
of electric glass as we sight  
our guide and shoot.

1. Photographing the Blind Woman’s Music

No one resurrects  
or restores or ignores the blind woman  
whose grey hair frizzes in this humidity  
into a halo of split ends  
above her sleeveless ivory blouse  
embroidered with purple violets and emerald leaves,  
each tipped with tiny mirrors reflecting back

our faces as she tucks one lemon-yellow cosmos   
between her breasts, its stem wilting  
against her sweaty flesh. Then she empties coins  
from a cup at her feet into her palm. Silence now  
while she rubs each silver and copper circle  
between her fingertips as if they speak to her  
of those who flip them in her plastic cup  
as they pass by

when she plays the dulcimer hanging round her neck.   
She does not see us lick our raspberry yogurt cones,   
tongues chilled by the heat  
of her dulcimer’s metal strings.

That woman strikes with two hammers  
one in each hand and a mouth full of hymns.

Words round as God’s name puff her cheeks  
into crimson cushions that curve toward bone  
when she plucks one string and ends.

Click, the camera catches her then,  
the last shot at the end of the roll.

We know the finish, that whirring noise,  
that internal winding cellulose  
from one black spool to the other.

1. In the Darkroom at Home

Under the developer,  
the blind woman evolves again  
into herself and brings back our sight

so we remember the melody of her coins  
clinking in her skirt pocket  
when she lifts her arms, just before  
she hits the strings in the right spot  
and shapes echoes from another place  
that settle deep in our bellies  
and we hear our own eyes blink in light.

1. Squares of Time in Photo Albums Everywhere

We carry away  
slices of places and people  
in Kodak color  
and paste them in photo albums  
or shuffle them like decks of cards  
as we show friends, family, anyone  
who will look at where we’ve been.

In other photos  
a blind woman who may be her stands  
behind us in Times Square playing the flute  
ten years ago. Even then,  
our cameras dangle from our necks  
like black pearl amulets.

We spot the blind woman   
staring out at us  
from antique albums  
on dusty bottom shelves  
at flea markets  
in other towns  
as we bargain for her image:

her eyes flat as the world map  
and full of buried cities   
that are silent as the pulse  
beneath our skin.

**Heart Murmur**

Mama crashed into her 90th year  
full speed and braked  
for no one except me  
who knew

her heart thumped erratic beats  
and murmured, a whirring sound  
as tapes rewound decades  
past these bedsheets  
trimmed in violet and pink eyelet

past her third husband she left behind  
in Venice on an air-conditioned tour bus  
eyes closed as Mama’s second husband  
who drank Bourbon straight, a southern man

from Lexington who bet on thoroughbreds  
called Mama Too and lost himself  
as Mama dressed in her white satin  
gown with beaded bodice zipped

against her grief for one husband  
who came first and slipped underground  
beneath a bluegrass sheet one August day  
when his heart leaked blood

drops red as cardinal feathers  
shed along the path, markers of the way  
for me when I was born in blood

and Mama saw him  
in me and rocked us  
in her arms, back to life again

and again she sang the cardinal’s song  
all along knowing what women know

how warmer than normal, this night would fall  
through the open window, into her room

while we two women  
listened for father’s feet  
and heard red  
red wings tipped with black.

**Her Father Spied What Was Not There**

Her leather diary:  
skin like a ripe red delicious  
apple, freshly picked from the tree  
of lies and wishes and what might be.

Her father:  
twisted a key in the tarnished lock.  
He might as well have stuck  
an ice pick in her back.

Secrets hidden:  
blank pages crammed  
with blue lines  
and empty space unbroken.

Only her heart:  
cradled all she remembered  
of life until now, the horrible  
longing for something else.

The rest she wore  
ironed on her sleeve.

**Her Night Mares**

Her swollen tongue  
fills her mouth  
with mushy screams.   
Smothered words  
in thickening saliva;  
a marsh   
of muddy waters,  
decayed leaves,  
rotted bodies.  
No one to hear her   
as she drowns

in white-cold papercuts,  
her scissored dreams  
press against  
the schoolhouse windows  
cover unwashed streaks  
as her child fingers  
scrape the winter glass.

Her frosted breath  
warm against the panes,  
melts her frozen mind

until behind her eyes,  
she finds  
a poem  
she can mount bareback,  
stroke with breathless whispers,   
spur into a gallop  
across the desert sand  
where blanched bones  
nestle at night,  
where she laughs,  
races toward mountains  
until the mare’s sweat is hers  
and she slips  
into lined white emptiness.

**The Hypnotic Mrs. Little**

The flap of skin under Mrs. Little’s chin  
waggled as she warned our third grade class  
about bombs and flash burns during   
our monthly air-raid drills while we stood behind  
cement pillars in the school basement with others  
whose legs trembled and eyes scrunched as if  
they might cry or sink to the ground from the weight  
of the whole school on top of them.

Back in class,  
when I messed up the multiplication tables  
and erased numbers so hard the paper ripped,  
Mrs. Little rapped my head  
hard with her sharp fingernail, polished  
blood red. Just my whisper at her back  
whipped her around. She aimed  
the eraser at my head. White chalk   
fluffed the air, settled in my hair.

Mrs. Little drilled us in disasters:  
how fast Newton’s apple fell from the tree  
of knowledge, how the sky might freeze  
and break into silver hatchets  
that could split a head in half.  
A crow could plunge through air,  
snip off a bit of our ears. She could  
hold us chickens back a year.

I pinned the sky in place with my eyes,   
opened my arms wide to whatever might fall.

**A History Lesson**

Mark Faneuil Hall: tell its story on bronze.  
Let tourists stare and snap their instamatics.  
Inscribe the Declaration, etch it on the wind  
whipping around the corner of the Old State House.  
Never mind Prudential Tower; its foundation isn’t set.  
Guide them on the Freedom Trail past the Park Street Church  
Erect wooden signs to hold the spots,  
scrawl on paper if you must.  
Sell them guidebooks, maps, and souvnirs.

Then take their faces, wet with sweat,  
and turn them toward your own.  
Field stones build the base,  
wall off space for chin and cheek,  
sink in eyes at high tide.  
Uprooted sugar maples ridge the chin,  
pour blood-warmed syrup over ice.  
Lips like cod swim the face,  
close before the hook.  
Mourning doves coo in your throat,  
remembering the first winter.  
The covered bridge between your eyes  
uses king posts like an arch.  
You breathe the blacksmith’s fires,  
melt iron for your skin.  
Two northern red-bellied snakes for eyebrows  
underline forehead furrows plowed  
by Puritans, chanting scriptures  
after the horses were fed.  
And in your eyes are alpine gardens,  
clinging to the rock.

**Hit By a Hearse**

Just because I didn’t look  
both ways, right  
and left, from air to ground,  
I didn’t see me or anything else  
reflected in the chrome grille  
burnished that winter morning in Detroit  
behind the closed double garage doors  
of J.W. Morely’s Funeral Home

perched for forty years  
on the corner of my street  
like some black crow with marble eyes  
who chants: *caw, caw, caw, caw,*and waits for something small  
to move across its sight line.

Just ice patches, I know  
but a girl like me can slip  
if my boots strike the wrong angle  
and puncture the thin layer  
of trust that freezes   
and holds my full weight, all the pounds  
I put on since marriage, since the children   
moved out, since

my husband retired early. He watches  
the TV weather woman predict sun  
somewhere in Florida  
and tips his 90-proof vodka bottle  
up toward heaven in absolution,

his hair once brown as the paper bag  
that will hold my apples, brown  
as fresh-turned dirt. Now gray  
and slicked back, its strands thick  
with lies are wound round his head:  
his heavy crown of thorns.

I cross the street   
alone on my way  
to Kroger’s for tart, green  
Granny Smith apples  
plucked from the trees in Washington  
and transported in crates  
to this city without orchards  
as if a taste of truth, a trickle  
of juice down my chin from the first bite  
that breaks the skin,  
can make me see the black,  
sleek bullet of the hearse.

**Home Again**

I poke in corners of the world  
and return naked to my clean,  
uncluttered space.

I stand still  
as the lily pond outside my window,  
my thoughts in bud, about to burst.

My fingertips curl toward a palm, a cup  
of air. I breathe in natural light,  
exhale shadows, my flesh-tone poem.

**Home from the Sea**

I unpinned a story of the North Sea  
from the braided bun my Middlesbrough  
grandmother wore. The silver strands  
unraveled, flashed waves of whitecaps,  
a foam of bubbles, a school of gray-green cod,  
a glitter of fish scales, a wealth of shine  
polished in the port city where ships docked.

On the day she almost died  
icy water lapped her ankles, she said,  
as the fork-tailed terns spread white-cloud  
wings above her. The current dragged her  
toward Denmark, maybe Germany, some place  
far from the English beach, the sand, the shore.  
Deep swirls of wet raked her back,  
filled her mouth. Splashes of red beaks  
pecked herring from the green-blue  
wet beneath her fingertips. She lost  
direction. Brown-speckled boulders broke water  
and spoke the secrets tangled in kelp beds.  
The seals’ sharp barks herded her home.

**The Hook**

punctuates my life  
with its head bowed  
and spine stretched   
toward a single dot

a speck at the end  
when the hook  
scoops white space  
embraces emptiness

while the question wiggles in my voice  
like a nightcrawler  
impaled on barbed wire  
and dangled from a line  
whipped out  
by the booted man  
who waits on sand

and does not ask himself  
or me if he can  
scale and gut a trout  
and eat what  
once  
swam free

as his love for me  
without question.

**Hospice***For the woman with Alzheimer’s*

She shrinks daily, a sliver  
of herself peeled to the core  
of apple seeds, moist  
with juices. Tipsy and cider-drunk,  
she steals out windows, out doors, out  
any open crack, a contortionist  
bending low under the limbo stick.

Her body a drum, skin stretched tight,  
reverberates with memories, too loud.  
Hammers pound, play her bones  
like a xylophone, up and down the scale:  
the mating dance. Back and forth,  
her legs straddle the stick, this side

then that. Silence, sudden as white   
elephants. Smooth as ivory tusks.

**House of Good Fortune**

The pink-haired teen drags a pile of troubles  
in a gunny sack. Everywhere she goes,  
people stuff their problems into her burlap bag  
as if she can ease their weary days.  
She shovels the whole mess into a compost pit  
where it mixes with the bright heads of marigolds,  
muddles with rot and potato peelings  
and curls around strangers’ problems.  
Everything breaks down eventually  
and oozes over the boundaries.

The teen dyes her hair brown, the color  
of fertilizer. In one coat pocket  
she strokes her worry stone,  
sighs as the shush of flesh rubs  
over the rose quartz and settles her mind.  
Behind each ear, she tucks a four-leaf clover,  
protection against the evil eye   
that could shrivel her to nothing.

An amulet dangles from her neck, given to her  
by a cousin who stitched powerful magic into each seam.  
The belly of this deerskin pouch cuddles one creek  
pebble, one tail feather from the common sparrow,  
and one dried rosebud plucked during the heat of the day.  
She wears her silver charm bracelet so she can fondle  
the book, the piano, the wishbone, the tiny scissors  
for cutting threads, the Scottie dog that almost barked  
and wagged its tail and the heart engraved  
with her name and birth date given to her by her  
mother who pinned all her hopes on this baby girl,  
now a teen who believes in luck, forgiveness  
and second chances. She gives up worry  
when she enters the house of good fortune.

**How to Find Happiness**

Reach back behind crunchy granola bars. Grab  
the wisp of smoke. A gasp of hope curls in sleep.  
Shake it awake. Make it talk sounds of cotton-candy pink.

Listen as a tiny gold-haired girl giggles  
up and down the scale. Improvise   
the jazz of peppermint, the razzmatazz of chocolate drops.

Slip-slide twelve steps forward. Reach out for Neapolitan ice  
cream. No, go for rocky mountain road, the crunch,   
the pecans cracked between vanilla teeth. The pleasure of it all.

Forget the flour and milk. Add very berry ice cream  
and red licorice, of course. Savor the tantalizing tickle  
when happiness hits the roof of your mouth.

**I Do Not Write Poetry**

it writes me  
into the blue-black center  
of my birth back then  
when I slid head first  
into sterile white with no words

for my life pushed into that mid-afternoon  
glare of Detroit time clocked in and out  
at the Ford Body and Assembly Plant  
and ticked off by the White Castle  
belly-buster burgers slammed one after the other  
onto the greasy grill and patted flat by the slender cook  
who knew her blank-verse days ended Sundays  
in the Temple Baptist Church on Woodward,  
the main drag for the ’43 Ford V8 DeLuxe coupes  
revving and running lights too red  
after the world war I read about in poems  
without rhyme

and later, words  
slapped me flat as a White Castle  
when poetry sizzled blue in my mouth  
dribbled onto pages of my life  
and wrote me into a simile  
as if I could puzzle out  
my birth and death rites  
and scrawl poems in between.

**I Got the Dirty-Devil Blues**

I got the no-place-for-me blues,  
the lay-down-and-worry blues, way down  
since the Chevy plant dumped me on the street.  
I got no laces for my shoes.  
I got bunions on my feet.  
My unemployment done run out.  
I’m down so far I can’t get up.

My welding gun has lost its flame  
and everything needs soldered.  
No way to melt the metal.  
No way to join the seams.  
Things just seem to fall apart.  
The cold wind blows thru cracks.  
This old house has broken glass.

No one’s calling me for jobs.  
Everyone forgets my name.  
The phone don’t ring.  
I don’t ever pick it up.  
The front-door buzzer broke yesterday.  
Everyone stays away, far away.  
No one wants to catch these down-and-out blues.

Maybe tomorrow I’ll get dressed in my best,  
make the rounds of businesses,   
put in my applications for work, any work.  
I’ll try McDonald’s with golden arches.  
Minimum wage means it can’t go no lower.  
The only way is up or out—and I ain’t out yet.

For now, I just got the dirty-devil blues.  
That old devil sucker-punched me good.  
That old devil knocked the wind right out of me.  
That old devil whispered hurting things in my ear.  
That old devil sucked my soul.  
For now I’m just laying back, eyes almost closed  
waiting for that awful sound of the final knock-out bell.

**I Have Become**

a chair, slipcovered  
in neutral beige, bound

by the decorator’s taste.  
His fingers shape my face,

tack the fabric tight.  
He levels legs and leans

against my back, hoping for  
an empty space, a place undone

like stepping off a cliff.

**Impromptu Essays**

You write to me on desktops.  
Jagged passions etched in wood  
with steel paper clips and dry pens:  
 Lopsided hearts pierced with arrows.  
 Mary & John in ’79 and class of…   
 Advice to one before  
 from one who sits now  
 knees gum-glued to metal,  
 his motionless daydreams  
 (heavy against black oak)  
 explode in magic marker  
 expletives,  
 the permanent kind  
as I pass out the mimeo sheets—  
no peanut butter smudges  
or erasures—  
to cover the splintered hardness  
of your fears.

The assignment  
created in four nights  
in my draped den  
calls to your mushroomed souls  
to write their spongy truths  
in measured lines. How  
can I tell you   
my red pen’s out of ink,  
my text is coffee-soaked,  
the grammar rules lost  
in red maple roots?

You sweat spring rain,  
build wadded paper glaciers  
between us,  
write pencil essays  
in dictionary words.  
Hand them in.

Now, carve your woodcuts  
until bells ring  
and I’ll read  
your impromptu essays  
after class  
when I sit  
where you sat  
and touch   
your word slivers.

**In a Double Bed**

She dreams  
oceans beneath her bed.  
Eels slither upward  
electrify the sheets;  
the octopus extends its arms  
wraps her  
and drags her down  
to salty depths;  
she breathes  
within the embryonic sac.

He dreams  
mountains rising  
peaks tipped white;  
snow melts between his lips  
cools his belly’s hunger  
floods the dams below  
until people look up  
see him plant the flag  
and breathe  
the frozen air.

**In Anticipation of a Poem**

My inspiration left me yesterday  
for a long, cold sleep under ground.  
It curled its tail around itself  
and ceased its chatter. I was alone

above ground, afraid death would wander  
into my house like a black fog  
carried on bat wings. I chewed silence  
on my back teeth, swallowed all this

nothingness. Without words,   
I, too, hibernated inside my burrow.  
Blank walls boxed me in. Only  
my cache of nuts promised sustenance

as I cracked hard shells,  
dug out the sweet meat of truth.  
I waited for the melting time  
when soil loosened its hold on living things.

The rhythm of the seasons  
shook me from my lethargy. Blood  
rippled in my veins where words bobbed  
above river stones. I created poems of air

that rode the wind currents as if mere images  
nourished this brown chirping creature  
whose paws curled on my shoulder  
as I grabbed a handful of bubbles rising.

**In Her Own Image**

Smaller than she remembers  
her childhood house,  
no more  
than a green bungalow set up  
on a Monopoly board  
collecting rent.

Hands roll dice,  
come up four: father,  
mother, sister, her.  
Then three, unlucky  
number after mother dies  
an ugly death.

Father  
in less than a breath  
displaces empty space.  
He takes his photographs,  
portraits black and white,  
hand painted  
by his assistant,  
his new wife  
and he vanishes.

Snapshot of him:  
face full of blood, flush  
with a winning hand.  
Let her, the youngest   
girl, shuffle hearts  
into diamonds, snatch clubs  
from behind his ear.   
Master of magic  
he saws women in half.  
His whiskey words,  
caustic as an acid bath,  
coax images  
into photographs.  
Roll flat and frame.

She’s three, all braids  
and bows. Her knees,   
bare beneath pleated skirts,  
bend like pipestem cleaners  
as she poses for him.   
Chin tilts up, eyes down,  
mouth a wedding wreath.  
Shutters click, capture light  
and dark. Shadows of her soul  
reverse on negatives.

Unblinking, his third eye  
zooms in, yanks her  
into the black box,  
turns her upside down,  
arms dangling like linguini  
hanging off her plate.

Her teen years  
glisten with developing  
solution, wet and slick as sweat.  
Sour as citrus fruit, he  
smells of screwdrivers  
and peppermint. In his darkroom,  
he airbrushes blemishes,  
shapes her mouth  
into her mother’s smile.

During her forties, men  
meander through her  
living room like tourists  
at art museums, looking  
for paintings of places  
they’ve been  
and left behind or nudes  
whose hips curve  
into thighs, muscles  
tense and tight.

Like her father,   
these men reek of drink  
and blackouts, punch huge holes  
in her book of days  
as she forgets to remember  
the whiskey chronicles,  
that wet, cold current of lies.

**In Our Blackberry Days**

I roll those August farm days in my mouth  
like blackberries, thick, sweet on my tongue,  
round as that summer memory of us.

Wild at ten, mosquito-bit and bruised,  
all legs running, arms reaching for more  
than my cousin or I bargained for that week.

She taught me how to dribble  
chicken feed through my spread fingers, call  
home the jersey cows and lock the gate.

In the sun-soaked days, our skin burned,  
blistered in Ohio heat. Back in the woods,  
we found a wild bramble bush, heavy with fruit.

With broken hoe handles, we whacked that thicket  
until a black rat snake slid past our ankles  
and even the bees fled on whirring wings.

My cousin jabbed her finger at the most juicy blackberries  
hidden under sharp-toothed leaves, huddled in the tangle  
of arched stems, the place where thorns hooked skin.

With curved wrists, we gently tapped the branches  
until blackberries drifted down into our open mouths  
and juice drenched our lips, our tongues, dribbled down our chins.

We rescued blackberries from a purple finch, throat  
puffed with song and a dark-eyed Junco in mid-snatch.

A waterfall of berries spilled into our silver buckets.

At night, my aunt stirred big pots of blackberries  
while we prepared wide-mouthed jars  
greedy for the dark nectar that stained our fingertips.

In my parents’ car, I clutched three jars of purple preserves  
cooling in my hands, hardening into something precious  
I would spread on biscuits in a white bungalow in Detroit.

In the August of my retirement, blackberries  
pop up in the pink of my wild roses. I know  
the purple finch carried my cousin’s seed here in its beak.

**In Search of a Healing Place**

For her health, Mother rowed a boat  
across Pleasant Lake, then caught  
a train headed toward Black Springs,  
Michigan, all by herself,  
searching for a night-  
colored spring with the tar  
smell of a rotted house.

Huddled at the very tip  
of the rabbit’s ear, Black  
Springs was not on the route.  
Mother hiked the final mile  
full of pines and endangered  
trillium white in moonlight.   
Wilderness grew in her mind.

Mother wandered on red  
maple leaves farther along the trail  
and slipped right through their covering  
into black spring water some people say  
doesn’t exist. If it does,  
they say, no one survives the extremes:  
the bubbling fire or the frozen floor.

**Interchange**

You come back to what you leave behind.  
Like me.  
Like litter on the roadside: Kentucky  
Fried Chicken cartons. Bones spill   
from red cardboard, bleach white in summer sun  
or cover themselves with bluegrass

and grow toward you. You   
roll down windows, breathe in  
skeletons rising up, new life  
alongside Interstate 52. You and me

dust to dust. The concrete median  
crumbles moments into hours. Plaster  
particles and sharp pieces of stone  
puncture clouds above the moon roof  
of your ’99 Windstar. Metallic seeds

float there. Settle into cumulous   
formations flat on the bottom.  
Fuse with fish bones. Fragile  
as your flight you chart with Magic   
Markers on the map from AAA. You accelerate

past safe limits, past lavender   
twilight on your right. You look   
left. Vacancy signs flash red ahead.

Iridescent neon tubes twist words  
we said and unsaid. Our silence   
cracks an open space between

us, unconnected cartilage. Bones  
bring you back.

You press your breastbone  
against mine and both soak  
in the salty brine of birth,  
our fused vision of bones.

**In Woodlawn Cemetery After Dark**

Who’s to say what darkness is  
or when it falls to ground, *kerplunk*?

Not I who usually visit during lunch  
when I’m hungry for life and company.

I memorize names of those who will be   
by me when my number is called for residency.

I research their names, read their obituaries,  
introduce myself by telling my life story.

Kenneth, I scold, you should not have driven  
yourself around that curve smack into a tree.

But I understand how you fell asleep worrying  
about the economy and your boss who screeched.

You are a man I can talk to honestly and trust  
to take no liberties with an old woman like me.

Helen, we will lay head to head. I read news  
accounts of how at eight a stranger strangled you.

You were just beginning then and I am fading from  
this world to yours. We will talk of girlish things.

So many names, so many years, so many causes  
have buried you here. I have my plot, paid in full.

Sun lulls me on this fine fall day when leaves drop  
geese fly north and I fall asleep above my place.

I have read closing hours on the gate, amazed  
that we who breathe have a curfew, a deadline to meet.

I wake to dark, a slice of moon and stars for light.  
These violated hours lock me behind fences with you.

Come out, I plead, and chat with me, your company.  
Mist shrouds headstones, drapes trees and bouquets.

Do not hide from me for I cannot play that childhood  
game. I fear tripping on such hilly ground.

Is that thick haze the shape of you? Or that shrub  
huddled over there? Your secrets will soon be mine.

Must I wait? I can recite your names, a litany  
of life I offer you. I am trapped in a forbidden place.

**It’s My World**

I have eaten off the blue plate,  
swallowed each grain of rice,  
crossed my chopsticks,  
signify that I am done,  
my stomach full  
of undigested food,  
of questions that roll and growl.

I have removed my slippers,  
a sign of respect, of openness  
as I stand on the edge  
of the spinning red vortex  
where fire can consume me  
before I even know  
who I am or who I could be.

I have allowed my cat curling space  
on the rounded surface of my head  
as if he were my hat dangling black tail  
one side, the other side a white paw of claws  
holding me in place, safe against red  
tongues that rake my back, purr words  
too slurred for me to understand.

I have written notes to myself,  
my book of changes with pages smudged,  
lined up like squares of doubt above me  
ready to flutter down, smother me  
if I don’t reach past the green-blue  
perimeter where turtle and snail carry their houses,  
where blue butterfly and ladybug color my sky.

Below me sits the city where skyscrapers sway  
in wind and bend their concrete sides toward earth  
where I yearn for yellow day and dark night,  
for their unity as one cycles to the other like me  
who stands poised for the dive onto my gold couch below,  
a velvet landing into my world where I am me.

**The Italian Restaurant on the Corner**

Some neighbors say  
the owner torched his restaurant  
one bitter December night when  
his till did not balance  
and the weatherman predicted  
a long, hard cold spell.

That night fell below zero as I recall  
and the stars hung in the sky like icicles.  
I heard the sirens, saw the red flash  
of fire engines from my bedroom window.  
Flames licked the moon with many tongues  
while water failed to drown the fire’s thirst.

When the moon fell from the sky,  
even firefighters dodged the sparks  
as the restaurant roof caved in and cans  
of tomato sauce exploded. Tin shrapnel   
struck the owner who stood in the ruins,   
arms raised over his head, cursing.

For days the restaurant kept shedding  
pieces of itself. I found a fork, a shingle,   
a charred board and a restroom sign  
in the rubble coated with ice,  
a place off-limits where neighbors walk  
their dogs searching for evidence.

These neighbors desire a crime to solve  
while I embrace the mystery of ice.

**I Wish for Bradley**

I wish you white-feathered wings  
that slice the air and carry you  
safely past the first star  
you see tonight,  
over the giant redwood  
where you will land  
and listen to the rustle  
of green-needled truth.

I wish you a pinch of pepper  
for zest and a hearty appetite  
for adventure as you explore  
all life’s nooks and crannies  
and value what you find there.

I wish you forget-me-nots  
that color your garden  
with the blue from the sky  
and the green sprouts of growth  
as friends gather round  
and walk with you through life.

I wish you eyes that shine  
like the sun, illuminating all  
you see with hope of what can be  
and what you can do  
to make the world a better place  
for everyone.

I wish you books and music  
you can share, walks in the park  
off the worn dirt path  
where ideas scamper about  
and feed your curious mind.

I wish you health and happiness,  
a love of life to see you through  
and most of all, I wish you dreams  
and a heart full of love.

*With Much Love from Grandma Carol  
February 3, 2005*

**The Japanese painter**

inks their dusky souls  
on rice paper:  
fine lines thicken  
lengthen into bamboo  
lips sucking  
persimmons;   
juices drip  
into body hollows  
where twin plums  
eclipse the moon  
and the painter switches  
to soft-bristled brushes.

**Kneeling In Front Of the Rain-Battered Mums**

He leaves the mums alone,  
not tied against stakes  
with garden twine  
or covered with burlap  
when frost crystallizes night.

He hoes his dreams, chops chickweed  
rooted in the ground,   
eats seeds like sparrows  
nested in the downspout. Gone now,  
chased by November rain.  
He stoops, alone, crouching  
wishing he pinched the early buds,  
folded in green jackets.  
These mums, too tall, too leggy  
to not fall, droop into dirt.

He props them up,  
weaves stems through cyclone fences,  
cuts dead heads, white petals now rust.  
His knees stained soil-dark and his hands,  
moist, move among the broken stalks,  
and his voice, hoarse with age, chats  
a promise, a prayer as he kneels there.

**The Language of Waves**

The moon-gold sun balances against my hairline, rolls to my nose  
 wet with sweat,  
then back again  
as I steer my bomb of words through these rough waters, under  
 this neon sun.  
Such unbearable yellow heat  
that explodes green, blue, white waves of words, churns a froth  
of sentences,  
long strands to meaning I read from the banners towed by fighter   
 planes  
over Whisper lake  
where bullet words pierce my bare belly until I beg for mercy  
and waves run red

with blood that will not clot, will not settle into war stories that  
turn

to stones,  
sink to the bottom  
of the lake where they wear smooth, become no more than sedi-  
ment,  
particles left from the ice and the fire, from dinosaur trails  
 and fish scales,  
bits of historical ruins,  
tales told in hieroglyphics, liquid as the waves that wash out,  
wash in,  
wash over me with ancient alphabets I scribble in blue water  
 and decipher  
the drift of night currents.

**Last Day of Class**

On the last day,  
we come together  
to record our history.  
I start it out, a story of us.  
Alice tells of *The Scarlet Letter*  
and Ed who read CliffsNotes instead.  
Mary remembers the day  
the sub laughed at Paula’s puns  
and the whole class got so loud  
the principal came in.  
Ted recalls the test  
that everyone flunked  
when I used the wrong answer key.  
Ellen screeches chalk and pops her gum.  
Barbara’s poem is in *The Clarion*.  
“The Most Dangerous Game” is   
cheating on tests and walking in late.  
Elmer got locked out and Mike got As.  
They didn’t forget  
the apple they brought all waxed and shined,  
the fire drill when no one came back,  
stomachs that growled at *The Iliad*,   
notes they passed when things got dull,  
things I said when they pushed me too far.  
We got it all down and played it back.  
Voices distorted or so they thought  
but I knew every one.

**The Last Night of the Year**

Even my dog let loose howls  
my neighbors pretended they didn’t hear  
tonight. Too many one-note party horns blasted the air.  
Too many feet slunk up the stairs and around the corner  
and tap-tapped into the bedroom on the second floor  
where men snatched winter coats  
worn by those women who slipped out the back door  
and later snuck back to tip whiskey down their throats  
thrilled at the risks they dared before the last  
tick of midnight faced them forward.

Maybe twenty neighbors crammed together  
under blue crepe paper twists in the basement  
where the whole neighborhood could fit  
if they didn’t settle for too long  
under aluminum stars dangled from silver threads.  
Arms reached out helter-skelter, fingertips slid along  
cheek bones, lips pressed lips and feet slip-slided  
on the tile floor. Wiggly bodies dripped sweat.  
People yelled for their spouses, aroused  
when the end moved nearer and a last kiss  
became the first, hovering  
between lost and found.

One man scurried home  
alone before the final, fatal tick.  
The changing of the years,   
the tick tock of clocks  
echoed in his head.  
He stroked his gun  
three times, tilted the barrel toward the sky.  
When he squeezed the trigger,   
the bullet split the air above his head.   
He did not see  
where it lodged or if  
blood flowed in the new year.

**Legacy**

Bones blanch white in desert sun.  
Skulls testify, mourn flesh and rivers  
of blood that stain rock sunset red.

The sky is on fire, a desolate orange.  
Only one Saguaro Cactus remains, arms raised  
in mock surrender, roots ready to detonate.

A bomb blasts open earth’s black mouth  
spewing boulders from the underground.   
Green tanks roll on caterpillar treads.

Still, the gods wager against all odds,  
shake two dice and throw. No sacrifice  
appeases blood thirst if they throw seven.

Such gods play high stake games  
through centuries. They rake in rubble,   
watch which way twin towers crumble.

A soldier guards the death cart  
while the brown moth guides spirits  
underground and the serpent strikes.

**Lemon People**

Maria resides in a box, in a place  
she calls home with four walls  
and no address. She plasters  
photos everywhere, buildings she wants  
for her very own on a street she lost somewhere.

Frederick crosses the line, steps off the curb  
in front of a yellow bus going too fast.   
The cops hold back crowds who want a peek  
at a man they never noticed on the street  
where he snatched purses, money to buy dark birds.

Minerva sweats at the Rouge Plant  
where steel bubbles, melts, pours into molds  
that shape her very soul as she clocks in  
and out. She counts the wages of her work  
and yearns for the cardinal’s song all along.

We are all lemon people dropped from thorny trees.  
We clutter our space, forget the fields we farmed,  
ignore the ocean roar—and suck our own tart juice.

**A Lesson Written in Ice**

Trust nothing you learned that summer  
fishing on Pleasant Lake. All you needed  
was a boat, a baited line and time  
enough. You caught your limit then.

It was all too easy. The bluegills spawned  
in shallow water. Females laid their eggs  
and fled. Males stayed behind as guards  
and you, my father, set the hook.

I watched you from the dock. You knew  
I could not swim with bluegills, would not   
invade their nests. I was your son  
who never ate the fish you fried.

In winter, bluegills lured you to the center  
where you claimed your space and carved your hole.   
You dropped your line into darkness, hoping   
for fish you could not see—and a son who was not there.

During these frozen months, you wandered  
on the surface. You heard the ice floor crack,  
tracked the jagged line of our relationship  
all the way back to the first bluegill I never caught.

**The Lexicon of Streets**

When I was seven, I believed   
in street names, their promised  
mystery. I pedaled my bike along Margarita,  
let my tongue roll around the exotic sound—Margarita.  
I just knew a Spanish woman clicked   
castanets somewhere on a porch  
with a metal swing,  
big red and purple and yellow carnations  
painted on the back. Margarita would  
tuck one real flower behind each ear,  
clutch one long-stemmed yellow rose between  
her white, white teeth. She would drape her scent  
along the swing, put down her castanets,  
beckon me with her long pink nails, pink  
enough to braid my tangled hair  
atop my head and thread  
two carnations at the crown.  
She would call me Margarita, too,  
and it would be true.

By eight, I knew Margarita was nowhere  
I could find. My tires rolled along  
Rosemont, a street without roses,  
across to Shaftsbury where Sue’s dad  
drank Bud from cans he crushed   
in one calloused fist, his knuckles white.  
He swore at the union and the company  
day in and day out until all his grass  
turned brown and the neighbors agreed  
he got the shaft. That summer I gave up  
street names. I believed only  
in myself and the apple tree I climbed  
at the corner where I caught everyone   
doing something.

If I were patient as the pink-tinged flowers  
time would turn into apples  
sweet enough to eat.

**Lilacs Bloom in the Vacant Lot**

Other eighth-grade boys bring tulips  
and daffodils that last  
a week on Ms. Williams’ desk  
without releasing one sweet smell.  
If I shut my eyes,  
I do not even know   
they are there.  
Their leaves wilt to brown,  
and the petals drop.

In the vacant lot, next to  
the party store, I pick  
lilacs. Purple, pink, lavender,  
white stars cluster,  
arch in bunch after bunch,  
so perfect  
they look fake. But fake  
reeks of plastic. Even I   
can smell that kind of lie.   
All the way to school,  
my lilacs bloom  
perfume in the palm of my hand.

One by one, I arrange my lilacs  
in Ms. Williams’ cut glass vase.  
The woody stems touch bottom  
as buds on each bunch pop open.  
My teacher takes huge gulps   
of lilac air as if she cannot  
catch her breath.

Ms. Williams picks  
a sprig from the vase,  
tucks it behind her ear  
and gasps at the truth of it all.

**Living Still in Tornado Alley** *Moore, Oklahoma  
 May 20, 2013*

Monday, mid-afternoon, my world  
went silent. Robins quit singing.  
Grey-black clouds hung in violet sky.   
Even Mimi, my Pomeranian,   
abandoned her yipping, nudged   
my feet, her pleas to flee this place.

My fist froze over the small  
hole I dug in my spring garden,   
the soil already turned,  
lush and ready for lettuce seeds  
clutched in my motionless hand.  
Plump raindrops splattered, then hail

hit the earth, dented my Ford  
Focus, bounced in their death dance  
before the melt on hot ground,  
before the fierce funnel cloud  
spiraled down. I grabbed Mimi, my phone, my  
radio, and huddled in my porcelain tub.

When I peeked over the edge, couch  
cushions crouched on the tilted floor. I flipped them  
on top of me just before the tornado’s roar,  
a prolonged growl, a deafening rumble before  
the weight of the world tumbled down, settled  
on top of me, trapped until found.

In our confused space, I could be anyplace,  
even over the rainbow with Mimi  
who licked me into consciousness again  
and again before I called the good guys who rescued me,  
the woman who would plant seeds.

**Loaves of Bread**

The little girl who ate words  
chewed them, savored them  
on her pink tongue as she curled  
against her father’s side, her head  
balanced on his arm, her eyes on whatever  
book he held palms up, tilted toward her.

Each letter on each page  
jumped into her mouth, tasted  
new, sharp as cheddar cheese.   
The whole alphabet jumbled,   
melted together in a casserole  
of spaghetti noodles and red,  
round tomatoes with an acid  
sting, a sit-up-and-take-notice   
zing when Heidi, an orphan,  
met Peter, the goat herder, and shook  
hands with the hermit in the hut  
who was her grandfather,   
his voice cold as the snow-  
crusted Alps Heidi had climbed.

The little girl snuggled closer  
as she swallowed Heidi’s story,  
nourished by each chapter,  
warm as dough baked into loaves,  
the crusty bread dipped into goat milk,  
her daily sustenance.

**Lullaby**

Rising from the streets,  
the yellow fog cradles  
bits of voices:  
curse words, shrieks,  
prayers, absolutions.  
Confusion  
balloons in her brain  
in her third floor flat  
where she rocks, clutching her cat  
against her shriveled breasts,  
stringing the street words  
into nonsense lullabies,  
ignoring the stillborn dust  
settling on her window sills.

**Madame Tina**

resides in the House of Spiritual Renewal  
just down Miller Road, a block off Main,  
in a converted hardware store  
once owned by Maynard Maynard  
first and last names  
the same, no middle,   
not even on the last will and testament  
where he left his land and bank account  
to Madame Tina, who read his fate  
in the squiggly lifeline dead-ended  
half way across his palm.

Maynard’s final seven years  
were lived full blast, circling  
to the top seat of the Ferris Wheel  
where he cuddled Madame Tina’s plump hand  
against his calloused one, fingers laced  
together against the chill, skin to skin  
rocking the whole world away.

Now by day, Madame Tina cradles other hands.  
Palms up, she pronounces their destiny  
carved in grooves. Deep ruts speak to her   
of marriages, births and deaths, no more  
than jerky starts and stops  
when the carnival barker fills empty seats  
on the Ferris Wheel and allows one more cycle   
before shutting down power at midnight.

Outside the House of Spiritual Renewal,  
a green neon hand, fingers spread,  
trolls with filaments of light  
across the freeway, slender threads  
of hope Madam Tina weaves into red banners  
when the carnival comes to town.

**Mama’s Windows**

Never a smudge  
on windows Mama washed daily  
and left cracked all seasons   
so air skittered across our foreheads.

Like being outside, she said,  
and right up close   
in the front row pew  
with nothing in between  
but our lives; such fragile souls

needed nourishment and a clear pane of glass  
that reflected us back to ourselves. Together  
we guzzled water straight  
from the garden hose  
when days broke one hundred degrees   
in mid-afternoon and bluegrass lawns  
stiffened into yellow brushes  
that bristled against our bare feet  
and water dribbled from our lips  
wet with words of foam  
and ocean waves.

**The Man Who Loved Paper Wasps**

angled the aluminum ladder  
into the shadows of his brick colonial  
as the sun bounced   
behind the earth’s curve. Red  
welts streaked the wasp-stung horizon.

Dusk called the moon  
into the sky as he stepped  
onto the first rung and sized  
up the paper wasp nest tucked  
under the eaves, up at the very peak.

The gray cells of the nest  
resembled moon craters, holes  
he could fall into if he got too close.  
Hand over hand he climbed,  
each rung a foothold in the June air.

All it took, he knew, was a shift  
of his body. In one unbalanced  
second, he could topple. A lethal drop,  
without the wings of a wasp to hold him up.  
He dared not look down.

He loved the wasp nest  
above him, the beauty of construction. Admired  
the workers who spun each paper cell  
from dead wood and their own saliva.  
The rested tonight, their wings folded.

At his own door, the wasps stung  
him more than once. On silent wings sucking  
the nectar from his sweet peas,  
nestled against the rusted cyclone fence.

The paper wasps would not hear the poison hissing  
in the air, the sudden spray of death.

**The Man Who Took Baby Steps**

backward arrived nowhere  
except places he had already been.  
He practiced twirling as if  
with the curved beak of his wingtips  
he might drill the soil  
deep enough for oil,  
for a gush of rich black-gold,  
for a slippery skin  
of wealth, an ooze of dark  
promise poured in cans,  
pumped in silver tankers,  
zoomed across mountains,  
cruised through apple valleys,  
direct to the Speedway station  
across Second by McDonald’s  
where the man who took baby steps   
stood on his tip toes  
by General MacArthur’s statue  
in the town square  
in the bed of pink petunias  
with one hand over his heart,  
his other waving to the girl  
who left him years ago,  
waving toward his lips,  
waving for one black kiss.

**Mare’s Tales**

I scratch my initials   
in earth’s crust,  
lose my fingernails  
in dust at the bottom  
of this sand hill  
I will climb  
and raise my arms  
in victory like the pine trees  
that flourish in rock.  
Roots dip deep,  
spread underground toward lakes  
while the circle of spruce  
holds up the sky  
with green-needled limbs,  
keeps it from crashing down on me.

I will stick to the path  
etched by others’ feet,  
ascend rock by rock through sand  
just as the wild horses do  
on this island where tourists tell  
tales of three mares viewed  
at the peak, silhouetted in moonlight  
when mist sweeps in and some say  
they are ghost mares waiting   
for a run with the north wind  
like me who years to gallop  
with them if the stories are true,  
if I am strong enough to hang on.

I count each step as I ascend,  
suck water from this humid air  
until I reach the top  
where I rest in trees,  
waken to pine and know I am  
not done with my journey  
when bark and branches beckon me  
upward to wear their crowns  
and hand over hand, I move higher,  
stretch in air  
where clouds of mares’ tails  
drop low, tickle my fingertips  
with white, wispy strands  
long enough and strong enough  
to wrap around my fist  
as I kick free of wood,  
dangle in air,  
wait for the rain.

**Marquette Under Snow**

I have come to the edge of winter  
where Lake Superior  
creaks in the cold snow blow  
jingle jangles a zigzag crack,  
its message of melt.

I stand in blur  
as a soft-bristled breeze sweeps  
across trees, dusts pine  
needles with blue-white flakes,  
a flash of light, the swish of tulle.

On my forefinger, I hold a fleck  
of snow as if it were a black-capped  
chickadee, a white-feathered wing,  
a fluff of down, a puff of snow  
poised in flight, illuminated by sunlight.

I swallow liquid snow,  
pooled in my cupped hand  
as warm water rises, vaporizes,  
hitchhikes in the belly of cumulous clouds,   
drifts around the world without me.

**Marriage**

Soup boils on the burner.  
Noodle numbers count  
fall limp  
onto ransom notes:  
Carrot pasted to potato  
slices sanity  
rises red or orange  
to slit night  
to rock moons  
to thrust words  
into crevices  
too dark for moans  
and vegetable words.

Vitamins  
throb at her temples  
as she scorches  
cotton collars  
and pays  
in unmarked bowls.

**The Mass Media**

Sitting  
there. A tall girl (or maybe  
small) with pointed nose and  
breasts pushing against her T-shirt  
shouting (whispering) in bold, black letters  
(faded slightly from the wash)  
DO NOT TOUCH.

Waiting  
for me, you, or anyone  
to turn her on (or maybe off)  
to some news flash of a foreign crisis  
(or even a domestic quarrel) that needs  
her intervention. She knows how to sit-in,  
stand-out, join-the-crowd while adjusting volume.

Wondering  
if she were alone (forever),  
would her tubes blow,  
spewing parts  
through the twenty-one inch screen,  
slashing passers-by (who stop to stare).

**Mata Hari Goes Undercover in Our Neighborhood**

Crouched behind Dad’s yellow Buick,  
my brother and I spied on Mrs. Valentino,  
guessing she could be an enemy  
settled in a safe house next to us,  
a double agent who wanted too much  
from men who rattled her screen door before  
they strolled right in with all their secrets.

Everyone in the neighborhood gossiped  
on hot Kentucky nights when her bedroom  
lit up, then darkened. Only my brother and I   
suspected she could steal our secrets,  
kill us and disappear in another small town  
where she might be safe from boys and men.  
Peeking in her open window, listening  
as her high heels clickety clacked on wood floors  
answered by the slush, slush slide of a man’s crepe  
soles and then, the sudden silence, heavy in the humid air.

At the dump that summer, my brother and I  
searched for lost diamond rings and buried treasure,  
maybe even all the cash from that Brinks robbery   
just one town over. My brother drew the map  
of most likely spots and we dug.  
We found a bike we fixed with a new chain,  
a picture frame and bones too small to be human.

As long as we could stay away from home,  
as long as we wrote the stories, we could  
escape our father’s fists and mother’s tears.

**Memorial**

Let me suckle at your breast  
of forgetfulness where milk gushes  
the geyser of life. I do not know

headless statues, craters or bronze  
plaques under falling bridges.  
No proclamations, declarations

preparations are enough. I can never  
recite the chronology of devastation.  
Too much, too long. Such causes crumble

brick by brick, stone by stone,  
word by bloody word. The portrait  
of now and back then. Way back

when death dropped a black cloth  
over our heads and held the shutter  
open. You know the acid bath

the acrid fumes I have not sniffed.  
No memorials to death. No leafless limbs.  
Just flesh and muscle. Streams of mothermilk.

**Midnight Shift at the GM Body and Assembly Plant**

No one ever says  
Hank is losing the touch  
or shirking the work, double now  
with shifts cut and machine cycles revved  
past capability, past endurance, past   
perimeters where metal and flesh fuse.  
No more

does his welding melt surface  
to surface or hold like lovers,  
limbs locked, navel to navel.  
Scarred at the very center,  
he cuts the cord  
again and again.

Belly full of fire  
burns blue  
as Hank’s anger. The hottest flame

after thirty years, his layoff.  
As if he can  
just switch off currents,  
forget the welding gun,  
the way it fits his hand,  
transforms his fingertips. Now

five torches blaze. Touch the robot’s arm,  
caress the steel joints. Patch  
broken parts with solder. Strong enough  
to hold against repetitive moves, against

vibrations that reverberate  
off factory walls, off scorched bones.  
Then burn to ash.

**Migration of the Monarch Butterflies**

You know the high price  
of the fog-filled hours  
as we wait for sun, wait for our body temperatures  
to rise. We prepare

for flight. Our bodies   
feed on fat, on thoughts   
we stockpile—our fuel  
beneath our flesh.

We are bound  
by our instincts, joined  
in our migration. Our destination:  
that small valley  
high in the Sierra Madre  
of middle Mexico

where the air is too thin  
for entomologists. They cannot  
track wingprints or see  
beyond violet.

I winter in these mountains  
with the Monarchs: millions of them.  
They perch in my hair  
dangle from my earlobes  
and brush against my neck. They settle  
on my shoulders. Their wings

paint the when and where  
of our return flight. We will  
mate in midafternoon, then  
lay our eggs on milkweeds.

Our descendants will rise up,  
rake the clouds with their wings.

**Missed Calls**

I didn’t hear you knock  
on my oak door. You know  
the type of solid rap  
rap, rap, two or three times with fists  
curled hard, pulled behind your back;   
then pound, pound until  
the frame splinters  
into sharp, slender wood,  
fragments that pierce your finger,  
cut dep as a memory  
you forgot to remember  
that day weeks ago  
you set your wedding ring  
on the top of our dresser,  
the shiniest circle  
among your loose change and  
you slammed that oak door tight,  
rattled everything left  
alone on the other side.

I didn’t hear my phone ring  
even though I kept the volume   
turned up to the highest notch  
but I answer it anyway  
just in case someone needs  
to talk to me, just me.  
You, my sister, are already there,  
about to call me about nothing  
important. Still your words  
rush over the long distance between us.  
You talk, talk, talk and talk some more  
about tomatoes in your garden   
red enough you will pluck them tonight  
red enough you might eat nothing else  
for days. I hear you  
over the rattle of  
blue-flowered plates and cups  
as you load the dishwasher.  
you won’t start until you’re done  
with your chat with me or until the kids  
run in from school full of news  
they don’t tell me, their only aunt.

I receive my mail every day  
from grocery stores where  
bananas are twenty cents   
a pound, where flyers urge me   
to buy ground round for the grill,  
corn on the cob for a discount,  
the more I buy the cheaper I get it  
all, even the plasma TV bigger than  
what hangs on my wall fed by cable  
I pay for every month for programs  
I don’t watch, not even the news  
with its bloody headlines that tell  
of a guy who shoots another guy  
who calls him some name he doesn’t really  
hear but all the same, he doesn’t like  
anyone calling him anything.  
I drop all the ads into the yellow bin  
for recycling, for making something new,  
maybe something with my name on it.

**Monarch on my Windowpane***For Nancy, who counts butterflies*

I do not see you land on glass,  
do not look up  
until you raise your wings  
above your back and lower them:  
three orange patches on your forewing  
bordered in black. You signal me  
with silent message flags, with eyespots  
where they aren’t supposed to be.

I cannot see how you roost there, how  
you cling as if held by silk threads  
from your caterpillar days. Invisible  
strands hold you motionless

against my windowpane. You stay still  
as my memories. My dreams hang moist,  
expand under this June sun  
and unfold into butterflies.

These butterflies  
carry the sky on their backs, move it  
from field to field, from day to night  
without letting it fall.

**The Moon Behind the Pines**

Just walk nice and straight.  
Put one egg in your shoe and one shoe  
in front of another as if you were taking  
gigantic steps. No, giant steps.  
No, humongous, slipping, sliding, flopping steps.  
Straight lines, angles, skating through  
velvet ropes. Simon says, “Find  
the moon.”

I see the moon. Big. Round. Orange.  
Sweet edges. All is sugary. You point  
a finger north.

No you don’t. The sky is empty. No moon.  
No stars. Nothing but darkness. No  
beginnings. No endings. Just emptiness.  
Look behind you. It’s just the reflection   
of our hanging light in the window,  
as if someone took a big bite  
out of the moon.

**Moonstone on My Finger**

You stare at my nudity,  
at my hands spread flat before you.  
My nails are polished clear.  
These transparent half moons arch  
into pink and grow toward night,  
reach backward.

You’ve been there;  
you are there still.  
Your hands tugged cow’s teats,  
firm, full of milk,  
emptied into pails at your feet.  
The moonstone, the one he gave you,  
mounted on a silver band,  
slipped over your knuckle,  
locked there on your left hand  
held then against the mare’s flank,  
both sweating in heat.

Inside your frame, hedged in rosewood,  
there is no room for breath. Like a Monarch  
butterfly in a mason jar,  
lid twisted tight, your  
face caught behind curved glass  
hovers above my brass bed.

I lie beneath you, translucent  
as the moonstone, worn down,  
barren for fifty years.  
My belly is flat as yours at nineteen.  
My fingers flexed and restless  
feel your ring. The metal touch  
tarnishes my skin, turns it dark  
as my inheritance from you, my kin.

**The Mourning Dove’s Missive**

We live in blue onion skin  
envelopes used for air mail  
letters to ourselves  
we sign with wing tips and quills

our feathery scrawl, our message  
scratched in blue sky, flutters  
this April morning as you teeter  
on knotted pine I split yesterday

for beams in my cabin, all wood  
brown as you, fertile with sadness  
birthing our blue song:  
“cooah, coo, coo, coo,” unrelenting

as we mourn the death of night  
full of ghosts, a circle of strangers  
and friends heads bowed, reading what  
life and loss swirl around us

land in our hands where we hold on  
another day transparent as our letter  
fades, glue dries, flaps open wide.  
I ride your white flash of light.

**Mourning Papers**

Uncle Ed reads the obituaries every day  
at breakfast. He will not eat a bite of toast  
until he knows who has slipped past him  
in the navy night, who has ridden  
the blue heron of death. It stands watch,  
on one leg, ready for his fall from life.

My uncle has seen the blue heron twice:  
once at noon when his tractor tipped him off  
and he lost consciousness and once at night  
when his heart stopped beating. He swears  
it is the same blue heron that returns each year  
and scoops up minnows from the shallows  
in Pleasant Lake. That heron lifts up,  
wings spread wide. Its legs are two fishing lines  
dangling in the blue sky. My uncle watches,  
shades his eyes from the harsh June sun.

**Musical Staff**

Sour note, Mother shouts. Her  
voice floats from the next room,  
catches in her unmade bed.  
Rumpled words, whiny   
as my violin, a string turned  
tight as the cat’s gut caught  
under my thumb.

My fingers   
slide between bridge and neck.  
I press   
hard to coax sound,  
cradle the bow,  
sink across b flats,  
c minor notes.

No major  
movements mar my  
mother’s breath, hot  
as pepper on my tongue.

The cadence set,  
we practice every note,  
every night. Under light  
too dim to read  
the score of lullabies,  
the book of songs  
is propped on the music  
stand.

I stoop; I drop  
my arm, my bow.  
I bite my violin,  
chew wood, swallow  
silent symphonies.

**Musical Warfare**

The bugler blows a wake-up call,  
dark and mellow as one ripe plum  
about to fall. That sound  
rolls out the tube. Note by note,  
reveille drips into a cupped ear,  
slides down the bone channel,  
straight to the heart. The soldier  
wakes to the ancient hunting blare,  
ready for the battle of brass winds.

The French horn player claims first seat  
in the symphony. Metal tubes  
spiral into circles. One deep breath  
travels through brass,  
transforms itself into notes.  
Listeners lean forward, hear  
that muted woodland song.  
The fawn drinks from a stream,  
as water flows and wind blows  
storm clouds overhead, a warning  
that war is about to begin.

Troops polish brass and silver  
until metal glints in sun, reflects   
musical scores. Lips vibrate  
into mouthpieces. Tubes resonate  
with tones. Pitches climb and fall  
in harmony. The battle  
flags unfurl from musical staffs  
like mountain roads wind to the peak,  
the final stop before descent  
into green, hushed valleys  
while the red sun sets.

The war of brass winds  
reaches back,  
sounds the hunting call  
through carved bones  
and the horns of elephants  
who won’t forget  
the bugler always  
plays taps.

**My Drawings Have No Relation to Reality**

A simple summer sun becomes  
a round head with arms cut off  
at the wrist. Nothing under the sun,  
not one person, not two trees, not  
three stick people who are my family.  
Just blue scribbles like waves  
or wrong-colored clouds crayoned  
below yellow on manila paper  
taped upside-down on the fridge.  
Not even the apples in the green bowl  
notice anything out of the ordinary.

Trapped on a glass slide, protozoans  
whip their tails, wiggle and fidget,   
my lab partner claims. But I do not  
see them through the microscope.  
These one-celled creatures split  
in half, create their own families.   
I draw only blackness before adding   
what should be there.

Doodles decorate every note. In every  
blank space I sketch hopeful hearts  
and purple violets. Every letter  
I write home contains nothing  
real about my life, only drawings  
of what will never be.

**My Doors**

Fish swim in   
and out my five open doors  
carrying messages, wet mysteries.

That catfish at my threshold  
suctions mud, purifies an entryway  
for walleyes with hypnotic stares.  
Large-mouth bass speak in code  
from a door above. A single minnow  
tows a line and a Sunday fisherman   
whose lips brush mine. The rush  
of lust dangling, bobbing  
in and out my doors as if I were  
the Detroit River, a channel to somewhere.  
The northern pike, round goby, yellow perch,  
black crappie, sucker, even the common carp  
bait me with a silver flash of truth.  
They spawn, feed, move on  
upstream, downstream. Some stay near shore.

Fish wiggle my maze of veins,  
open my sixth door. I see  
no doors lock. I am river.

**My Father Grew Dahlias**

“Nothing,” I told my father,  
“I want nothing.” For sure,

he wanted his job back before Christmas,  
wished his hands still tightened the vise,

operated the shaper, cut metal once more  
within tolerances. Layoffs bloomed

that hot summer in Detroit. Tempers split the humid air  
when work trickled in as if dripped from a leaky hose.

My father planted dahlias, one hundred tuberous roots  
and staked them against the whoosh of the west wind.

Soil lined our fingernails as we yanked weeds and father  
fed me Dahlia names: Blackberry Ice and Cherry Drop,

Candy Cane and Apricot Sun. He answered newspaper ads,  
hoped for a call back and deadheaded dahlias, whistling.

At first frost, the dahlias turned brown. My father predicted  
snow on Christmas. He tracked jobs, kept in touch and bought

nothing new. White flakes glistened like wet December  
dahlias. Petals of snow crystals piled up.

Out front and three houses down that Christmas day,  
my father had shoveled the walk. When I straddled my new

red bike and pedaled away, he shaded his eyes  
and waited until the tires rolled me back to him.

**My Grandson’s Preschool Assignment**

*Typed note: Fill this bag with pretty colorful  
leaves. Bring it to class Wednesday.  
Your Teacher, Miss Amy.*

The day the leaves dropped,  
higgledy-piggledy at the park, my grandson  
squeezed two maples and one birch  
in his bare hand, crumpled them to bits  
he threw in the air like confetti,  
pigments of marigold orange, red,  
dusty brown he breathed in when  
he heaped leaves over his head,  
over his green-leaf body.  
He licked dry oaks from his lips.

My grandson crammed the bag  
with crinkled leaves, acorns, two beach stones, a Canada goose  
feather and two pretzel rods,  
salted away for one more fine fall day.

**My Machine Project**

In my mind’s closest cave,  
I scratch dimensions on walls,  
calculate the speed of time,  
a linear line that stretches  
from past to present  
where I reside and mark my days  
as clocks tick. Alarms sound  
my wake-up call. I add numbers,  
subtract for loss, multiply minutes  
into round-circle days  
without end.

I sketch loops of my infinity machine  
with no openings for forgetfulness.  
My mind sees the possibilities.   
In my dark cave, my charcoal traces   
geometric shapes and how they fit  
together with straight lines,  
the shortest distance between   
what was, what is  
and what could be  
if there were no limits,  
no boundaries.

Others have been here before me  
in my cave, in my mind, in my muscles  
which remember another time  
when people crawled,   
then walked upright on green land.  
In my machine, I will take you  
back to the beginning  
where we started,  
where sunlight illuminates  
shadows we carry forward  
and backward through time.

**My Sweet Onion**

Ah, sweet Vidalia,  
my wild onion child,  
I watch your bare feet  
root in this Georgia field  
as your golden-brown legs  
draw nourishment from red clay  
days under sun, a harsh spotlight

as you twirl from row  
to row full of bulbs and seeds  
bursting through soil, cultivated  
by you whose grasshopper legs  
leap lettuce leaves nibbled  
by deer who eat from your hand  
when you whisper in their ears

your plans, the rhythm of your heart  
pumping visions of pirouettes  
on stage where you strengthen   
toes, muscles tough enough  
as you whirl along the side  
of your rented shack, performing  
for family who hum, play harmonica

while you, sweet Vidalia, ride  
each note until it holds you,  
a season of layers circled under  
your translucent skin no one  
peers beneath but you who know   
one day your body will be ripe,  
ready for northern cities, the dance

where you wear purple ribbons  
curling in your hair as you  
shed dusty skin behind footlights  
and stretch toward one sweet note.

**My Two Children Leave Their Childhood Home**

If you must leave this house,  
do it quickly before dust settles  
in my hair, before I grow old.

Take seeds from forget-me-nots  
by the drive. Plant them deep  
as you think of me raking our garden.

Don’t forget that chunk of quartz,  
that piece of driftwood you carted  
from the shore of Lake Michigan.

Remember our redbud tree blooms  
in full sun when purple leaves explode  
to pink. Still, some call it the Judas Tree.

Life is not all the peaches you eat.  
I ask you to watch your backs,  
cross at corners after looking both ways.

I grow toward you, you bend away  
as it should be when you leave.  
This house was built for me.

**The Nature of Vipers**

I was born on the dark side  
in the year of the snake.

When I slept coiled,  
my knees grazed my chin.

As I grew, I sunned myself,  
stretched in the arms of bad men.

I kissed the lips of cottonmouths,  
sipped their venom and whiskey words.

The gossips said I shed skin after skin,  
and tacked them on my bedroom walls.

Tales about me plumped with lies,  
spread across back roads where I rested.

In the heat of August days, I savored  
the true dangers of the raised rattle.

**New World Spices**

A small dark woman who had no words  
in English, only a pan on a gas stove  
where she whipped exotic spices into a frenzy

of ginger, cardamom, saffron, cinnamon  
that pinched my nose, tugged at the back of my throat  
burned my tongue with memory

of smells she dished out to neighbors  
along with the recipes her daughter translated  
into a new language we all spoke.

**Night Passage**

Stars lead me to the edge  
of Lake Superior where I find myself  
alone. Sand scrapes my bare feet.  
I step on stones, stumble on bottles  
full of emptiness, left behind  
on this beach where I curl my toes,  
scoop up mounds of sand. Each grain  
carves its message on my skin,  
the lesson of horizon  
where earth meets sky.

I baptize me in cold water, shiver  
in warm air. Draped in black night,  
I spot a Great Lakes freighter slice  
through the calm at a steady pace.  
The moon illuminates one side  
as if that vessel were a shadow  
of me steering toward a destination.   
In the Pilot House, someone else  
moves this night, awake in starlight.

When I look up from the horizon, I see  
all those stars, too many to name. The sky  
blazes with star gas. Celestial candles  
flame white and yellow,  
reflect the freighter’s water self  
as if it floated  
up from the bottom of the lake.  
Even the smokestack duplicates itself  
in sky and water. Smoke drifts to clouds  
above the horizon, marks my night passage.

**The Night Watchman and His Flashlight**

After the sun doffs its top hat. After it boogie-woogies across the slippery oak floor. After its patent leather shoes tip-tap out the grand finale…then, and only then…do we applaud daily at the Gem Theater when spotlights dim.

Two stagehands (one stage left and one stage right) pull the drapery cords. Hand over hand. Almost as if they can shimmy up those ropes, thick as their wrists. They strain against gravity until the tattered purple curtains, frayed at the bottom, drag the strings of our days across the unlit stage. Velvet seam laps velvet seam at stage center.

Smaller than the sun. Powered by four D batteries (negative and positive charges at opposite ends like a fable and a truth, linked by electric metaphor)—the night watchman’s flashlight. It is his only weapon against darkness on his appointed rounds when he tests outside security locks on exits. And yes, he checks the locks on the iron gate secure across the entrance.

The night watchman times his sunbeam flash to the second on his luminous, green, glow-in-the-dark, digital wristwatch strapped against his moonlit skin. Meticulously, he prints numerals and documents each time and date in log book columns lined with red. He, the bringer of light to night, believes re-chargeable batteries in his light of flash will never die.

A crash, a clang, a crinkle. The watchman flicks his flashlight on/off. On again. His light lines write their poem (or is it a story?) across the Gem’s brick façade. Inside no concern of mine, he mutters. Outside safe, he nods.

A skittering sound. Inside. A creature drawing close. Off again, his flashlight dangles from his fingertips. Crackle, slurp, crackle, slurp, bam, blast. The orange-blue fire within the Gem flares up and crunches beveled windows between its jaw. Then, ever so politely, this flame wipes its own burned lips with smoke.

On, on, on. He clicks the red button. Shakes the chrome cylinder. Four batteries hiss, release their charge.

The night watchman can not record the exact moment, can not log the date of darkness when the Gem turned inside-out.

Phantoms float, stick  
in his throat,  
damp, a bitter taste.  
Over the years, stalagmites  
grow up from the soles  
of his feet,  
pierce his heart  
where fish swim  
blind from lack of light.

He breathes hard, fast,   
hyperventilating, giddy  
with oxygen. He strikes  
matches. Sulphur burns blue.  
Sparks drop, catch again  
on cardboard cartons,  
rise to mate with diesel fumes.

He keeps watch. Alert  
behind bulletproof glass.  
He waits; hands fold in prayer.  
Floors explode. Geysers of fuel  
erupt into flames. Burn clean  
the night. His visions of light.  
The legacy of loss.

**Northville Convergence: An Architectural Landscape**

1820s: Settling In the Natural Way

A free place, a space  
of imagined shadows chased  
with light, with wind  
wiping air clean, whipping

through evergreens,  
branches brown,  
blue-green needles of spruce  
and oak, roots  
reaching deep into rolling hills.  
Cattails and weeping willows  
anchored in marshland.  
Nature’s architect sketched

possibilities. Logs, trees, earth,  
water, air: the stuff   
of life. Women, men and children  
came, claimed land,  
cleared their property. The Tibbits,

McFarlands, Starkweathers, Bartows,   
Phillips, Bentons,  
Simons, Hungerofrds: more than  
merely names. Pioneers who built

foundations, laid dupporting beams, shored up   
roofs, erected homes of heavy timbers. Frames  
for their existence, their comings and   
goings in and out. The sun, the phases   
of the moon their calendars. Days colored

by seasons: cyclical, rhythmic   
as their heartbeats, that pulse of blood,  
a natural way of settling in.

1830-1900: Truth Tellers

Churches rose from farm soil, homes  
of worship. Presbyterian first, then Methodist,  
Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran: arched doors,  
frames, bricks, stained glass. Geometric  
shapes of faith. Worshippers kneeled  
in aisleways, against the wooden pews,  
fingers touching trees and visions  
of what could be, would be  
as they tended  
crops of corn, orchards  
of apples. All truth tellers  
transforming wilderness. Rows   
and rows of wheat, hay,   
rye hoed and harvested. Stored  
in barns whose plank sides weathered  
over winters, swelled with water. Warped  
doors shaped themselves, skimmed snow,  
cleared paths for women gathering eggs, warm, white/brown ovals. Smooth/

rough buildings brick or frame, one   
story or two. Joined in rural  
celebration: a community at work.  
Houses, a school, the doctor’s office  
in his home on Main, a general store.  
Roads rutted from wagons and horses’   
hooves. Linked paths, packed tight  
from loads of produce,  
logs, and livestock, even  
people moving up and down steps, outside/

inside, entering/  
leaving one place for another.  
Mills processed logs, split  
into more structures. Victorian  
architecture: intricate carvings, parapets  
of stone, steep-pitched roofs, porches shaded  
by sloping eaves. Places where folks   
could talk and live. New building

plans with mystical rooms. Attics   
nestled under high mansard roofs,  
the double slopes, the angles.  
Basements, cemented  
in ground, strong as the White  
Mulberry on High Street. There  
for the duration. This hardy

stock of people, not afraid. They   
bred horses, thoroughbreds  
with lineages flowing back through  
history, across the ocean. Embraced

change and controversy. Workmanship,  
after a fashion. They carved moldings  
scrolled above their heads, up  
and down entry ways, leaded   
glass, windows shuttered, painted  
wood and stained walnut, mahogany  
and Black Maple. Dark

as their stallions standing guard  
against the night. Unbridled, unmounted  
moving muscle, poised for flight.

Form and function. From  
the Yarnall Gold Cure  
Institute on East Main, promising   
and promoting miracles, to Northville’s   
spring-fed well. They came

and drank. Silver Spring  
Mineral Waters bottled and sold,  
cold. Electric   
railway tracks down Main,  
past a grocery store, clothing   
store and all essentials. A blacksmith  
shop where fires burned hot, melted  
metal shoes. Lined up, eclectic

buildings, blends of this  
and that. Purity  
of Queen Anne arches,  
built to last. Studies  
in grace, simplicity.

A century closed, opened   
doors. Truth tracked through  
architecture; the story  
sung by warblers perched  
on gables, the highest peaks.

Early to Mid 1900s: A Gathering Together

Fire’s flames licked up houses, Park House  
Hotel, Globe Furniture Factory, other   
places as if they were  
ice cream cones melting  
on a hot day. The train picked up

dropped off people who came and  
went at the railroad depot, into/  
out of Northville. The old crow’s nest  
at Main & Center circled   
by crowds. They heard round   
notes of trumpets, drum beats, the whole  
band above them. Sounds wafted  
down, settled like cloaks  
around folks’ shoulders. People

came from nearby towns, stayed  
for fun. Pinned on blue ribbons.  
Cows, quilts, jams, cakes judged  
at the old Wayne County fairgrounds,  
in season. Just down the way,   
a tournament ski jump. All wood  
and snow. Layers of white winter, soft,  
slick and smooth enough. Ski  
tracks, ending at the end  
as skiers soared, their poles  
tucked like wings  
into air, before the jump

and landing. Whole families balanced  
spaces at several levels. Symmetrical   
lives linked by design. Interior/  
exterior mirror images like Spagy’s  
Grocery Store with shelves stocked  
and living quarters up above,

fully furnished. Modern ranches on the edge  
of town: brick, wood and aluminum siding,  
all shades. Builders or owners painted  
masonry light blue, green, white,  
yellow or left it  
bare in bottom line buildings  
exposed. Even cement shifted,  
cracked, required constant  
vigilance. Maintenance   
of contemporary styles, showplaces/  
showcases of new trends tracked

as closely as bets at Northville Downs  
where people came  
to win against the odds. They sat  
on bleachers, leaned forward, stood  
as ponies rounded corners, watched  
under artificial lights. Fluorescent  
against the night. They lost  
or won and came back again

drawn by neon signs, fast food.  
They hiked trails worn by feet  
before them, played in parks  
and streams. They wandered  
streets, shopped at Freydl’s, Schrader’s  
Home Furnishings, Lapham’s Men’s Wear,  
Ely’s True Value Hardware, Brader’s  
Department Store: all still run

by founding families who settled in  
and stayed. Some came for jobs  
at Ford or other places.  
The water wheel turned  
as they moved in, a gathering  
together. *The Record* headlines,   
and photo cutlines captured past,   
present, future: preserved in print.

1950-1994: Soul Sketches

Sketchers, artists all, drawing  
what they saw. Thin lines  
thick as their very hopes.   
They constructed dreams, homes  
of sleek lines, lots of glass  
and stained wood, set back  
amongst the many maples still  
standing, away from gravel/  
dirt roads. People traveled

from other places and spaces  
then and now, time restored.  
Old Victorians remodeled   
rewired, refurbished, renewed:  
all according to plan or luck  
or even sudden discoveries   
of what lay beneath after  
they scraped flaking, fading  
colors on dormers, on gingerbread   
trim, right down to original   
timberwood, cut and carved.

Transitions, transformations  
ticks of the eye. A ranch   
redone; now a beauty  
salon, specials listed  
in the picture window. Restored  
homes inhabited by attorneys,   
doctors, antique dealers, insurance   
companies doing business.

In the Center of town:  
the landmark clock emerged  
from the old crow’s nest. Park  
benches with hearts carved right  
where people’s shoulders leaned warm  
against the wood, a resting place.

From there, they could see up/  
down Main: the Marquis  
Theatre where actors/  
actresses practiced lines, listened  
for applause, cupped hands  
coming together, again  
and again. Or the yeasty smell  
of poppy seed rolls  
and loaves of bread baked daily  
at the Great Harvest  
Bread Company. Or Genitti’s Market  
Place where families ate, became  
parts in a play. A natural evolution  
from grocery store to restaurant.  
Singly and together people  
window shopped, entered/  
left stores with a range  
of names: Fleet Feet  
Sports two doors down

from Changing Seasons or up   
the other way, Cobbler’s Corner,  
Preferences, Orin’s Jewelers full  
of gems, cut carefully, polished, set  
to catch the eyes of passersby.

Northville looked bac, looked  
forward and captured time. The hour  
hand, the minute hand, days/  
weeks, even years converged:  
a single point where people   
strolled sidewalks, all the time

knowing who they were, where  
they wanted to be. In Northville.

**Not Knowing What**

to call those two birds  
by name, by species,  
indexed in field guides,  
lost alphabetically.

In the same way,  
your name melts  
on my tongue, tart  
as cinnamon candy. Red  
dye stains   
tongue and teeth.  
Our talks, over touch  
too tentative, too full

of nothing but  
sugar, spun at high speed,  
puffed with air, not enough  
to grab onto. Like planes,  
our marriage recycles oxygen,  
dry as old arguments.

Just that once,  
I spot them  
at the feeder, wings tucked,  
heads cocked like guns

before metal hits flint.  
Detroit on New Year’s Eve,  
near dusk. Their saffron crests  
burst brown tonight,  
two lone crocuses above   
snow. The whole world

upside-down, in flight.  
I see two  
birds, feel feathers  
brush my eyelids, listen  
for wings fluttering

against my lips, the sound  
of breathing in and  
out. Not even words,  
hard as sunflower seeds,  
can fill the spaces  
between us.

**No Use for Stones**

As a kid, I never even skipped  
one pebble part way across  
the blue plate of Cass Lake or  
sprinkled gravel on a mud pie or  
dropped rocks from the edge   
of the limestone quarry outside town and   
watched the silver circle lariats  
rope in anyone who dared swim there.

I will step off gravel walkways  
at the museum of wild things  
tucked away behind the Brookman  
Building which is about to tumble  
chunk by chunk into its own bowels.  
I walk on crepe soles  
and wear thick cotton socks although  
concrete blocks have barred my way  
and I have stumbled on a sidewalk pebble.

On this warm May afternoon,  
the skyscraper where I work  
spit me out into a blue-sky day  
with the sun still high,  
huge as any river boulder,  
shiny as a hunk of fool’s gold  
I might carry for luck  
until it burns  
a black hole in my pocket.

**Nighttime Meditation: A Woman and Her Tabby Cat**

This is a quiet poem,  
full of hush and purrs.  
My tabby cat claims the kitchen  
corner in the evening after supper.  
Her nose nuzzles her ginger paws.  
Black, cream and cinnamon hairs  
quiver as she surveys her territory.  
Her green eyes glare at a blue  
cup out of place on the counter,  
pierce me as I scoop  
tender ocean whitefish from a can  
into her blue, hand-painted china bowl.

Tonight, I am slow-moving,  
even contemplative. My steps  
to the chipped porcelain sink  
shrink in size as I think of all  
the news I refuse.   
At least tonight  
I will relish domestic acts  
of nourishment—the slosh  
of chamomile tea against  
my cup, the silence of dust  
as it settles on the TV screen  
and the ripple of bath water  
warm against my skin, soaking  
off dirt and stains I will not let  
color such a tranquil scene.

**The Odyssey**

People come at her as she lies  
woven into her narrow bed  
by spider-lines  
drawn tight against life’s loom.  
Transparent fibers bind  
her fresh-spun dreams,  
bring faces back again  
in the city’s oiled night.

It’s him, above her,  
coming back in darkness,  
his marionette arms  
pointing behind him  
at vacuous woman-faces  
sewed into her brain  
before he left her bed  
and chose  
grey-eyed girls with silver bodies  
to walk his soul past at midnight’s ledge.   
He talks to her of times they’ve known:  
 blackberry brandy years  
 when moon crickets  
 serenaded the sounds  
 of bodies  
 coming together.

She cannot close eyelids  
stitched open with spider-threads  
or move her flattened fingers  
from the tapestry  
to touch the flesh  
of those who greet her.

A childhood friend returns,  
older now,  
too old.  
Sunken breasts droop;  
the paper voice recalls:  
 worn Kentucky blue grass  
 between their houses  
 where painted dolls lost smiles  
in the rain  
as two girls snuggled together  
under crazy-patch quilts,  
talked of boys  
and flat chests growing  
into cupped hands.

Now her mother,  
dragging Father behind,  
kneels over her,  
murmurs magic chants.  
Onion skins, mosquitos’ wings,  
Circe’s voice, one black hair:  
the midwife’s cure.  
Two voices remember:  
 cypress knees skinned  
 on gravel swamp paths,  
 summer’s hair plaited  
 against autumn winds.  
 The child who was  
 before she came  
 in wedding white.

Morning light rewinds  
tangled threads  
and she rises  
from deathbed dreams.

**Off Days**

Every day, I take my place, set the pace so  
my students can teach me,  
make me know my grammar rules,  
mark my quizzes,  
argue grades, write my words, read my books,  
whisper comments, test my patience.

But then comes the day when schedules are short,  
bells buzz in the middle, students are muddled,  
and Alice enters Wonderland.  
On those days, I shake them up,  
leave the walls.  
They hear shoes in grass,  
find the smallest ant,  
rub dandelions into concrete.   
They dance in bodies  
freed from desks  
and speak in poems.

**On Reconnaissance**

I spot one woman’s coiffed head  
skewered on a fencepost  
beside an empty shack.  
No body. No extremities.  
Just a plastic head in this war zone  
jammed onto a rusted metal tube.

I curse whoever  
concocted this atrocity,  
this violent monstrosity. It could be me  
with brown hair, flipped at the end  
and querulous eyes exposed  
in this mannequin’s molded face.

Like me, this dummy occupies a space  
someone else chose. Could she be  
a warning, a woman   
in a morality play  
who lost her tongue  
spying for the enemy?

I cannot decipher  
the coded message painted  
in pink sunset on her lips  
turned up at the corners   
as if she knows the secret  
handshake for my safe passage

through this bloody world  
where I must wear camouflage  
and streak my face with mud.

**On Washday**

She tie-dyed her soul Monday  
and hung it out to dry  
on the thin, frayed rope,  
hung between two locust trees  
whose lacy shadows sewed themselves  
to dripping cotton, sagging in the sun.

Twisted rubber bands, knots upon knots,  
wrapped white spots bound tightly.  
Bleached blackness soaked scarlet.  
Jagged green lines wiggled the length   
as starburst golds stretched the cloth  
until it split, slightly, along the seams,   
opening itself for her inspection.

**One Closet in a Clean House**

I don’t like clutter, the blue sweater, too small,  
a hole in the sleeve and missing a button,  
the yoga mat I spread out one day and put away  
after the downward-facing dog position threw out my back,  
challenged my perspective about people walking bulldogs  
or collies or even Labs big enough to ride.

Into the closet willy-nilly, I toss the yearly letters  
from Aunt Tillie  
who complains I don’t visit or call just like  
my mother, she says, who ignored people  
related by blood and took up with strangers  
she met in dry cleaning establishments, bless her  
soul, dead now and probably lost somewhere.  
If I search, I may find my mother there in the closet.

Imagine a mishmash of books I never finished,  
words I can’t pronounce, criticisms that pricked,  
good-byes I never said, limp handshakes,  
the chipped cup from my Willow ware set, the only  
damaged piece after Grandma entrusted it to my mother  
who gave it to me and I broke a bit of blue from that cup that fills  
me with guilt since my daughter won’t get a full set  
of anything from me, not even the key to this closet.

This closet  
seeps under the foundation of my home  
and leaches joy away.  
Still I dust, mop, rearrange furniture  
in my tidy living room.  
Who knows when the doorknob of that closet  
will wiggle, when the monsters will break free.

**One Venetian Blind**

ivory as a piano key  
stained with blues  
on alternate Tuesdays  
at Alvin’s on Cass

where Sweet William  
thumped his life chord,  
his fingertips blunt,  
swollen with sound,  
curled down. Down

past yellowed keys  
slick with sweat,  
past morning and night  
that open-and-close death  
when his heart stopped,  
and he tripped

through the venetian blind,  
all slats tilted  
toward one perfect note

blue as the blackberry brandy  
he tossed back. Neat  
and clean, the kicker,   
his last kick,  
the bucket flying up  
and out of sight  
as his music kissed the wind  
down the long avenue,  
light flying into light.

**One White Petal**

Sibilant carnation—white   
against the preacher’s black lapel.  
Hiss as petal rubs petal. As petal  
tilts from his wool crepe suit, drops,  
drifts. That one white petal

descends, nestles now  
in the crevice between  
his parishioner’s breasts.  
She shivers having known before  
the pleasure of a petal

translucent as her skin—hush now.  
She is fluent in tongues,  
in one white petal,  
in preacher men  
who pray carnation tunes.

**The Other Woman: Three Lives Left**

I. Cats Die by Degrees

You won’t know her by her red hat,  
brim turned down, ribbon red around  
the crown with streamers half-way down  
her back. Nothing so blatant. No,

she won’t announce herself, won’t   
even appear in appropriate dress  
or undress. At least  
to you she won’t. She will

wear whatever suits her  
as long as it uncovers curves,  
serves her very self  
curled like a cat,  
tail tucked and wound around  
her paws. A furry mess

of claws, sheathed in pink  
mounds of skin, under cover.

She will not answer   
to any name or come  
when you call; again  
and again you try. She will remain  
lost. When you least expect it,  
she will stalk you. Watch for her. She will

arch her back.  
Each strand of her amber hair  
will carry electric currents,  
measured in watts. She will

weave her seventh death, in and out  
between your legs, shedding what  
she is and what  
she is not.

II. Cats Evaporate Eventually

You listen  
for the jangle   
of her collar bell. The jingle  
and tinkle of that cat, her rustling   
movement through weeds. You see

but not quite the way  
her muscles pull her   
hind end tight, then  
loosen. Her whole body  
solid as bone:  
a subterfuge. She will

avoid you. She will  
purr her curse. Quietly,   
she will lie still  
as your prayers rise  
and fall. She will wait

until goldenrod yellows. Its stalks  
grow straight up, ruffled  
by Michigan winds  
carrying the scent  
of winter: that acrid, musty smell

of deceit. She will wind her way  
down walkways in daylight, climb  
the Red Delicious apple tree,  
drag belly against bark. She will  
crush apples into cider, discard  
peels in the compost heap  
to ferment there  
behind your clapboard house.

She will rise  
from frosted ground  
like steam, a mere vapor,  
insubstantial as the mist, a fog  
that settles into your soul  
softly, cold as snow. You know

her by her fragrance, by the way  
your nostrils press toward bone,  
sucking in her breath. A battle  
for her eighth death: and even number.

III. Cats Count Number Nine

You pour   
her past life  
across the floor like white,  
thick, condensed milk.

She will lap it up. She will  
lick her own eyes closed,   
tongue rough  
against the truth:

you alone whistle  
knowing full well  
your lover, your mate  
left you both

before any of you came  
together. You came apart.  
She will

wander your yard in January,   
February: these hard months  
crammed at the beginning   
and ending of it all. In time

after the earth softens, you will  
dig her grave and bury her  
with all her lives, all  
her bells and a blue saucer  
filled with cream:   
thick and rich  
as your lover’s lies.

**Our Insignificance**

I capture this rectangle  
of black and white,  
as if it can be framed  
by my Instamatic camera.  
I freeze surface scenes  
but not what’s below,  
not what the next moment holds,  
not what develops in the acid bath.

A ship may sail on land  
if I double expose a frame.  
A businessman may strut the sky.  
Once I juxtaposed a city on a sea.  
When I blink, the city sinks  
and lands on sand. Yes, I am  
a magician of motion  
when the shutter clicks.

I shoot a strand of hair, a blade of grass,  
a handful of air. Life wiggles there.  
I see it move.   
I wave my wand,  
chant an age-old spell.  
All is frozen  
when I push the button down.  
I airbrush out the flaws,  
blow up what I want.  
Now you see it.  
Now you don’t.

No, I won’t tell you secrets  
of my tricks. I won’t   
disillusion you about clean,  
uncluttered places I have been.  
I have also watched the rush  
as city feet crack concrete walks.  
We embrace the magic of open space.   
We clench our fists  
when we recognize  
our own insignificance.

**Performance Art**

Women loved Oliver. Oliver loved women but not himself. Oliver edited his image, hired a PR agent. Olivia got her start pounding drums in an all-girl grunge band every Saturday downtown.

**Piano Keys and Peacock Feathers** *—for Zena*

The peacock’s beak vibrates  
against the strings of chicken wire  
as he pecks a tune up  
and down the scales,  
a piano concerto for peahens.  
The notes rush into the crowd,  
settle on wing feathers,  
stir the females’ grey-brown squawks.

The peacock arches his feet,  
saunters along the keys,  
a slow shuffle of ivory  
and ebony as his blue-green  
feathers glitter  
against the dark and light.  
He slides the sweet melody  
into the hot August night.

A frenzy of notes now,  
a flutter of sound loud,  
louder. The peacock screeches,  
rattles his tail feathers,   
dances on each key. Sage green  
hammerheads strike steel wires  
as the peacock  
sets sound free.

**Polar Bears at the Detroit Zoo** *—for Bradley who chose polar bears*

Don’t miss the Polar Passage,  
a new exhibit, a natural habitat  
where polar bears dive off the edge  
of Greenland into the Arctic  
Ring of Life. Their splashes  
streak the outer tunnel  
of arched glass where tons  
of cold salt water and white  
fur tumble past tourists  
whose feet shuffle along the floor  
and whose damp hands press glass  
curved beside them, hope  
a paw spreads out in answer   
as if no glass came between.

Before the zoo, these polar bears climbed  
stairs at the circus in Puerto Rico  
and slid down pink plastic slides  
as humans paid and cheered  
for more as the bears dwindled,  
lost fur, lost heart,  
and grew sick on heat-soaked days.

Before the circus, these polar bears romped  
in Greenland or maybe Alaska, in some faraway  
snowdrift where black-padded paws  
left footprints on glaciers. These bears sniffed  
seals below ice and kept vigil at the breathing holes.

If the major and minor bears exploded tonight,  
if the north star swam south,  
if the polar bears escaped unbreakable glass,  
who would tell them ice is melting everywhere?

**Petals**

Four separate seedlings bloom their beginning—  
one purple sweet alyssum close to the ground,  
a squat marmalade marigold, a hot pink impatiens  
with a white throat, and a viola dressed  
in five loose petals above heart-shaped leaves.

Above these flowers my sweet-faced,  
green-limbed grandson tilts his watering can,  
wants more leaves, more flowers, more  
life as water pours from the spout.

Five viola petals fall ever so slowly  
onto the black earth before he bends  
and picks up each yellow-orange petal  
and puts it oh so carefully in his pocket.

**The Photographer and Her Camera**

After completing a fine arts curriculum at an elite college in New York and purchasing the very finest camera and equipment money can buy, the photographer returns to her home state to create documentary essays: those mini-seconds of perfection when a person, place or object reflects back its very essence and everyone will applaud her work, buy it for their walls and make her rich and famous (unlike poets’ shadowed images buried in measured horizontal lines across pages with white margins in unopened books stacked on shelves in entertainment centers, part of living spaces, everywhere).

Not that the photographer has anything against poets. No indeed. In fact she admires their subterfuge, the way they blur real life with similes, as if any two objects can possibly overlap. She aims for crisp lines that delineate where one person starts and stops and remains contained within those lines.

She loads only fast-speed, black-and-white film and lets the viewfinder see. Piles up shots of herself, of places she goes, people she knows (or doesn’t know). Houses, cities, blue cornflowers in bud, weddings, deaths, newsbreaking crimes. Only she, the photographer, controls the shutter, the amount of light she lets in or filters out.

In her basement darkroom, she resurrects the images and washes them in chemical baths, saving the fixer for last.

She turns negatives to positives. Flips and crops what the eye sees. Enlarges. Shrinks. Finally, the photos emerge from their baths. Close-up portraits: her documentation. Each fine wrinkle, each split end, each pockmark, each patch of oily skin. In the name of truth.

No one buys her work. No one attends her gallery shows. She offers champagne and a toast: *mea culpa, mea culpa*, when my camera deceives and I believe.

The photographer and camera wait, its eye covered. No one comes. No one sees but she.

Later. Alone in her darkroom. Where no one knows: she superimposes, under-exposes, airbrushes flaws, tints black and white with color, erases any spaces. A master of disguise. Razzle, dazzle, presto. Ask them now.

They come. They buy. Their charge cards flash and twinkle. Secret codes and holograms. Plastic purchases. A clamor for tints that match their sofas: soft greens and golds and dusky blues. The photographer with camera draped around her neck never poses poets. She is rich now—and famous, recognized in every magazine.

**Poems Read Under Duress (Japanese Puzzle Box)**

I look into the semi-circle and see  
sketched on foreheads, chins, and cheeks  
plump golden babies like cherry blossoms  
overflowing mothers’ arms,  
green-robed fathers picking yellow mums  
and geisha girls with downcast eyes.

So many Japanese puzzle boxes  
painted and lacquered   
daring me to find the crack,  
open the box  
without a key  
slip out the drawer  
hidden underneath.

I probe, poke, and pry until  
a drawer springs open to my left  
a lid flips up in the middle  
and I stuff in verbs of being and doing.

Auden, Sexton, and Plath leap  
into velvet-lined boxes;   
neatly stacked ideas  
slide through cracks  
expanding the dimensions,  
exploding the sides,  
and class begins.

**Poets**

like plumbers aren’t blinded  
by porcelain and veneer.  
They get to the guts  
wrench in hand  
twist copper screws  
and rubber washers  
pluck out  
crimped hair and bits of fluff;  
even the metal matchbox car  
is snaked through curves  
as cesspools drain  
and clean voices  
gurgle upward.

**Pond Dipper**

One drop of pond water  
unveils the world  
rippling on a glass slide.

My microscopic eye magnifies  
a star-shaped colony of green  
algae floating free.

Under fluorescent light, one  
cell releases oxygen I inhale,  
lifts me from my land-locked life.

I blink as crimson, emerald, yellow  
spheres and lines paint my slide,  
a portrait of my life I cannot refute.

Come look, my love, we can begin  
again. Our dreams wiggle, float  
us back in water to our other selves.

We survive as larvae, move to nymphs  
and buzz now like dragonflies released  
to air, hovering in our scientific world.

Let’s land on a lily pad, rest  
as buds form, burst to pink.

We need not measure days  
in numbered slides preserved. We can  
file them away, forgotten in metal drawers.

Let’s track our childhood to the pond,   
dip our nets in murky water,  
scoop tadpoles into our wet hands.

We will start again as we did back then  
while we watch with naked eyes  
as water bugs skim the surface.

**Power Lines**

Mostly I looked up  
tongue out, ready  
for the slurp  
of snow or sun,  
the turn and churn.

All us kids knew  
how power lines  
could break and fizz,  
strike like snakes. I crossed  
under the one over Oak Street  
for four grades and in fifth,   
a gull’s wings flapped it up,  
up, straight up.  
I wanted  
the frazzle of light,  
the burn,  
the drop of voices falling  
from phones, the loss of light  
and power,  
the dark threat  
the gull would drop  
but the gull was   
some boy’s white sneakers,   
hanging from the power line.

Wind blasted those sneakers   
dust brown, nudged them  
a bit down the line.  
I never saw them drop.

**Power Outage at Christ Cathedral**

before my friend’s funeral  
in the midst of zigzag fires  
doused by thunder boom

bang and shock  
a pronouncement of another  
visible fire in the sky and another

the vestibule door closed out  
a heavy oak slam soft candle   
light, flares of sangria flames

burned down filaments of finely  
spun fibers encased  
in tapered white beeswax

the stained glass window  
arched with the Ascension  
bits of burgundy, saffron glass

blue and white sky whisper  
my friend’s whiskey breath  
coiled invisible in my ear

**Proof of Existence**

I notified everyone   
that you are  
gone from our house.

I told them you don’t live  
here or anywhere anymore,  
asked them to remove your name.

Still you get offers  
for golf vacations, credit cards, sweepstakes  
numbers that will change your life.

I have given up hope  
that customer service will correct the records  
or certify your legitimate absence from life.

You fit their demographics of a senior man  
retired with money you haven’t spent  
on leisure activities they advertise.

You have traveled somewhere out of reach  
and left me to deal with all your mail  
that has no return address listed anywhere.

Envelopes slide through the slot every day,  
spread across the slate floor, flaunt your name  
as if I don’t know what I’m talking about.

**The Psychiatrist and His Coffee Bean**

The psychiatrist is a sensitive soul who wants more than anything to cure his patients of the poetic delusions, contusions, confusions, illusions they confess only to him. He listens, observes, distances himself: a scientific man sifting fact from fiction.

Nonetheless, the psychiatrist weeps at night in dreams of those who enter his office, pay his fees faithfully as they kneel before him and offer words and stories on silver trays like cups of coffee he drinks black to get them through their days.

One night the psychiatrist cannot sleep, even with his down comforter pulled to his chin, even when he recites the text of Freud and Jung and even Skinner, word by word. He turns on the bedside light, gets up and paces back and forth in his locked bedroom. He knows the signs of too much caffeine: the thumping heart, unnatural alertness, restlessness, sleeplessness. Back and forth, he paces, faster and faster. Leaping, almost galloping, and cursing his addiction that wakes him. The coffee bean.

The coffee bean. That’s it, the psychiatrist knows the reason, the tool of any scientific man anywhere. He brings in the tall tropical shrubs. Frames the hypothesis. Inspired by logic, he works fast and soon over three thousand coffee shrubs grow from the dirt he dumps on all his floors. Everywhere. Coffee beans and more coffee beans. He fertilizes with fish bones. All flourish in his light. Beans ripen and burst.

The psychiatrist’s patients advise him not to roast or grind or drink these coffee beans and he listens. Patients visit him at home, now, cured of what they never had. They fill pails full of the dark brown beans, bathe in them, sniff the pungent smell, lie down on beds of beans and fish bones that shift beneath them.

The psychiatrist and his patients sleep through the longest nights as poets string rosaries of coffee beans and count their musing prayers.

**Pushed by Passion**

Aunt Violet loved the smell of dirt,  
the way it felt, the way it crumbled in her hand.   
She said it reminded her of sex.

Aunt Violet raked her flowerbeds   
clean of rotted leaves and fallen twigs  
while she inhaled the fertile, woodsy odor.

On her knees, Aunt Violet planted marigold seeds  
plucked from the frosted stems last fall  
just before the earth turned white as her bed sheet.

Back near the corner of her blue house, Aunt Violet  
inhaled that first bit of green: a row of slender leaves  
in sunlight, open to catch the aqua sky and rain to come.

Aunt Violet knew how those leaves had burst from bulbs,   
how they had licked nutrients from dirt. Those leaves  
wiggled upward, pushed by passion to reach the light.

Aunt Violet rose from the ground, her knees brown  
with dirt, her flesh hot and sweaty. She had waited  
months for the vernal equinox, for that musky smell of love.

**The Puzzler**

At three, my son chewed edges  
of the world,  
each continent constrained  
by the puzzle frame he carried  
under his arm before he dumped  
whole countries on the living   
room floor, crossing all boundaries.

He knew the world was flat, full  
of colors, capital cities and land  
surrounded by blue oceans and seas  
stamped on paper, pasted to cardboard.  
Each piece fit  
in its designated space unless  
he lost an entire continent

under the love seat where mice  
gnawed at a peninsula,  
left teeth marks in mountain ranges.  
He was not afraid of walking  
off a precipice or clutching North  
America or South in his pudgy hand  
for he was king of where

everything belonged. He believed  
puzzles were nothing more  
than toys, something he could  
figure out, put together. Even when  
all pieces turned upside down  
with gray backs up, he spotted   
shapes he could flip up at will.

At seven, he spun the globe,  
knowing he could fall off anywhere.

**Rabbit Tracks in Snow**

In the night forest there are no shadows.  
No stars have fallen, no moon-  
light slips past summer oaks.  
Maples lean into each other, shake  
love’s embrace loose and kiss  
green. Then the blaze of red-orange,  
a final blast, an explosion of loss  
puffs into clouds before the drop  
into brown. Broken on fertile ground.

Even rabbits do not mate  
in January snow crunch.   
Ice shivers the trees,  
brittle as young lovers  
with hope before they break.  
They fall through sky—  
two lost mallard ducks shot  
out of season.

**The Rain Goddess Speaks**

The words of the rain goddess harden,  
cut through the night,  
gnaw at wood above the women  
gathered in prayer, their heads bowed.  
Words drip down their temples,  
into their ears, onto their lips  
as the rain goddess speaks:

Lie down in dry riverbeds.   
Let hazelwood cool your breasts,  
divine the bloodpools.   
Burrow through sediment  
until fish rise to meet you.

The armadillo woman stirs  
cactus flowers in gin  
and drinks sand  
until edible prickly pears  
sprout from her fingertips  
and she touches peyote visions:

Hear the coyotes howl the moon  
from your hands  
call forth the spirits  
to dance with you  
on burial grounds  
and feast on mesquite bread.

The scorpion woman  
creeps into the badlands  
twirls in her dress of dust  
touches shoulders, cactus cheeks  
of men who dance on the mesa  
rock beneath their feet.  
She curls in trouser cuffs  
drinks her venom  
until she sees:

Look for the bones  
ivory in moonlight  
string them on grasses  
encircle your waist  
give birth  
to the west wind.

**Reaching Toward the Top Shelf at   
Sam’s Used Books**

Somewhere in the last row on the top shelf in the far corner   
Sam shelved a book. Back where he never dusts cobwebs   
form a lattice, open spaces between spider threads.  
Gnats, long dead, dance in silver threads brushed by wind  
when the back door opens. I stand, stretch, reach for  
the books, red and blue and black, stacked one against one   
tight together, upright, titles turned outward for reading.  
It’s there, I know, somewhere, with the others buried  
by words and phrases and sepia pages waiting for my touch.

**Reconciling the Dichotomy**

In your vegetarian phase  
you refused  
a fried egg for breakfast  
with its eyeball bulging  
as if it saw you had not done  
geometry homework due that day,  
had not followed your “no sex” pledge  
when Tommy kissed you hard  
in the back seat of his ’99 Buick.

Someone plucked that egg from its nest.  
Not me. No, I could not steal  
an egg warmed by hen feathers.  
I admit I cracked the fragile shell,  
discarded it with a flick of my wrist.  
You could not bear such loss.

Now you meditate, seek balance  
of all things good and right. You resist  
the counterweight that tugs like gravity.

**The Recovery Room Nurse**

I am the white rustle  
who whispers your name.  
Hear me call for your return  
from the bottom of Lake Pleasant,  
from your bed beneath the surface  
where currents cool your body.

The tips of my two fingers rest  
on the inside of your wrist  
where your pulse beats against your skin  
and mine. I count and chart your heartbeats  
as you kick toward air. I am afraid  
your lungs may burst on the way up.

I will monitor your vital signs,  
serve as your guide back to this room  
painted sky-water blue, the color of veins.  
I, too, have been in that watery place,  
that womb of forgetfulness. You cannot stay  
in that amniotic sac you abandoned years ago.

Your eyelids flutter like white seagull wings.  
You mumble fish words that wiggle beneath blue.  
You have escaped the seagull’s sharp beak.

**Red Lava**

The fire goddess speaks in flames,  
flicks her tongue against our cheeks  
warm with August sun. We hear  
blood pulse through our temples  
as she warns of fire days to come.

Come to my subterranean cave.  
Lie down in my chambers.  
Cool your fevered heads.

She sears that boy’s sullen lips  
with a lover’s kiss as he lip synchs   
cuss words that pound his ears, a rap  
song full of drugs to numb his soul.

Climb down my blue ladder.  
Rest awhile on lavender steps.  
Beware of the fall into red lava.

She blisters that woman’s ringed hand  
with her fingertips as the woman turns  
and punches a number into her cell phone  
and connects with an answering machine.

Fall into the circle of my arms.  
Let flesh touch flesh as we embrace.  
Ride my swirl of thick, red passion.

She welds together that woman and that man  
with her blowtorch hand as they stand  
face-to-face and argue about the cost  
of divorce, the price of severance.

Let your furies flow with mine.  
Whip them until they boil and burn.  
Stir our caldron of anger and jealousy.

The fire goddess raises her arms  
as we kneel at her feet. Red lava erupts,  
bubbles hot. Underground ovens melt rock  
and the red mass overflows all boundaries.

Dive deep into your passion.  
Touch bottom with your feet.  
Brand your soles with my mark.

We ride the crest of the lava flow,  
grow giddy with heat as all burns  
and cools to black rock. From cracks   
in barren ground, we rise like smoke.

**Refrigerator Note**

If you were magnetized, you too  
would stick to metal doors.  
Spread-eagled. Stretched between

magnetic poles, positive  
and negative pulls. Two frigid points  
opposite, both arctic circles. Both  
yank and tug.  
Your soul cracked,  
two halves of a peach

pit revealed. The very core,  
the seed that grows like the note  
you left on the refrigerator. Last night,

you ran out. Out into early October snow. Your way  
illuminated by the hunter’s moon full  
of footprints that puffed up the balloon   
above. Your tracks imprinted   
deep with frozen edges, sharp  
yet smooth as your green rubber boots

I could track. I could read  
the signs along your trapline,  
plain as your note   
that I shredded, scattered

throughout the house. Words  
clung to my bare feet. Last night  
my callused soles bled  
a trail of phrases  
across emerald wool carpet.

In corners   
of our rooms, your words  
took root, germinated  
into full sentences.

I erased vowels, soft sounds  
round as the moon’s phases. Even  
then the curved moon cradled your consonants.

Your words rose up from paper  
like so many tulips. Old wounds opened  
in the day of light. Your voice  
vibrated against walls.  
Metal to metal.

Only the echo of you remained. You  
who left last night, who would not   
listen when I called your name.

I rolled your sound  
around my tongue, savored its taste  
when it burst, sweet  
as a single Concord grape. You

who are no more now than a stain  
on the refrigerator door.

**Refusing to Say Grace**

Supper hour slips through her fingers  
slick as rosary beads. She counts  
husband, son and daughter,  
mouths open. Tongues ladle words,  
dip deep into days,   
scoop up scenes, serve  
chewy as meatballs.   
Well done

as if they do  
know how  
bread crusts crumble  
in dry air. They swallow  
water, flush body cavities  
clean as the tablecloth  
washed by hand and spread  
before them.

Not the knife, the fork,   
spoon. They lie  
still, stainless,  
their future forged  
in heat. She sweats

opening ovens, stirring pots  
boiling over onto electric burners  
where bits of food flame to ash.

Dab ash on foreheads, shape the cross.  
Their bodies, each a mass;  
arms extend, reach  
for rolls or meat or bowls  
full of succotash, specked  
with hot peppers, red  
as a reminder. Yet,

her son will not say  
grace or bow his head  
for anyone or anything,  
not even for her, anymore.

He believes  
he dies  
in dreams   
every night and wakes

early, trusting only   
what he bites off, crushes  
between back molars  
for sustenance.

**Rehearsal**

If I had two months of life left

would I sprout and send down roots  
deeper and deeper in search  
of water and divine  
the blue, cool voice of wetness

or would I just float paper boats  
in muddy sidewalk puddles  
where sparrows dip their beaks?

I could assign tasks  
of this and that  
so friends distract themselves  
by clipping cotton strings  
from this rag of life  
wrung dry of their tears.

Could I find something better   
than driving the freeway  
the same route every day  
which ends when I slam the car door  
and elevate to the 15th floor  
where my fingers dawdle over keys  
reluctant before turning locks  
needing oil. Still  
jagged metal fits jagged metal.

I shall choose. I shall   
scratch in cracked, brown clay.  
With dust under my scarlet nails,  
I shall make my mark  
and brace for wind and water

in my garden until my soul  
balloons from my toes and fingertips  
and blooms a meadow of blue chicory  
and Queen Anne’s Lace  
before scattering its seeds.

**Relativity of Roots**

There is no history of me  
who came late to this family,  
asking questions, begging  
names of those who came before  
who had not claimed their spaces  
in empty boxes, arranged symmetrically  
on both sides of my family tree.

The full moon of the falling leaves has come  
and gone. I enter the sweet time   
in this woodland where the sap runs  
in the sugar maple trees, where strawberries ripen,  
stain the earth red with blood,  
a reminder of the strings, the binding  
of all living things, the cycle of my life.

My path records the tracks of those who walk  
the twisting trail, circling ever inward   
to the center where we all have been  
when we discover who we are  
and out again to where  
strings dangle in black space  
as if no one knows the end.

The world cracks in half but no one hears  
the breaking. The chasm is the proof.  
I understand the buoyancy of emptiness.  
my history is yours. All we need  
are clouds of eagle feathers  
roots thick as string  
one green, green thread.

**Reluctant Eyewitness in the Florida Keys**

I will testify in any court,  
tell the truth about what I’ve seen.

Your black eyes pin me in my place  
like a moth you study in a locked case  
where my arms flap against glass.

Your tented lids droop over green eyes  
that recognize women do what they must  
when the undertow drags them down.

You hide your eyes behind glass and skin  
as if you can not see that I might be  
the mother who killed her children.

Your fearful eyes fill with blue-green ocean  
yank me in where I can drown  
unless I take a breath and swim to rocky ground.

Your eyes smile and turn my image back to me  
so I can see my innocence rise into the air  
on the backs of seagulls, white feathers everywhere.

You are the madman with the onyx eyes  
of night who labels me unworthy  
of living in this day of light.

you do not suspect  
I have drawn your many eyes  
for evidence. I carry you with me  
when I go  
just as you have  
etched some part of me  
behind your eyelids  
for safekeeping.

**The Remains of Living Things**

I have come to find the dinosaurs  
lost under all this desert sand,  
nestled in bedrock along the arroyo.

I hope for an egg: unbroken,   
fossilized. A life interrupted  
could fill my right hand.

If I could turn rock to flesh, I would  
birth one green dinosaur  
who would shelter with me under the Joshua tree.

Here we would weave baskets from yucca leaves,  
sing “whit-wheet” with the curve-billed thrasher,  
wish the coming and going were not permanent.

I, too, have paced this arid land,  
heard the dark wings of the nighthawk  
at dawn, grabbed for one black feather.

**Remains of Summer**

Brown crumple of what was once   
red zinnia petals now crinkle  
crunch under the gardener’s boots  
already coated with mud  
zapped by lightening in last night’s storm.

In her mind’s eye, the gardener conjures up  
a wisp of smoke, curves it  
into her lover who left before the first frost  
crystals froze the cutting garden  
into shriveled stalks and dead flower heads  
bent over puddles of fallen leaves.

She rakes her raggle-taggle garden,  
hacks at clods of clay,  
buries what remains.

**Remedies**

Indian summer finally comes to the mountains,  
heralded by rain crows reading the sky’s palm.  
(Three days’ sun, one rain.)  
Their gypsy throats swell with sound  
like her hands, large with knowing   
tomatoes ripe on the vine, the midwife secrets.

The medicine man will come,  
she knows,  
bringing spring tonics in autumn,  
drinking pokeberry wine  
against winter’s rheumatism  
saving some for her  
whose knotted hands reach inward  
to count the rings,  
set the time of coming and going.

Her healing herbs dwindle in Mason jars,  
sons and daughters no longer hunt roots  
or white-painted salvation at Calvary  
where voices rise in revelation.

Cornfields lie fallow,  
barn planks rot,  
no one eats hominy  
or plays gourd banjos  
anymore.  
But, once, wild roses circled hemlocks.  
Comfrey roots sucked out chest pain.  
Pennyroyal banished night chills  
before the harvest dance  
where her hair unbraided  
and she walked with stars.

Her hooded eyes watch for the medicine man  
to find the path,   
take her hand in his,  
spoon catnip tea between her lips  
until she sleeps.

**Reunion Sunday at the Methodist Episcopal Church***Keweenaw Peninsula, Michigan, July 2005*

My great-grandfather’s bones remain  
at the bottom of the deepest shaft,  
in the farthest tunnel where  
Cornish miners once chiseled copper  
from the black rock walls  
of the Victoria Mine.

I have come to remember him,  
a man I never met,  
and other miners  
who once walked beneath the earth  
in hobnail boots with worn soles.

As the preacher tells  
their stories, I listen   
for the cadence of their lives,  
the lilt of their picks tap-tapping  
and the slam of hammer heads  
breaking up copper chunks   
that fall to the dirt like so many   
renegade orange-red suns.

My great-grandfather lost his way,  
some say, when he traced the purest,  
the richest copper veins to their source,  
a place where other men had not been.

Others claim he chose  
the underground where fires  
fueled his rage  
when companies walked away  
from the open mouths  
of mines and bent men  
and all foundations tumbled  
onto hard, hard ground.

On the last Sunday in July,  
I listen for the silence  
of my great-grandfather’s pick.

**Requebra**

The drumbeat thumps in our chests,  
a second heart pumping rhythm   
through arteries no longer clogged  
as we march, black heads held up,  
bodies twitching to the beat  
of four hundred feet that move  
as one in the Bahian Carnival.

Hear the cotton-candy melody,  
the sweet sound as bodies rub together,  
skin to skin, mouth to mouth  
breathing in and breathing out  
the mating call. Move your herky-  
jerky butt in tune, grind your body  
into mine. Strip down to basic chords.  
The drums, guitars and keyboards hit notes  
of red passion for who we are,  
of gold glitter reflecting sun,  
of green grass where life is good  
through night as black bodies merge.

Requebra vibrates from dawn to dusk,  
our song of celebration, our battle call.

**The Rio Grande Gorge in Summer**

This is the season of suicide  
when young women leave their men  
alone without any offering, without  
even a note scribbled on lavender  
paper. It is their words  
echoed by the owl: who, who  
who will find the open space  
tucked between red rock lips?

Who has seen the stepping off,  
heard the pebbles crumble? Not you  
who reads the story twice. No  
you step back from that ledge  
from the gap-toothed grin of men  
who have nothing to lose, not  
even you. You would have left  
a letter with scratched-out words.

**The River of Us**

Gaze long enough at me  
You see yourself. You  
Lead me to blue  
Where pieces of sky  
Plummet into Stony Creek.

Your arms are bare. Blue rivulets  
Flow under your skin, warm currents.  
You dip my finger into blue  
And I touch liquid green.  
We reach for white, those strands  
Clouds leave behind  
When they rise moist.

Look there. That heart-rock  
Plump with age-old mystery.  
All those river rocks in bed  
Lulled by dragonfly buzz.  
We stroke lichen sun drops,  
That line of green-yellow fur  
On the blue rock road.

Come let us soak  
In wandering waterways,  
Our toes gripping river rock  
As all that wet murmurs  
The ancient blue-green song.  
Who we are.  
Who we will be.

**Rock and Roll Never Forgets**

“I want to go to a Bob Seger concert.”  
-- *First words of Evie, a 79-year-old woman when she  
came out of a five-year coma (from* Michigan Live, *4/13/2013)*

Two baby bluebirds  
burst from Evie’s throat  
last week. No one saw  
their wings spread, carrying  
globs of black tar, gasps of nothingness,  
round neon balls, green flashes  
of regret. Those blue feathers  
zig-zagged past her,  
over her sleeping aide and nothing  
changed. Machines continued beeping.

For days, Evie scuttled across   
the ocean floor, a crab without a shell.  
The slush of sand shifted, tainted the silence,  
grains nestled under her big toe. Ruffled fins  
of orange fish tickled her neck. She stayed stuck  
with the guitarfish wiggling over mud flats,  
volcanoes biding time before letting loose.  
The sea urchins waited to strike  
with their poisonous spines. A whole world  
she had never known. Here she breathed   
in and out without drowning. She belonged  
with the speechless. All living   
creatures made space for her and  
water held her back.

Her squinched eye spotted an RCA red plastic  
radio on the bedside table next to a wrapped straw  
and the cord stuck into a wall plug somewhere.  
Her parents gave her that radio  
when it was new and she had kept it, listened  
to the music, especially the oldies, the rock and   
roll of her youth. Her voice had not whistled  
with Little Richard or Elvis for years.  
The drone of news and no news  
plugged her ears. She had not wanted  
the ugliness in the world marching in.  
Her aide turned the dial to rock ‘n roll.  
Evie heard an explosion, a rush of red.   
Blood roiled inside her like an ocean.  
She raised herself to her elbows.  
Bob Seger lyrics screamed,  
“If you need a fix  
come back baby.”

**Rock Crushes Scissors**

You always knew I would choose  
paper, fingers splayed,  
right hand turned down. My loss  
as your two fingers opened   
and closed again and again,   
scissors cutting me in two,  
making me go last  
in every children’s game  
we played when we were young.

In class, my pencil swished across  
paper. Words dipped and rose above,  
below and on the lines of my messages  
to you who never read or heard what  
I said as if my hand in air spoke  
of all I was, all I could be.

You ran with scissors, never  
afraid of falling  
under fist-sized rocks  
that could poke out your eye  
or bloody your nose for you were  
you and you were always first.

Over the years, you honed your skills  
into fine points,   
yelled sharp-scissored words  
at me, now your wife  
during this cutting time.  
You were promoted at work,  
yelling all the way at everyone   
who disagreed and you got things done  
but not enough. You climbed faster.

You clenched your fist, a wrinkled rock.  
With your rock, you crushed  
scissors and people who worked for you  
as your company went bankrupt.  
White-knuckled, you fought the balance  
of audits, of lawsuits, of me.

Paper was more malleable than rock.  
You heard the crinkle as it wrinkled  
into ball, folded into swan, floated  
on air currents, settled to ground.  
My paper covered your rock.

**The Roto-Rooter Guy Snakes Out Two Alligators**

Sarah next door tells  
Mary across the street  
and she hollers   
to Tom on the corner  
who warns me  
since I’m on my own  
on the hottest day in June  
on this street of married couples.  
As I run with the rest   
to Bobbie Jean’s house,  
sweat pools between   
my breasts as they bobble  
and sway and settle   
only when I stop and stare  
dumbfounded as the Roto-  
Rooter guy sucks up   
the second albino alligator,  
drops it onto the brittle brown grass  
while the first alligator opens its jaws,  
yawns and rolls its red eyes  
at our squeals, our yelps  
when we jump back,  
snap photos on our cell  
phones and punch in TV news tip  
numbers. All of us  
want to tell our story in headlines.  
We dream of our brave faces  
plastered across plasma TV screens  
in every living room, on every street  
in this nation. We want  
viewers to frantically flush their toilets,  
search wash tubs and yank up sewer covers  
as they hunt albino alligators everywhere.

**Round Sounds**

I’m squeezed somewhere between here and yesterday  
with a mother’s pinched lips and dilated pupils.  
Standing in the bathroom, I  
brush my teeth  
to stop the screams –   
round sounds magnified by the mirror  
as I pluck my eyebrows and draw the lines.  
Filling in spaces, I   
define shapes  
to make my face,  
a connect-the-dots picture in a coloring book  
that my daughter has not yet completed.  
Clutching the crayon, I  
press hard,   
retrace the lines.

But she’s drawn her own circle-lines  
with blues and yellows on cheap manilla paper.  
She resists my attempts  
to add her dots  
completing my self.

**Rub Out**

“Bring me the floor plan,” Gina’s boss shrieks, “and all the gum erasers you can find. Right now.”

“Call me despot of the high-rise, will he? That puny accountant.” A flick of an eraser and his name disappears. “I own this building.”

“Don’t,” Gina pleads. She loves that puny guy who is no more.

“This guy, too,” the boss chuckles, rubbing holes in the plan. “All the men gone.” The boss points blood-red, tapered nails at the survivors’ names: all females.

Gina dumps the empty eraser box. She draws the eraser hidden in her bra.

Rub-a-dub, her boss’s name is gone.

**Run, Brotha, Run**

Friend been snitching  
to the big guys  
how you study them books,  
how you ace them tests  
too hard to pass  
and most of all  
how you stays to yo’self.  
Yank on those Nikes.   
Run, Brotha, run.

Baby sista past all savin’  
now she done been sniffin’  
stuff up her nose, payin’  
for it and buyin’ time  
walkin’ Woodward Avenue  
while her no-good man’s been  
beatin’ heads and he’s a lookin’  
for you who is nowhere here.  
Run, Brotha, run.

Ain’t no salvation at Calvary  
or nowhere else in this dead  
city jammed with emptiness  
while all good mens outta jobs  
and down right, downtown mean  
as pit bulls rarin’ for a fight  
every night. Just put yo’ money  
in the man’s hand playin’ the game.  
Run, Brotha, run.

Hey, Brotha, Somewhere out there  
you be safe as Mama plots escape   
from windows, roofs, summer   
heat you be carryin’ all this time  
on yo’ back ’cause you, too, dream  
Louisiana days, long and sweet  
hours of eatin’ crawfish, laughin’   
at fools don’t know no better.  
Run, Brotha, run for your life.

**Sally Heads for the Night**

At rush hour, Sally high-steps off the curb,  
glides between the Fords and Chevies  
taps the hood of a pick-up truck  
as cars honk. A Sears delivery van rolls  
closer before the light turns the ghastly  
green of go ahead and run her over.

Machines stampede,  
a herd of chromed racers.  
Nowhere to go but over her,  
a woman in high spirits  
dressed in black, ready for a starry night.

Sally bows, waves, pirouettes, throws  
kisses, promises more than she can deliver  
in her world of dangerous cars and high hopes.

**Searching for an Entrance to a Woods**

I mistake you for my lover who grew roots  
in my garden, stood with me those long hours  
during the drought year. Even I shriveled.  
My skin dried to dust as your leaves curled  
and fell for lack of rain, lack of green   
plump dreams swaying in the wind. I hear  
the rustle of death on gray concrete streets  
where my lover scraped his soul one dark night  
and abandoned me in sunless days.

You stand contorted, your twisted limbs  
fall apart at the edges. I lose  
pieces of myself. I could break off a twig,  
light your firewood, listen to the crackle,   
the sizzle of the burn as flames snap at me,  
a reminder of the passion, those woody days  
when I stumbled into a hidden passage,  
into the green forest where my life began.

I discover another way into where I have been  
when I wore Queen Anne’s Lace in my hair  
and held a fistful of forget-me-nots.   
Now the sparrow hawk circles above me,  
waiting for me to drop on this barren ground  
where others have chopped down my trees,  
left ragged stumps shaped like humans  
that raise their arms in agony and protest  
the loss. I bind twigs in blue sisal, hope  
the center will hold against greed.

**The Season of Fireworks and Naked Trees**

Fireworks blossom into blue  
and red-gold peonies  
floating in the burst of a moment  
on aqua ripples  
contained in the cut-crystal bowl of sky  
above the lovers’ heads.

Sizzle, whiz, crack and whistle  
stir the night air, whip the single stars  
into new constellations, into tails of froth  
these lovers grab and climb  
hand-over-hand through smoke  
and ashes, into the orange explosion.

Such lovers have seen their own birth  
and death, the black-stick trees   
that time will tip eventually.  
The darkened sky drops  
and the gods smile at the magnificence   
of love, of naked trees gone to ground.

**The Season of the Hummingbird**

*For Bradley*

Cup your small hand in mine.  
I will fill it with words  
unspoken, unbroken  
as if some ruby-throated hummingbird  
plucked them like thistle,  
like dandelion down, soft  
enough to line its nest  
woven with spider silk, a pattern  
as delicate as your lifetime.

Your tongue moves sounds around   
darting up, down – testing   
their taste like the hummingbird  
dipping its long bill into scarlet  
sage, into the nectar of this herb  
as its wings beat the humid summer air.  
You hum the same rapid tune  
when feathers brush your lips,  
when your fingertips quiver  
as if you knew the song.

I hold you in my palm, warm  
with summer, with wanting  
all there is. You speak to me  
in the season of the hummingbird  
when the Rose of Sharon blooms.

Tonight the moon rises  
earlier than yesterday.  
Its white light illumines your hair  
drops a yellow cap on your head  
as if pollen had settled there.

**Secret Garden**

Neighbors watch  
your hybrid roses rot  
in rain. Weeds flourish.  
Each rose bush strangles  
on Virginia creeper. Vines  
take over, cover everything.   
Rosebuds wither on broken stems.  
Fungus polka dots green leaves with white.  
Aphids thrive, suck out the life juice.  
The thorns still draw blood.

Only you can mulch the beds,  
coax roses to bloom again.  
Your gardening gloves hang  
from the hook by the door  
in the shed. There is a hole  
in the thumb of the right hand.  
Your trowel rusted over winter,  
an orange coating of neglect.   
The bottle of fungicide is more than  
half empty. I hear fluid swish inside  
when I shake it as if there is hope,  
some medicine you can take  
and cure yourself of this awful disease  
we both battle daily as if it were a rose.

Come with me now into my secret garden.  
Slip your hand in mine as we stroll.  
Each day from sunrise to sunset,  
I collect daylilies that bloom one day  
and then another blooms. I cut the stems,  
gather whole bouquets of these perennials.  
They grow on leafless stalks,  
with bud after bud opening and closing.  
Arrange them with me, the red, the orange,  
yellow and mahogany. Each trumpets a day  
we had together, a memory as sharp and smooth  
as the strappy leaves that bind us.  
I stitch them on quilts, capture a window of sky,  
a square of dirt where they once grew  
and spread naturally. I set daylilies everywhere.   
We call on their medicinal power: a relief  
from pain and a lessening of grief  
as we walk toward the tallest pine  
in my secret garden where no rose survives.

**Sexual Division**

The man grew breasts.  
Straps bit his shoulder flesh  
like a cur’s enameled fangs  
sinking past curly chest hair,  
cutting through bones  
right to the heart  
where the man-woman  
flexed muscles,  
dried tears   
for what he was before

she came  
into his house,  
dusted untouched corners  
with feather brooms,  
scattered pain everywhere,  
polluted his rivers  
with night fears and blood.  
He knew, intuitively,  
his Easter soul  
would embrace her  
halfway.

**She Dreams**

She dreams rooms filled with books.  
Dr. Seuss in corners, yaks climb the wall.  
Betsy meets the Bobsey twins and Huckleberry Finn.  
Dog-eared books flow from faucets,  
pages turn themselves.  
Nancy Drew mysteries are mountain ranges.  
Superwoman stands in snow, reciting Tennyson.  
The Pigman eats mean hamburgers  
on a table of paperbacks.   
He drinks sentences and paragraphs.  
Words dive from leather boards,  
swim in her eyes, until she dries them,  
wraps them in silk,   
and pins them in her hair.

**She Makes Her Bed**

All night the rain falls.  
Oak limbs bend,  
scratch at the glass  
of her window. Each wet drop  
wiggles down the pane,  
blown by wind,  
pulled by gravity  
into cursive lines of memories  
she slips over her head  
like a well-worn nightgown.

Tonight, the crazy quilt  
she sewed holds her down.  
She fingers each piece.   
The blue bowling shirt triangle  
blazes with her husband’s number,  
holds the smoke he chose.  
She cut up his jeans worn thin  
on the thigh where he wiped   
his palms when he got mad,  
before he walked out the door once  
and for all. Her daughter’s graduation  
gown gaped back at her, its black  
hole holding the fights, the late nights,  
the boyfriends who hid outside  
taking her where her mother   
did not know and could not go.

The antique ivory silk with lace  
swished at her wedding so long ago.  
She can’t even vouch for what she vowed,  
only how she clutched a bouquet   
of pink larkspur she plucked  
from the meadow, a wild flower  
that attracted her and butterflies.  
The honey bees buzzed danger.

In the morning, she makes her bed  
as she does every day. Her muscles remember.  
She flutters and smooths the bottom sheet,  
then yanks the corners tight and folds.  
The top sheet billows before she turns  
it down and pushes it in all around.  
The crazy quilt patterns itself on top,  
edges loose. She will slip  
between the sheets tonight as if she were water.

**Shoe Store Romeo**

She only bought high  
heels at night  
after the shoe salesman  
cupped her ankle,  
let her nyloned flesh settle,  
seek the warmth of his palm  
for a second,  
a flash of a moment  
nothing more,  
nobody could accuse him  
of anything.

Still on one knee,  
he stared into her blue eyes  
as he slipped on the shoe  
with the highest heel  
and rolled his hand  
lightly up her shin  
and back again,  
just a gesture  
lifting his white cuff  
above his tattoo,  
a small black skull.

The swipe of her blonde hair  
in the air, the sink of heels  
in beige carpet, the look-back   
smile, the hiss of fabric against shoe,  
the rustle of tissue, of shoe  
against shoe, of cardboard on top  
against cardboard bottom  
against bag,  
against flesh.  
The worn and wrinkled bills  
in this high-heeled transaction.

In school, she daydreamed  
novels of him and her.

**The Shopping Bag Lady**

Coiled in the doorway,  
waiting for the flutist to cover the holes,  
charm the noises from the steel tube.

City sounds assault her.  
Woeful wails ride the autumn breeze,  
bang against rotted wooden walls,  
fall through broken windowpanes,  
explode into screams.

She hears the flute and unwinds slowly.  
Clear chants in the Arabian night,  
slivers of sound,  
silver crystals in the darkness,  
a litany of sweet notes.

Street people pass the old lady  
huddled in the corner  
with a brown, torn shopping bag,  
its handles wrapped  
around her wrist.

She moves,   
rippling skin in tune,  
sensuous in the cold morning light.  
Musky smells ooze onto desert sands  
as she sheds fabric layers  
from her mind and body,  
hearing, remembering soft voices,  
hands throwing golden coins  
when the flutist played  
and she danced too long.

Pulling down the felt hat,  
she drops her soiled chin  
into her sunken chest,  
coughs quietly into her bag,  
rummages for a cigarette stub  
found on yesterday’s sidewalk,  
next to the garbage can  
where she eats and talks.

**Sign of the Times**

The company’s name crumbles  
as rusted paint chips flake  
from the green metal sign,  
dribble to the sidewalk.

A fleck of red, part of the first  
letter of the owner’s name  
sticks to a stranger’s crepe-soled shoe  
as if he can walk it someplace safe.

Consonants disappear from the beginning  
and end as rain licks the hard sounds.  
Vowels stick, the last  
remnants of the owner’s howl.

**The Sky is Falling**

The flap of skin under Mrs. Little’s chin  
waggled as she warned our third grade class  
about bombs and flash burns during  
our monthly air-raid drills while we stood behind  
cement pillars in the school basement with others  
whose legs trembled and eyes scrunched as if  
they might cry or sink to the ground from the weight  
of the whole school on top of them.

Back in class,  
when I messed up the multiplication tables  
and erased numbers so hard the paper ripped,  
Mrs. Little rapped my head  
hard with her sharp fingernail, polished  
blood red. Just my whisper at her back   
whipped her around. She aimed  
the eraser at my head. White chalk  
fluffed the air, settled in my hair.

Mrs. Little drilled us in disasters:  
how fast Newton’s apple fell from the tree  
of knowledge, how the sky might freeze  
and break into silver hatchets  
that could split a head in half.  
A crow could plunge through air,   
snip off a bit of our years. She could  
hold us chickens back a year.

I pinned the sky in place with my eyes,  
opened my arms wide to whatever might fall.

**Skylight**

Today we snack on sky,  
pinch off a bit  
of its blue hem  
and chew a piece   
of air. All that holds  
us here. We spot

a woman in black taffeta,  
her gown shredding against   
concrete. Back and forth  
she paces, against night, against   
the hiss and swish of navy  
anonymity as sky canopies her turf

just as sky jackets our bodies.  
Hems unravel up and down the avenue  
like lines on a map, marking  
major freeways, route numbers,  
constellations on the ground. Sky turns  
upside down. We follow threads, not knowing

which strand dead ends at curbside,  
which leads to our blue-roofed home.

**Sleepless**

This day perches heavy on my head  
like some green parakeet repeating again  
and again words that spiral in my ear  
and screech until I cannot sleep.

Such trivial notions harden into seeds  
that bird plucks from air and crunches in its beak.  
It feeds on my misfortune. It sharpens every claw  
on my mistakes. I turn onto my left side, away from it.

My eyes remain open, dry as this Torrid Zone  
where I reside tonight without relief.  
Only this nervous bird keeps me company  
as it pecks at the chalky shell of a cuttlebone.

I need my sleep, my dreams of flying straight.   
I roll to my right side, away from the hallway light,  
away from the green, green bird.  
It wants to spread its wings in flight.

This parakeet belongs to me. No one else will own it.  
It grooms its green feathers. I plump my pillow  
and burrow in as if I can escape   
the sound of feathers when they fall.

**Sleight of Hand**

A swoosh of your hand  
spreads cards  
face up,  
yours and mine:   
pale squares

full of uncut diamonds. All  
red numbers. Add, subtract,  
divide and multiply. Even  
odd numbers come up black  
sometimes. Repeat themselves  
if you count

cards. Too many   
duplicates drift  
into your trouser cuff  
lined with hearts

you claim as trump.  
You fan them   
in your hand,   
collapse them  
into a slender neck

that fits your fist  
full of cardboard, corners  
marked and bent. A flick

of your fingers discards  
the lowest heart, the two.

A single curve.   
Thick as our beginning.   
Thin as our final end.

**Snow Carnival**

All day weather advisories  
skitter across the bottom of the television screen:  
*Winter storm  
Stay off the roads*

Aunt Jane stumbles  
over a bridge of frozen slush  
snowplows tossed up at the bottom  
of the driveway she just shoveled.  
Josh, only seven, believes in days  
off school and the fort he builds  
against cold winds, a silent place  
where he eats his lunch  
and pretends he alone  
survives this snow white day.

Cars, trucks, delivery vans skid, slip-slide,   
smash into someone else’s fender  
like bumper cars. Like a Tilt-a-Whirl  
these vehicles fall to earth. Like snowflakes  
fall to earth  
one ice crystal at a time,

I snuggle into the top seat  
on the Ferris wheel  
where I hoard bits of snow  
in my red-gloved hand,  
where this shimmer of white glitter  
glints its dazzle of destruction  
and I marvel at the beauty of it all.

**Soaring**

Inside the House of Fabrics  
I find myself shuffling up and down  
aisles of cotton, wool, lace, satin  
wrapped on bolts. Like me they wait  
for the first cut of the scissors,  
for what they will become.

I brush against purple silk,  
more like violet with lavender designs  
in a language I don’t know. It speaks  
of Japanese simplicity, of silk worms  
spinning this web around me, pinning me  
in place so I don’t fall down.

Although I have no pattern, no thought  
of what I will make, I buy three yards  
and rush to work no longer afraid. I can  
not stop death of the old people I assist  
in living. They swallow medicine, forget  
who they are. Still, they keep moving.

These delicate folks want to know what  
I carry from the outside world. I tell  
about the silk, hold it this way and that  
as light shimmers, turns lavender to blue  
and back again. Silk rustles. One woman  
exclaims she holds twilight in her hand.

On my knees, I cut my silk into a kite.  
I gather four fallen twigs from outside,  
fasten silk edges tight at each corner. I find a ball of twine as we go together   
outside where the wind swirls. We each hold  
a string as the kite catches a wind current.

Our kite rides the waves of pink-tinged sky;  
soars, glides, rises, trails a blue silk tail,  
chants some sweet language of clouds and air.  
We cut the strings  
at dusk when colors fade,  
before night envelops us.

**Some Pinecones**

I listen to crunch.   
My boots squash paper  
cups, one tin can,  
three bottle caps  
and oak leaves in the fall.

I hear it all  
as I walk. Murmur of voices  
screened by mesh, a shout  
metallic with gunshot fear. A dog  
yaps, wind shakes maple  
leaves that cling to wood. Every  
star clusters above me. Around  
the moon and over roofs, stars shoot,  
burn hot, drop at my feet. One  
wish I’m granted in all this noise.

Under a streetlight, scotch pines needle  
me, rub branch against branch. I am   
alone on suburban streets. My subdivision   
waits a mile up. I know its name,  
the house with my number, the place  
I bring back what I have found.

I set together  
two pinecones waxed with moonlight,  
stuffed with seeds.  
One balances upright against darkness.  
One tilts on its side, damaged.  
One slender twig cradles them.

Two broken scales. Love spirals  
out of control. The red squirrel feeds.

**Somewhere in New England**

Above the old woman’s head  
squirrels fly at night,  
legs spread.  
Folds of skin catch the wind  
and hold the woman’s song,  
carry it across the spaces  
from limb to limb,  
turn it in forepaws.

The high note’s a clasp,  
the words, a chain,  
a scrimshaw to hang on the fir.  
The mast is rigged.

She sails on salt visions:  
men larger than waves,  
whalebone in moonlight.  
Her hair flows like seaweed  
as she anchors and waits   
for her man  
to rise from the wet,  
push back the storm,  
walk to the rocks  
where she sits now  
and harvests stonecrop.

**Squirrel Control**

A flash of red-gray fur.  
The swish of a bushy tail.  
Scritch-scratch. Claws scrape  
glass behind the fireplace door.

A black-eyed rodent glares  
as I stare back, watch  
four paws squirl the pile of ash,  
all that’s left of last night’s fire.

I am a city girl afraid of sharp teeth  
and squirrels that slip-slide down  
my chimney, spray my home with chitter-chatter  
fear of dark red blood or some stark brain disease.

I punch in the number of Critter Control.  
The man comes right out. He chuckles as  
the squirrel triggers the ash dump spring,   
tumbles fast into a black-soot void.

The man tempts the hungry creature  
with peanut butter bait. I must wait  
until late tonight, strain to hear  
the metallic clink as the trap door closes.

All night I expect squirrel teeth at my neck,  
a furry tail blindfold, a smudge of ash on my forehead,  
the burst of a flame in my brain, the loss  
of hope as the critter skitters over me.

In the peanut butter morning, the squirrel licks   
his paws in the cage. With gloves on, I shake  
my invader, exile it to the back porch where Critter  
Control will snatch it, release it in green fields.

Later I visit my father in the common area  
of the Alzheimer’s Ward. Squirrels flit in his mind,  
a twittering taunt. He recalls his Ohio farm days,   
the sharp retort of his shotgun in humid summer air.

**Starling in My Fireplace**

Mystic carrier of messages,  
diviner of star talk and dark spirits,  
you fold your black iridescence  
close against your body,  
drop past charred chimney bricks,  
land on my fireplace floor  
where you scratch grey ash,  
claw prophesies in squiggles  
while night shadow clings in corners  
and even the television remains silent.

Bundle of feathers,  
curved bill of truth,  
you peck a secret code against the glass  
between us. You can snap a beetle’s  
back in your beak. The flurry of your wings  
frightens me as they flap  
soot from the chimney shaft.

With harsh gurgles and clicks,  
you call your flock form the evergreens  
as I cover mirrors and windows with sheets.  
You with your purple-green hood  
slick with oil spout a litany of black threats:  
famines, fires, ice, hurricanes, plagues,  
volcanoes, wars, guns, what rises  
from the earth, what falls from the sky  
and all that turns in between.

Bird of the occult,   
friend of the ancients,  
you would carry me on your back,  
translate the tongues you speak  
until I pull open the glass  
and you glide past my oak door,  
into the light stream speckled with dust.

**The Statue of Liberty Wears Next to Nothing**

In the land of the free, men may lose  
their shirts. Pink bunnies stand upright,  
dangle baskets crammed with yellow plastic  
eggs. Such ragged rabbits shed fake fur everywhere.  
Paws jab the clouded sky with printed signs,  
crooked words of spring sales,  
a clearance of everything.

Just down the street, an old man holds  
his Mickey Mouse head against his waist,  
out of character for minimum wage.  
No one minds, really, that his head wobbles  
on top of Mickey Mouse’s body as long as  
he wears the costume, hands out red flyers  
saying buy one get one free of almost anything.

Outside Liberty Tax Service, the statue paces  
without her torch and wears a green, ragged crown  
with no windows anyone can look out and spikes  
drooping. No Independence Day tablet, no   
tarnished gown. Just a sandwich board saying:  
*Early refund.* But she knows she has  
nothing coming just like most everyone else.

**Still Life**

Today I captured stillness  
in the palm of my hand. I held  
the hush, listened to silence  
brush my eardrum  
soft as an egret’s feather.  
The sound of absence,  
of white, of waiting  
for you to surface  
and walk to where I was

last year when we fished  
together, when you taught me  
to bait a hook, dangle a lline  
from this dock I can still see  
from the hill where I sit now  
alone with all this quiet.

I came here today with my paints,  
my camera as witness. I cannot  
mix blue to match the placid lake  
or the green of wilderness. Only   
this snapshot emerged from my darkroom  
where I stood still as the snowy egret.  
Only my eyes scanned shadows, someplace  
where you might appear in black and white.

But egrets do not fly until they feed  
and I weep buckets of minnows for you.

**A Still Shot**

When theater lights dim  
during Sunday matinees,  
widows pull sweater shrouds  
around their drooping shoulders  
against the air-conditioned night,  
muffling the popcorn shouts  
and coke kisses of the young  
whose budded hands  
flower against pink angora knits  
in the reflected light  
of someone else’s fantasy.

**Stone Chronicles**

In the hunt for history,  
consider an ocean stone,  
a slender, black, volcanic disk  
worn thin from waves,  
still full of fire, the story  
waiting for release.

That grey stone holds  
the moist breath of a dinosaur  
who wandered here before us,  
chomped on horsetail rushes  
and left its bones compressed  
in stones, its legacy of wings.

One gull feather tipped in black  
spirals from the navy sky,  
drifts onto one white glacial stone  
chilled from the ocean floor, broken  
from bedrock and carrying tales of what  
happens down deep where few go.

**Strawberry Girl with Heart**

Three strawberry hearts ripen  
on the bush, dangle their perfection,  
their promise of plump flesh and red juice.

The girl sits by the berry bush, scribbles in her diary.  
Seven years ago, she buried in this very spot  
her last baby tooth tipped with scarlet at its root.

She tops her letter “i" with a heart,  
a flash of her red-glitter self. On the page, she curves  
a berry, adds one black blotch, the mark of rot.

Changes turn on a breath of wind or the wiggle of a worm.  
Nothing stays still. Nothing waits.  
Her own eye blinks in her heart-shaped face.

A quick twist and two berries nestle in her palm,  
sweeten her tongue with the taste of loss. A cardinal   
snatches the blemished berry. The heart is a beating wing.

**Students**

I look into the semi-circle and see  
sketched on foreheads, chins and cheeks  
plump golden babies like cherry blossoms  
overflowing mothers’ arms,  
green-robed fathers picking yellow mums  
and geisha girls with downcast eyes.  
So many Japanese puzzle boxes  
painted and lacquered  
daring me to   
find the crack,  
open the box  
without a key  
slip out the drawer  
hidden underneath.

I probe, poke and pry until  
a drawer springs open to my left  
a lid flips up in the middle   
and I stuff in verbs of being and doing.  
Hemingway, Faulkner, and Oates leap  
into velvet-lined boxes;   
neatly stacked ideas  
slide through cracks  
expanding the dimensions,  
exploding the sides,  
and class begins.

**Tattooed Saint**

You’re the real thing.  
None of this cyber-saint stuff for you.  
No sainthood.com with flashing green lights,  
a good deed and a plastic master card  
over the limit. But $24.95 plus more  
will buy you a shrine and a halo  
you already have. Your miracles,  
your heart is right where it ought to be

upfront with two chambers, both full  
with spots of white space. Room   
for a poetic squiggle, even a blue note.  
You, patron of arts, are known everywhere.  
Your pale face topped with blue, black,   
red tam draping your ear. The tassel swings  
both ways: the tragedy and comedy   
of saints who grin at pain. The release.

We, the abandoned, yearn  
for sustenance, something crunchy  
enough to wake our souls. Cornflakes,  
a burst of tattoos, every hue, all lines  
and geometric shapes. The stuff of life.  
You know the way your body shivers  
as needles ink your deeds over ribcage,  
collarbone and move to face.

On your Saint’s Feast Day, we live  
your pain, your sacrifice permanent,  
marked on every bit of flesh, on us.  
We pray you will guide our hands.  
Our hearts clutch, paralyzed  
in white space begging for our mark.

Oh, Tattooed Saint, we bear witness.  
Summon the miracle of art.

**A Teacher Answers**

Questions curve your cheeks  
cling to bone  
rise like meat hooks  
to peel cataracts.  
 You see  
 taste of blood  
 of whys  
 and grow dumb

like me  
who scrapes chalk against skin  
knowing all the while  
answers are gauze  
wrapping the wounds  
and scars ache on  
winter days.

**Teachers**

like plumbers aren’t blinded  
by porcelain and veneer.  
They get to the guts  
wrench in hand  
twist copper screws  
and rubber washers  
pluck out  
crimped hair and bits of fluff;  
even the metal matchbox car  
is snaked through curves  
as cesspools drain  
and clean voices  
gurgle upward.

**Tea Party**

Silence brews between them,  
a pot of tea.  
The bags, heavy with water, hang  
suspended by cellophane.  
Leaves leak from the paper sack.  
Specks float, settle,  
foretell the future if she  
or he can see the bottom  
or even drink from the cup.

They put their finest china on the tray,  
serve themselves the senna tea.  
No cakes with pink frosting or wine,  
just porcelain between their lips.  
No Alice comes to take a place.

“Senna purges dreams,” the woman says,  
“too dark for gypsy eyes.”

He shuts his lids, asleep it seems,  
until he starts to speak,  
“No riddles today to twist the brain  
or make things seem like what they aren’t.”

She hasn’t heard. Her clock has stopped  
and no one comes to clean.

He takes a sip of tea and grows.  
His voice is louder now.  
“March hares arrive in April.  
My hatters are all sane.”

She balances her saucer on her knee.  
“If I were in the well, I’d hear  
water in my ears.”

She sinks,  
a teabag cut loose,  
sprawled at the bottom,  
ready for a reading.

**Tear off a Hunk of Bread and Chew**

The little girl who ate words  
chewed them, savored them  
on her pink tongue as she curled  
against her father’s side, her head  
balanced on his arm, her eyes on whatever   
book he held palms up, tilted toward her.

Each letter on each page  
jumped into her mouth, tasted  
new, sharp as cheddar cheese.  
The whole alphabet jumbled,  
melted together in a casserole  
of spaghetti noodles and red,  
round tomatoes with an acid  
sting, a sit-up-and-take-notice  
zing when Heidi, an orphan,  
met Peter, the goat herder, and shook  
hands with the hermit in the hut  
who was her grandfather,   
his voice cold as the snow-  
crusted Alps Heidi had climbed.

The little girl snuggled closer  
as she swallowed Heidi’s story,  
nourished by each chapter, warm  
as dough baked into loaves,  
the crusty bread  
dipped into goat milk,  
her daily sustenance.

**The Test**

The boy in the back is  
a verb like walk, talk,   
think of  
tonight’s dance:  
 black discs turn  
 other voices into  
 his calloused ear  
 out his mouth  
 as he taps  
disco repeats in five  
paragraph essays  
with no conclusion.

The girl in front is  
the noun---the person,   
place,  
thing that anchors  
its weight in chairs  
and sits  
and rocks  
solidly  
a wadded dream:  
 flutes drown in   
 drum sounds  
 as she picks up  
 sticks   
 and beats out  
paperball beginnings  
pile up  
on her  
on her cluttered desk

But they pass the test  
eventually  
when grades  
are plotted  
on the curve.

**Their Marriage Album**

They speak in snapshots.  
His voice, yellow smoke,  
puffs of black and whites  
held tight with corners.

“I said,” he says,  
“you used to listen.”  
Close-ups blurred  
he turns blank pages.

“What’s that?” she asks,  
dusting in another room.

She turns the towel.  
More strings unravel  
like spider legs dangling,   
skittering across wax,  
wet as newly spun webs  
above the cornice. Dust,  
in the air, on her tongue,  
settles softly,  
dray as days past.

“Come look,” he says.

He recalls retirement. His   
day stuck in the ground  
like a stake marks tomato seeds  
covered lightly with soil. He  
yearns for red, a sign  
of ripeness, color of his blood  
in daylight. Even pink  
streaks the evening sky, delicate  
as blown glass,   
fragile as an insect wing.

“Yes, look,” she laughs,  
“A missing head,  
you shot too low.  
Our eyes were closed.  
And there’s a photo missing.”

In photos, they look  
away. From each other,  
from the camera, each  
hides as if the shutter  
may open too wide,  
an empty space full  
of light to tantalize.  
Then, shut fast,  
sharp as a guillotine.

**Therapist Treats Agoraphobic at Her Home**

Elderberry bushes rooted,  
flourished in my fertile brain.  
White flowers, every perfect petal  
shriveled, replaced  
by black berries  
I turned into wine.  
Sip a bit with me.

You, my therapist,  
tracked me for years.  
Your footprints  
meandered along shores of my thoughts,  
paused where you plucked cattails,  
fuzzy in autumn wind, fluffy  
and white as my fear.

I saw you toss a stone  
in my river, feared  
for my life  
as concentric circles rippled  
outward from center  
as that rough-edged river  
stone sunk in silt.

Such a small disturbance  
could tug me under water,   
could hold me there  
until I grew gills  
and minnow fins. My mind  
huddled behind skull bone,  
its home, right  
where it belonged. Only I  
should walk there.

Here, let me fill your glass.  
As you drink  
elderberry spirits,  
you will understand the way  
my neurons flickered,  
lighted gray ghosts  
outside my window. Yesterday,

I swam on dry land. Moist  
with sweat, rivulets of me  
dripped onto roads  
red with Georgia clay,  
with shimmering heat  
mirages where I rested  
on sand under weeping willows.  
I wiggled my toes in the blue pond,  
curled my skin around wetness.

Don’t interrupt the telling  
for I know where I go. You can  
traipse after me, mark my route.  
If you stare through my window,  
you may glimpse one leaf  
on that red maple, unfurling late  
this spring as if it weren’t sure  
it should show itself at all.  
I watched every day  
waiting for that leaf to open.

Down the street  
by the stoplight,  
one diseased ash tree  
draped its limb  
against the green light  
before the trimming.  
I listened to   
that awful whizzing saw  
you hear  
before something tumbles  
to ground. Yes, I heard  
the fall. I certainly did.

I could show you  
ways to leave this state  
I’m in. But then  
you have seen   
all seasons, anticipated   
changes when snow melted  
and wild daffodils dotted  
grassy banks on the freeway.  
I rode the backs of pigeons,  
saw orange barrels closing lanes  
under construction  
for a better tomorrow I thought  
the signs said. Hard to see  
clearly when a pigeon feather

twirled toward earth, toward gray  
concrete that would not melt  
ever. Like my mind, the lines  
led to other states, even  
the Arctic Circle, a frigid zone

where all was frozen,  
where I straddled an ice floe,  
drank elderberry wine,  
and toasted you who lived   
my life outside this house.

**The First Day of April**

The day  
all the daffodils tumbled  
from their green beds  
at the same time,  
I knew  
winter had given up its darkness.

On this first day of April:  
the town jokers turned  
street signs topsy-turvy.

Outside,   
I swam the butterfly  
stroke in the aqua sky  
where the dampness spoke of spring  
rain and ferns that uncurled their tongues.

I heard the trumpet of a daffodil,  
a blast of air so sweet   
the note centered in my throat  
as if I could release it to the wind  
and like a yellow warbler  
it would take flight.

Red balloons floated the message:  
the carnival was on its way.

Pranksters rode the Ferris wheel  
as high as the sun,  
rocked in its yellow glow  
knowing their wax wings would not melt

until their feet touched solid ground.  
Week after week the carnival stayed:  
Icicles dangled  
from the Ferris wheel  
and snow nestled in the seats.  
The townsfolk waited.

They watched for:   
the sun that would coax life from the underground,  
daffodils that would fall from the cloudless sky,  
the turning of the wheel.

**A Timed Exercise**

If I had two months of life left  
would I sprout and send down roots  
deeper and deeper searching,   
divining the blue  
cool voice of wetness

or would I just float paper boats  
in muddy sidewalk puddles  
where sparrows dip their beaks?

I could assign tasks   
of this and that   
so friends  
clip cotton strings  
from this rag of life  
wrung dry of tears.

Could I find something better  
than driving the freeway  
the same route every day  
which ends when I slam the car door  
and elevate to the 15th floor  
where my fingers dawdle over keys  
reluctant before turning locks  
needing oil. Still  
jagged metal fits jagged metal.

I shall choose. I shall  
scratch in cracked, brown clay.  
With dust up under scarlet nails,  
I shall make my mark  
and brace for whirlwinds

in my garden  
until my soul balloons  
and blooms a meadow of blue chickory  
and Queen Anne’s Lace  
before scattering its seeds.

**The Time Will Be**

She—  
walking across waxed linoleum floors.  
Reaching for the wall phone.  
Talking long distance through wires.  
Yelling at the boy tracking in mud.  
Hanging up.  
Wondering what to fix for dinner.  
Pushing the phone buttons again.  
Juggling the skillet in her left hand.  
Listening to the busy sound.  
Breaking the connection.  
Punching now another number.  
Hearing another woman starting dinner.  
Saying nothing.

She—  
Waiting for the sound of his car.  
Waiting for the phone to ring.  
Waiting for someone to contact her  
About something she should have done  
Yesterday, or can do tomorrow or next week.

She—  
Knows she must stop waiting.  
Knows she is forty now.  
Knows the mortgage is paid.  
She sits still  
Waiting for   
Something to happen.

**Tinkertoys**

When my grandson tilts the box,  
105 Tinkertoys roll out. Orange connectors,  
plastic pieces, small, shiny, slick,  
notched at the center. Perfect  
for holding things together  
when they’re about to fall apart  
at the edges. Round wooden wheels

unfinished, until my grandson  
crams one blue rod into the center hole  
in one wheel, then joins the other end  
to a different wheel. One flick of his  
three-year-old finger launches this two-  
wheeled car across the tiled floor  
where it hits the wall, zooms back  
once more into his agile fingers

content with his car, fresh from the assembly  
line of his imagination. That blue car  
without hubcaps, seats, engine, even headlights   
still does what he wants, goes where  
he aims it, covers the ground  
between his warm fingers and the cold

basement wall and bounces back  
in one piece. Safe as my grandson  
who spends the whole morning building  
towers where he can live, buses, trains,  
airplanes, birds, the sun. A dictionary   
of connections crackle along the synapses  
in his mind, a place where he pokes around   
and carries back adventures he constructs  
with bits of wooden shapes, all joined

together. He cradles his world in his own quick hands  
afraid a piece might break off,  
fall to the floor and roll under the couch  
where he can’t stretch far enough to reach it.  
He has placed every tipsy piece  
just so. A pirate ship with ladders,  
and a plank to walk over a sea  
swarming with sharks and whales that   
can eat him, he says, if he falls in

when I turn my head.  
Not even for lunch  
will my grandson dismantle  
the pirate ship, put it back  
in the box where it belongs.  
He wants to tell his scary pirate stories  
again and again.

Only I know   
nothing  
goes back the same way  
once you’ve taken it apart.

**To Dylan at the Beginning**

May you discover  
the whole world  
a piece at a time.

Scoop a handful  
of earth damp with promise; inhale  
the vision of one brown acorn  
alone sprouting into an oak  
tree strong enough to hold you  
embraced by the blue, blue sky  
up high where your dreams perch  
on the edge of the sun.

Catch one raindrop  
on your fingertip; count  
each speck of life, each  
microscopic molecule floating  
free as you swimming under  
water, choosing to see  
what is and  
what can be.

Bite into one   
plump, red apple; savor  
the sweet juice, sun-warmed,  
dribbling down your throat,  
and in that moment, recall  
that first nibble,   
that crunchy taste  
of truth.

Blow on one blade  
of green grass; whistle  
long and loud your own tune  
of happiness, of friends forever  
true, of books you read,  
of what you do along the way  
to make this world  
a good and better place.

*With Much Love from Grandma Carol  
October 2, 2006*

**To Each**

Sullen talks.  
The couch and car,  
divided dividends,  
no animosity,  
or so they said,  
to each other.

The children, too, split  
between Saturdays and Sundays  
springs and summers;  
even the cold death   
months considered   
and ignored, until later  
when they discussed  
other matters that required  
more words,  
their complete attention  
to all details.

She and he got  
through it all,  
and were glad,  
or so they said,   
to each other.

**Tomatoes**

The poems I do not write  
are crammed in my head  
like so many overripe tomatoes  
bleeding into each other,  
dripping, unsynchronized,  
out the bottom of the wooden crate  
that warps and swells and rots,  
giving birth to white worms  
who lap up the red juices  
of the words I cannot write.

**To Men Who Want Mothers**

She stands by the bed and captures  
nightmares in the folds of her gown.  
Fingers perch on her palms,  
ready to swoop down,  
pick off his moans in mid-air  
and swallow them whole.  
Her arms are red cedars;  
incense oozes from her pores,  
perfumes his phantoms  
caged in a flannel fog.  
Like a mountain  
she holds her ground and grows.  
Her head pierces clouds.

From the peak,  
she rains April lullabies  
against his closed eyelids.  
She knows:  
he must not look at her mouth  
open like the tulip.  
She pulls him to her heart,  
feeds his dreams.

**To My Daughter on a Fine Fall Day**

I stand behind you and push,  
harder and harder.  
You pump higher.  
Feet kick the air.  
You swing back,  
just miss my arms  
waiting to receive you.  
Hands fall to my sides,  
hide themselves in coat pockets.

You’re over the sandbox  
filled now with maple leaves.  
Shoes skim the hedge,  
reach past this boundary line.  
You lie in your bed of air,  
no pillows for your head.

I watch you wake,  
hanging there above me,  
a sparrow in its nest.  
Your fingers clutch the chains,  
probe the links,  
let go the hold.  
You jump, splitting the noonday sun.  
I cannot stop your feet from touching ground.

**To the Boy Who Rode a Skateboard**

You zipped from behind that bush,  
right in front of me and I nearly had  
a heart attack the way you didn’t stop,  
just flipped that skateboard up  
and twirled it twice as if you were in a circus  
and crowds paid to see you do what you did.

Let me tell you, you’re lucky I stopped  
in time. You could have been squished  
under my wheels like a squirrel,  
left with two broken legs and blood in your mouth,  
your right arm trapped under my tire. I shudder  
to think what might have been.  
I could have had your death  
on my conscience for the rest  
of my life and I wouldn’t dare drive again.  
That would have killed me.  
It would have been all your fault.

I wish  
I had said all that  
to that boy  
who didn’t even see me.

**Tonight the Round Woman Moon Swallows the Dark**

The moon glides across black silk,  
bright, plump with promise. A silver puff  
polishes the spoon’s curve  
slick as a woman’s lips. Shiny  
quicksilver strokes her throat.  
A disc of glitter, a pendant of moon  
rocks slides between her breasts, glistens.

A girl of fourteen sits on a grey boulder, her  
long dark hair still, straight, almost touches  
the cold rock as she leans back on soft hands,  
considers the moon a woman, strong,  
steady enough to pull the tides as she sweeps  
the world with her white-gold gown. She illuminates  
the girl, then shadows her in a grey cashmere shawl.

The girl can almost hear moon words,  
whistled whispers in her ear before the silver circle  
plops into the pond right in front of the girl  
who opens her hands to catch slippery minnows.  
Their scales flash white translucence as they jump,  
leave only air and concentric circles on the mirror.  
One moon floats on water. One moon moves across the sky.

The young girl wades into the pond as the water moon  
gathers its shimmer and rises. The girl stands submerged,  
moondust and minnows curl her hair as her arms reach down  
for a fractured reflection and up to the round woman moon  
who lingers atop a blue spruce over her right shoulder.  
The girl bursts through the wet blue barrier, head above water.   
The moon swallows the darkness, dips from sight.

**Too Dark**

for opaque mirrors,  
your dread. Look into silver  
mirrors instead. Or

ride the river rapids. Flash  
emerald against blue. Rise  
like a leaf in a whirlpool.

Your face can break   
the surface. Wet,  
wreathed with foam,  
you drink the cream.  
Breathe out  
again.

**Transgression at Hospice***For the woman with Alzheimer’s*

Her brain cells pop like plastic  
air bubbles shippers use  
for packing, for sending on  
breakables to other states.

Reminds her of a jack-in-the-box.  
She had one, once; she hears  
“Pop Goes the Weasel” playing  
now, waits for the lid to snap up  
as if clowns pounce  
from cramped places  
and clean, unlighted spaces, dark

pockets like pills. Round and hard  
they stick in her throat, dissolve  
eventually. She untangles   
her shoelaces, strips off support hose.  
Varicose veins bulge against skin,  
blue ink, the indelible kind.

She shrinks daily, a sliver   
of herself peeled to the core  
of apple seeds, moist  
with juices. Tipsy and cider-drunk,  
she steals out windows, out doors, out  
any open crack, a contortionist  
bending low under the limbo stick.

Her body a drum, skin stretched tight,  
reverberates with memories, too loud.  
Hammers pound, play her bones  
like a xylophone, up and down the scale:  
the mating dance. Back and forth,  
her legs straddle the stick, this side

then that. Silence, sudden as white  
elephants. Smooth as ivory tusks.

She scales mountains,  
a solitary climber, lost  
in the blizzard, pale as a papercut  
snowflake unfolded, pasted  
on a schoolroom window somewhere  
in the north. She searches toeholds  
in granite chinks. Igneous rocks  
forged by fire, cold now, coated  
in ice, hold her weight.

She pounds spikes into crevices  
above her, as far as she can reach.   
She uncoils cord from her waist,  
flings the lasso, pulls the slipknot  
tight. Up, fighting gravity, she  
ropedances. Eyes water in the wind.

Ends fraying, genetic ropes  
dangle down, twist through centuries.

When will he come? she begs nurses  
repeatedly, the suitor with hair slicked   
back, still damp. A dandy, her father  
warned. She parts curtains,  
watches for him. Today is

Tuesday, the nurses say again.   
At dinner time, your husband comes,  
feeds you, clips your nails. Must  
remember that. They yank her back.

**Travelogue: Dad’s Garage**

Look in the southwest corner, Dad’s own  
painted desert. Can upon can  
dripped gobs of color.

See the specks:  
our marigold kitchen wall, circa 1972.  
Avocado green for the living  
room. Sunset purple, royal blue,  
lavender, the aster pink all  
mixed by Harry’s Hardware back then  
when Dad skipped up Grandville Street  
with us, warning: Jump the cracks. Hold  
upright the aster, forget-me-not, violet,  
even the celery stalk for Harry.  
He matched all colors, stirred  
again and again. Our experiments  
exact: recreating life.   
A swirl of green added for father,  
who painted our world on April days  
each year, windows wide open  
was we held his ladder.

Check out the southeast corner. Dad’s own   
everglades. Hoses coiled into hummocks   
drizzled his days, his 80 Midwest years.

Count the summer sections:   
our sea wings, those brown   
inner tubes there at the bottom. Ragged  
as our toddler steps, lurching,  
twirling under Dad’s hand-held waterfall.  
That green tube with brass nozzle  
turned full blast during our teens.  
Dad misted seedlings, perennials,   
yews until delphiniums spiked blue,  
sunflowers swiveled toward light,  
furry faces dark  
as our own bodies,  
slick with baby oil and iodine.  
My sister and I   
grew into ourselves,  
our bellies against bluegrass  
knowing all the while our father  
would warn against burning, turn on   
the sprinkler. He, the water magician  
coaxed life from dry seeds.

Glance into the northeast   
and northwest corners, Dad’s own  
wilderness, full of wood and work.

That vise gripped broken chair legs  
until glue held the splinters  
together, healed  
his daughter’s hearts.  
This was his work.  
His shovel tilted there  
against the rake.  
He waited for Detroit snow,  
predicted by a lone forecaster,  
a record-breaking blizzard,  
below zero. When Dad wasn’t ready  
for cold or death, it came.

We two daughters zip our jackets  
against winter as we linger  
there in that unheated garage.   
We have come to clean,  
bundle up our youth in Hefty bags.  
We climb onto two blue bikes,  
wait for his hand  
snug against our backs.

Our feet pedal,  
round and round once more.  
We wobble forward on used Schwinns.  
Ahead and on our won,  
we pump the north wind home.

**Two Pine Cones**

I listen to crunch.   
My boots squash paper  
cups, one tin can,  
three bottle caps  
and oak leaves in the fall.

I hear it all  
as I walk. Murmur of voices  
screened by mesh, a shout  
metallic with gunshot fear. A dog  
yaps, wind shakes maple  
leaves that cling to wood. Every  
star clusters above me. Around  
the moon and over roofs, stars shoot,  
burn hot, drop at my feet. One  
wish I’m granted in all this noise.

Under a streetlight, scotch pines   
needle me, rub branch against branch. I am   
alone on suburban streets. My subdivision   
waits a mile up. I know its name,  
the house with my number, the place  
I bring back what I have found.

I set together  
two pinecones waxed with moonlight,  
stuffed with seeds.  
One balances upright against darkness.  
One tilts on its side, damaged.  
One slender twig cradles them.

Two broken scales. Love spirals  
out of control. The red squirrel feeds.

**Two-Way Mirror**

Then:  
You called me Calliope  
and heard with your lips.  
Your hands  
touched circus epics  
until clowns tap danced  
across the bridge  
of your nose  
in five seconds flat  
and your quiet laugh  
shattered crystal lies.

Now:  
You smile through windows  
as your concave eyes film  
moon craters  
of your soul’s surface,  
wait for volcanic lava  
to harden  
to petrify  
before the steamy words  
from droplets  
on the glass  
I cannot break.

**Uncle Amos**

Solid as a brick  
the rich folks on the ridge said  
whenever anyone asked. Someone  
they could count on to make things right  
when they were wrong

like when the carburetor plugged up  
on their new Oldsmobile 88s  
from the dust on the old county highway  
and no air could get through  
or when their silos rotted  
and crumbled plank by plank,  
full of carpenter ants still chewing  
and spitting sawdust. Wasn’t anything  
Uncle Amos couldn’t fix or rebuild  
better than new, most folks admitted.

But it was tougher jobs  
he hung his reputation on.  
Cases like that No Good Johnny Ray  
who could pluck a grandmother’s garnet ring  
from her finger without her even taking notice  
or eat a blueberry pie still in the oven  
without a trace of crust left in the tin  
or stain on his lips. Uncle Amos believed   
anyone, even Johnny Ray, had redeeming qualities  
even if they didn’t surface much. Before anyone knew  
what was missing, it was back in place.

Uncle Amos never let on how he did it,  
just hunched his shoulders,   
rubbed the back of his neck  
like he was working out some stiffness  
settling in his joints.

Even today, when ridge folks talk   
of Uncle Amos, they wish he was still around,  
bless his soul, they say, a solid person.  
As if he was  
nothing more than a red brick  
from the old Methodist church,  
part of the design built into their back patios  
beside the swimming pools, all Olympic size.

Wonder if they ever noticed  
how Uncle Amos’ eyes  
were the grey-brown color  
of a sparrow’s feather  
and his eyelids fluttered  
like wings in open space.

**Under the Microscope**

I was a child again  
last night scouting  
the perfect place where  
I knelt, scooped pondwater  
until my empty jelly jar was   
full of wetness,  
my own piece of pond I carried   
home with the tadpole swimming  
side to side. Overnight, sediment  
dropped to the bottom and I saw  
more clearly all my barefoot days.

Squeeze just one transparent drop  
from my pond jar I urged students,  
onto your sterile glass slide.  
Now gaze at life  
magnified. Stare long enough   
for green dots, strands, squiggles  
of algae. Watch them multiply  
before your eyes. Ah, you see the yellow hairs  
sway like your own as you toss  
your head, lift your eyes confused.

**Untitled**

I have never seen  
the big brass, the faceless one,  
all angular arms. His pinchers  
grip our round: a few countries  
or maybe even blue oceans  
wet enough to drop. No safety net.

Centuries of wars, famine, plagues,  
tarnish our ball, pile weight on one side,  
then the other. We all scurry,  
here to there. We slide past  
his brass forearm, past his wrist bone,  
right into his palm. We dangle there.

The big brass can not  
be bribed with gold. He will protest   
declarations, explanations, proclamations,  
tallies of wrong that may be right. NO,  
he commands balance up, down, across  
and around. Resist and go to jail.

The strategy of brass is white button.  
A fingertip temptation.

**Upon Being Asked for Advice**

You mapped your face in mirrors  
for fifty years. Traced  
every open pore, closed  
mouth bracketed by worry  
lines. Two furrows

cut deep between your brows  
cradled your babies, held them  
close. Safe behind your eyes. You  
swaddled them in your own  
imperfections, reversed reflections.  
Skin to skin, they knew

you inside out and   
outside in

as I did, my friend. Do you  
want to chart, again,  
your whole geography? Change  
our ways of seeing: who you are  
and where you’ve been? All

this medical sorcery  
the price for skin pulled tight  
as a girdle, holding in  
what should be let out? Do you

choose a pattern  
in your size? Does it fit  
with seams, stitches, tucks  
like a child’s outgrown smock?  
Will it

make your skin transparent,  
luminescent, hold your death  
day in abeyance: a distant,  
fluorescent green glow?

Too dark for opaque mirrors,  
your dread. Look into silver  
mirrors, instead. Or

ride the river rapids. Flash  
green against blue and rise  
like a leaf in a whirlpool.

Your face can break the surface.  
Wet and wreathed with foam,  
you drink the cream  
and breathe again.

**Uptown Jazz**

The jazzman’s fingers skitter  
over the naturals, jounce off  
sharps and flats. He plays  
in that place where no one   
can live for long,  
where the first star’s bright  
wish light sucks him up,  
up where storms brew inside  
white clouds, where lightning licks  
the licorice sky before his rhythm  
rattles hickory roots, grumbles,  
tumbles into the heartwood,  
slides under the ebony and ivory.

Musical notes rumble  
in the jazzman’s belly,  
primitive sounds he can’t  
write down, won’t remember  
tomorrow. His throat grunts  
with each chord, each key  
his fingers stroke, his song  
from the start. Only him  
and wind and fire  
and water and dirt.

**Vapor Rising**

November is the cold month  
when black nights fall into black  
Lake Superior which rocks its dead  
whose souls rise to white,  
curl into luminescent wisps of loss,  
of memories strong enough to hold  
the hull, pregnant with cargo

like me rounded and full of life,  
my belly an aquarium  
where one fish swims safe  
in dark water without sight.

I stand watch, legs braced  
against pain in this pilot house  
as I navigate our passage  
through each contraction,  
each breath I take for you,  
my child, who knows nothing  
of life or death or reasons  
why one freighter splits a path  
in this opaque night you breach.

Water breaks warmer than air tonight.  
Vapor rises white as cumulus clouds  
that float this vessel, this child of mine.

**View from My Blue Bungalow**

The woman next door lost her job last year  
and can’t find hope anywhere,  
not even on her couch  
behind the yellow beaded pillow  
from India where the elephant is frozen in time,  
its trunk raised for good luck when in truth  
no one has any luck at all these days.

What with the cost of coffee, my friend  
down the street is tempted to give up  
the drink altogether but his brain fogs  
from lack of caffeine. He begs  
the neighborhood watch group  
for day-old coffee, even discarded grounds  
good enough for one more perk, one more drip,  
enough to sip while he searches  
for some job a man might slip into   
as if he had never slipped out.

Even the for-sale signs on my dusty street  
have faded and tipped onto dry dirt  
where nothing takes root.

**The Vigil of the Man with One Good Eye**

I knew the man, his one good eye  
turned sideways toward the northeast,  
full of storm clouds that blotted  
the ink-stained sky. He watched

for you, prayed for your passage  
while he called home the swallows  
lost in air, buffeted by wind currents   
like you. He charted your ragged course

toward shore, warned you with a single light  
that you would crash on jagged rocks  
submerged, lurking there to slice your hull  
sink you in your ignorance of how to navigate

past the siren who sings her sweet song  
of death, of promises that will not be  
if you abandon course. The man with  
one good eye sees past the danger of what is,  
straight to your vision of what could be

if only you wait for clear weather. Listen!  
Hear the metallic sound of the bell? Taste  
that sharp bite of metal? Swallow dark air.   
See the one-eyed man above the waves?

He rings you out to the center, the deepest place  
where I once pumped his hand, wet with foam.

**Vineyards**

Hummingbird words buzz in my ear,  
hover about my eyes,  
lose me when I was found  
unconscious on city streets,  
awaken me in vineyards  
with ruby-throated sounds,  
the nectar sweet on my tongue.  
Slender bills draw juices,  
drip wine into my parted lips.

**Waiting for You at Morels Restaurant**

A pink-suited woman asked  
about the empty seat  
next to me. That oak chair  
full of air, standing there  
behind the place set for you

next to me. From the other side  
she leaned over her gold-rimmed plate,  
over chicken, two half breasts  
browned and simmered in wine  
sauce flecked with morels.

For flavoring, she said. The black  
morels can be gathered. Look  
north near wet elm leaves in shade.  
Like men who stake an empty chair  
you will find fungus growing there.

**The Waitress at Big Boy**

For two years, the same  
plump waitress wobbles over  
to my red vinyl booth.  
Her eyes rest on the plate  
glass window behind me.

Color her face red  
like a check in Big Boy’s pants,  
like a limp tomato slice  
tucked under the lettuce  
in the green, green salad bar.

She chants her litany,  
all the specials she can offer:  
a Big Boy with its secret sauce,  
the Slim Jim with French fries,  
a fresh strawberry pie with whipped cream.

I do not know what to call this waitress  
who wears no name tag,  
who licks the tip of her pencil  
ready to record whatever  
I may order. She writes the exact price.

No-name turns away with my choices  
clutched in her fist as if she may forget  
everything if she doesn’t hold on tight.  
Her shoelaces drag on the tiled floor,  
pulling crumbs of bread along behind.

Grey hair falls over her right eye.  
Her feet slip-slide to my table.  
She looks at no one, just sets  
dishes in front of me. Her no-polish  
no-shape, frayed nails betray her.

She walks many miles  
every year and arrives  
nowhere she ever wants to go,  
and she has no cat at home,   
not even a grey kitten.

I imagine her name is Ruth.

**The Way in Is the Way Out**

I lost me somewhere  
among the tire tracks  
on a rutted winter road.

Spring cycled me around.  
I walked alone into the toothless  
mouth of the sun’s labyrinth.

Here, I gave myself up,  
stumbled over hot stones,  
resisted magnetic forces.

Green hedges grew toward me.  
Such stiff, dense, unyielding  
walls nudged me ever inward.

I spiraled toward the center,  
toward that open space where I would  
melt into a bubbling yellow puddle.

I feared evaporation,  
the permanent loss of substance,  
nothing left of me in this clearing.

Imagine how each yellow bubble rose  
on air currents, broke into nothingness.  
From such emptiness, I formed my meaning.

This is my story of transformation.  
As solar flares blazed, I could see  
I was where I was supposed to be.

**Weaving Her Tapestry**

People come at her as she lies  
woven into her narrow bed  
by spider-lines  
drawn tight against life’s loom.  
Transparent fibers bind  
her fresh-spun dreams,  
bring faces back again  
in the city’s oiled night.

It’s him, above her,   
coming back in blackness,  
his marionette arms  
pointing behind him  
at vacuous woman-faces  
sewed into her brain  
before he left her bed  
and chose  
grey-eyed girls with silver bodies  
to walk his soul past midnight’s ledge.  
He talks to her of times they’ve known—  
 blackberry brandy years  
 when moon crickets  
 serenaded the sound  
 of bodies  
 coming together.

She cannot close eyelids  
stitched open with spider-threads  
or move her flattened fingers  
from the tapestry  
to touch the flesh  
of those who greet her.

A childhood friend returns,  
older now,  
too old.  
Her breasts droop;  
the paper voice recalls—  
 worn Kentucky bluegrass  
 between their houses  
 where painted dolls lost smiles  
in the rain   
as two girls snuggled together  
under crazy-patch quilts,  
talked of boys  
and flat chests growing  
into cupped hands.

Now her mother,   
dragging Father behind,  
kneels over her,  
murmurs magic chants.  
Onion skins, mosquitos’ wings,  
Circe’s voice, one black hair,  
the midwife’s cure.  
Two voices remember—  
 cypress knees skinned  
 on gravel swamp paths,  
 summer’s hair plaited  
 against autumn winds.  
 The child who was  
 before she came  
 is wedding white.

Morning light rewinds  
tangled threads   
and she rises  
from her deathbed,  
dressed in a sheet of white.

**The Weight of Water**

The flash and dazzle of this lake of giggling children disappear under the wet, lost in blue-green shades of in-between. My son dangles upside down from a fishing line sharp enough to half the sky if it were black, a stain against the very air he breathes. No more than a glint of skin covers his skeleton, my son’s white bones concealed in secret.

Confusion reigns when my son bursts into flame. Beside him, a lake trout leaps and dives as its flank and tail flip, flaunt red spots with blue halos. Scales weigh the distance between water and air. Waves of light wiggle through the sky. The sun explodes in an orange fireball crunched between the scorched molars of noon. One drop of water on a lily pad illuminates forest green under royal blue. Children frost the waves with glitter.

Freeze the moment like ice before it melts.

**What Cold Cell is This?**

The police arrested Tillie Mae  
when she roamed Oakwood Cemetery  
after midnight. Even the Big Dipper hid  
under the black blanket stretched  
across the sky. No constellations

claimed their brilliance above Tillie Mae  
whose radiance flared from a flash-  
light wobble and old batteries.  
With one stiff finger she traced the names  
carved on her family’s headstones.

Last in the line in this small town  
on this November night, Tillie Mae  
spread her best lace tablecloth, set the chicken  
wings just right before she asked her mother,  
“Who would care? Who would

summon the police  
to this ghostly place  
all because of a failing light  
slicing the night?” Tillie Mae’s frail voice  
cracked with such terrible loneliness.

**What Happened at Loon Lake**

No one swims today.  
Cool fall breezes ripple my skin,  
skitter across Loon Lake, hurry   
water skippers over its surface,  
rustle the heart-shaped lily pads  
still green after 30 years as if  
the whole scene graces a post card  
with only white space on the back  
empty of memories anyone   
would dare write   
about that day  
I must remember.

I make myself  
listen for the splash of wet  
drops against my skin, the watery   
memory of laughter, the gurgle  
of adolescent girls, my four friends  
as they dive under water  
and split the surface back then  
when their swim caps bloomed  
fluorescent flowers all the rage.  
Those four young heads crowned  
with lime rubber petals, hot  
pink, even orange, float  
right there among white water   
lilies. So much life full of fragrance.

I lie  
sun-soaked on shore. My toes  
curl over grains of sand, measure  
seconds the sun remains  
behind clouds, the very moment  
I did not answer   
my friends’ calls to come on in  
the water’s fine I did not  
want to wear my swim cap  
without flowers of any kind  
without the iridescence of even  
one loon feather or a bluegill’s fin.  
I hunch today  
on shore, unable to name  
the exact moment one  
friend slipped under the skin  
of Loon Lake, her lime green  
flower returned to seed.

I know now  
death occurs between  
the opening  
and closing of one  
white water lily  
luminescent before night  
drops over Loon Lake.

**What I Remembered**

I was only six,  
old enough to never forget.

We were in a hurry that day,  
late to my ballet lesson.

Mama was driving, talking out the side  
of her mouth, *You never, ever listen.*

And she smacked my bare leg. I think  
I remember the sound and the red mark.

I knew she wished I would cry, hoped I would  
say I was sorry as if that would make it all right.

She was looking at me when it happened.   
I saw it coming. *Go back, stop* I screamed.

I saw the blur of red fur, heard the horrible  
thump against my door. Mama stopped the car.

She never came all the way around or kneeled  
down or stroked the red fur wet with blood. I saw.

*God damn dog,* she muttered. I opened my mouth.  
*Shut up. It’s all your fault. And don’t you ever forget.*

**What Might Have Been**

My ears have seen  
the very moment  
when dawn breaks  
into a thousand shards.

My eyes have heard  
the shatter, the scatter  
the deafening scrunch  
of rose-colored lens under foot.

After the petals of pink tulips  
drift from their grass-green stems,  
after the puzzle of pieces jumble,   
no glue can hold.

**What Robins and Starlings Have to Say**

I just found a dead robin  
on the basement floor of my new house.  
No, I did not leave  
front doors open. I slammed  
every window, twisted every lock  
against intruders. I swear I did. No,  
I have never owned  
a cat or dog. I would never accept  
a pet whose teeth could crunch fragile bones,  
could force me down on hands and knees  
in grief. Do not accuse me  
of forgetfulness or negligence.  
Do not blame me  
for this corpse. No.

How did this robin sneak  
past me, sidle through   
some invisible crack  
in the foundation? How?

I only know  
the dead robin on the basement floor  
of my new house does not sing.  
Such silence speaks of red feathers,  
a throat swollen with unshed noise.  
Do not warn me of death ahead.  
Such tittle-tattle tangles me  
in dreams where robins peck  
me bald, weave my hair into nests  
where baby robins rest and chirp  
as if nothing can invade their space.

I will bury  
my bundle of brown and red,  
in a shoebox under the cherry tree.  
Let this be the end. I refuse  
to see this as an omen.  
Death would only dare  
present itself as a blue-black starling,  
strut across frozen ground  
straight to the front door  
scream *caw, caw, caw*  
until it got in. Its three-pronged feet  
would sink into my white carpet,  
present another puzzle I can not solve.

**What the Old Woman Sees from Her   
Frosted Window**

The old woman wanders when dusk drops,  
glints on the frosted window  
cracked with age and a rock  
thrown at her second floor flat  
yesterday by some boy who stared at her  
long and hard before  
he tossed that rock, before  
he split her window  
in half. She still sees  
the rock as it rises and falls,  
the boy as he struts off,  
his Detroit Tigers cap twisted backwards.

On this night of the first snow,  
the old woman changes into her   
white ruffled nightdress, her very best.  
She rests her forehead  
cold against the window  
frosted with her breath.  
She counts dormant trees  
those big, dark trunks of sleep  
across the street. Five maples  
rooted there. Their branches hold,  
then break in wind sway.  
Twigs snap, twirl to white,  
One trunk moves with two legs  
across the crunch, leans  
into the blizzard, raises two arms  
as if any human can  
hold back the sodden dark,  
keep this night from falling.

**What the Photographer Found   
on the Abandoned Street**

Brown pill bottles crammed with dirt,  
clay, sand and concrete bits lined the window sills  
of one tipsy house without a roof where air  
and crows could perch. NO doors or window panes  
slowed entry into vacant space unadvertised,   
unwatched even when fire swallowed one whole wall  
last week and spit black-red embers  
onto parched ground, hard as hope.

The photographer focused on the torn,  
white labels, the names of pills faded, the dosages  
smeared, the patient’s name illegible,  
the pharmacist’s address gone like whoever lived  
in this house with brown pill bottles. The noon sun  
burned into the bottles as he unscrewed   
white, plastic caps, poured out bits of earth,  
photographed the sediment of one man’s life.

**What the Thief Took**

At eighty-eight, Sam did not know what he looked like,  
the man who stole his wallet at the Dollar General store  
and became him.  
That no-good, money-grubbing guy  
overdosed on The Suicide Machines’  
*Destruction by Definition* paid for  
with Sam’s credit card. The next bill listed  
a fur-lined leather coat, a room at the casino  
and other stuff Sam never bought.  
He conjured up a young crook,   
with black hair combed straight back  
but always falling forward. Nothing stayed   
where it was. Even Sam’s wallet took a hike.

No matter what anyone said, Sam lost who he was  
in the aisle of orange plastic Easter lilies at the Dollar  
General store and he would never get himself back.  
Even when he looked through the plate glass window,  
no reflections took his shape. He lost his way home  
more frequently as if he were wandering about  
on the last half inch of his ruled life  
searching for his name and finding only   
streets he could not recognize and wearing a red-striped  
wool hat he would never pull down over his ears  
like some goofy kid with no name,  
shuddering as he wobbled through December,  
snow piling up at his feet.

**What We Did the Last Night of the Year**

Even my dog let loose howls  
my neighbors pretended they didn’t hear  
tonight. Too many one-note party horns blasted the air.  
Too many feet slinked up the stairs and around the corner  
and tap-tapped into the bedroom on the second floor  
where men snatched winter coats  
worn by those women who slipped out the back door  
and later snuck back to tip whiskey down their throats  
thrilled at the risks they dared before the last  
tick of midnight faced them forward.

Maybe twenty neighbors crammed together  
under blue, crepe paper twists in the basement  
where the whole neighborhood could fit  
if they didn’t settle for too long  
under aluminum stars dangled from silver threads.  
Arms reached out helter skelter, fingertips slid along  
cheek bones, lips pressed lips and feet slip-slided  
on the tile floor. Wiggly bodies dripped sweat.  
people yelled for their spouses, aroused  
when the end moved nearer and a last kiss  
became the first, hovering   
between lost and found.

One man scurried home  
alone before the final, fatal tick.  
The changing of the years,  
the tick tock of clocks   
echoed in his head.  
He stroked his gun  
three times, tilted the barrel toward the sky.  
When he squeezed the trigger,   
the bullet split the air above his head.  
He did not see  
where it lodged or if  
blood flowed in the new year.

**What Women Know**

The fire moon ignites,  
burns to red lace  
passion in my scarlet room.

With my eyes shuttered,  
my fingers stroll  
across my flesh.

I read each bump, each   
pink point of your message  
coded in braille on my skin.

Listen for the shush,  
the slide of skin against skin  
as we speak in hot, red tongues.

Flames blind me and I cannot hear  
the words you do not say aloud  
over the hissing sound of heat.

Women know the lesson of red lace,  
the way the embers cool to black.

**What You Throw Away**

I am the insomniac  
dragging sleep behind me  
like an empty red wagon  
full of night air. My house

slippers slide over concrete walks  
past your house of dreams  
where you rest not knowing  
how I steal what

you discard of yourself every week  
on trash day. I mine bits of you:  
letters from your lover, leftover  
chicken bones, mostly wings and thighs

reminders of flesh against flesh, whiskey  
warmth drained from the bottle, red roses  
crumbled to dust, razor blades too dull  
for blood or skin and I carry these trinkets

in my wagon for nights.  
I dare not close my eyes.

**When Birds Fly South**

Even the birds have left me alone  
with an empty bird house and frozen seeds  
like my husband who drove away Saturday.

**When I Was Unlearned**

My fifth grade science teacher  
stuffed students into formaldehyde jars,  
studied the unborn embryos  
curled in the dark liquid,  
labelled on sterile white squares,  
their various stages of unbirth.

In my dream-soaked bed,  
his bald head glistened  
like a fish’s belly  
on the dissecting table  
as I raised my steel knife  
and cleanly slit a line  
to probe his printer’s-drawer mind  
with its letters, numbers, signs  
neatly categorized, a definite  
order. Letters without words.  
With jagged stitches, I  
sewed the gap   
and closed my eyes.

**When I Speak Out**

I shall uncross my blue-veined legs,  
unclench my hands  
folded against my skirt of forget-me-nots.

Fingers lace like shoestrings;  
I shall pick at my knots  
until my fingernails fray  
and white moons at the base rise up  
toward the crest of a snow-capped mountain  
where my toes tip my feet on end

as if I were the only Wall Street stockbroker,  
the clear-sighted woman above the crowd,  
my arms bare to my elbows, naked skin  
exposed as I cradle international markets  
with products and companies bought, sold  
and rocked against my flesh.

As if these stocks, commodities and bonds  
were more than mere paper pulp and ink,  
more than glaciers  
slipping into valleys, melting  
into salty seas and carving out

the space   
where I shall stand erect  
and drink my toast  
to red cedars and blue spruce  
that split night skies between themselves  
just as I, nourished on brine,  
shall grow taller than these trees

until my head pokes through cumulous clouds  
and seeds the darkness  
with words of rain.

**When the Narrator Speaks**

If leaves  
curl from aphids thick on blaze roses,

release five hundred ladybugs,  
a plague of open mouths, a flurry of red-beetle wings.

When the white moon rises  
before the pink sun recoils from the day,

turn toward the moon, a mere sliver tonight,  
a curve of promise towing the silver sea.

Do not be angry at the red lips of the forest fire  
as they gobble green, spit out ash.

Brush aside dust on long, wet days  
until pine seedlings stitch scars and fireweed flowers.

And when the creek vanishes in dry air,  
when fish flounder on sand and ghosts rustle the grass,

lie down in the bed where nothing can sleep.  
Hear the story of stones, the hoarse tale of leaves.

**When the Petals Drop**

Four separate seedlings gloom their beginning—  
one purple sweet alyssum close to the ground,  
a squat marmalade marigold, a hot pink impatiens   
with a white throat, and a viola dressed  
in five loose petals above heart-shaped leaves.

Above these flowers my sweet-faced,  
green-limbed grandson tilts his watering can,  
wants more leaves, more flowers, more  
life as water pours from the spout.

Five viola petals fall ever so slowly  
onto the black earth before he bends  
and picks up each yellow-orange petal  
and puts it oh so carefully in his pocket.

**When You Hear the Story**

Think of Goldilocks who tested  
her existence by the rule of threes  
and settled for the middle,  
for the just-right porridge. She   
dropped into dreamland  
only when she laid herself out  
on the not-too-hard, not-too-soft bed,  
exposed on top of the quilt, not under.

All three bears gaped and grumbled  
when they discovered this uncovered  
intruder who had gobbled  
the mother’s bowl of porridge  
after only a nibble of the two extremes,  
thank goodness. For all Goldilocks knew,  
father bear might have clutched her tight,  
squeezed her dead  
if she had preferred hot or cold  
instead of choosing just-right.

A more gifted storyteller would have   
pawed the dirt, then stood up  
on two hind legs, would have  
gone for the drama of too hot  
or too cold. Forget the facts.  
Hear what you want.  
The truth lingers in the telling.

**Where Our Enemy Lived**

My best friend and I wrote  
directions to our enemy’s house.

Turn left at the end of Oak onto Elm,  
streets named before Dutch elm disease

devastated blocks of trees. DDT spray almost  
killed us even though we hardly breathed

that Detroit summer in 1955 when we were   
twelve and skinny as sticks. Our enemy’s fat mouth

called us “a carpenter’s dream,” as if  
our chests would never swell.

Must have been a million times  
we rang his bell and hid behind his dead

trees near the street. He could not see  
us crouched there, hunched

in our own soft shells, satisfied and dangerous,  
beautiful beneath our thin skin.

**Wicker Chair and Coreopsis**

My mother left this white wicker chair  
to me who knew the intricacy of the weave,  
the way each strand overlapped  
and wrapped over and under itself,  
creating the pattern of us.

There in her private place I listened  
when she hummed like the wind rustling leaves  
in the plum tree. She whistled sparrows to the ground:  
t-weet, t-weet, t-weet. She could make me hear   
the rise and fall of butterfly wings in air.

Mother kept her sewing basket full of thread  
on the white wicker table. All colors  
moved through the eye of her needle: the deep blue  
of a jay’s wing feather, the red of her blazing roses  
climbing the fence, the white of clouds shifting shape.

From pieces of fabric, she designed my clothes,  
knowing what would fit, what would bring out  
my coloring, what would move with me like skin  
when I was ten and growing faster than grass.  
She sewed me into myself, leaving seams to let out.

I watched her fingers move, the needle flash in  
and out of cloth as she turned flat flowered cotton  
into a full skirt buttoned at the waist. She was  
a magician who taught me how to sit quietly and wait  
for coreopsis buds to open into gold suns at our feet.

Every year the coreopsis bloom on the same day  
and I place the white wicker chair and table just right.  
Light weaves my mother’s shape in that quiet space  
and I hum along with mother’s songs, hear leaves fall  
as mother performs her magic tricks and all is an illusion.

**Wild Field of Men**

I name the vegetation  
at my house: crabgrass, bent grass,  
ryegrass, Kentucky bluegrass and one weeping  
willow down at the creek where I toss  
memories of men. Like stones, they sink.  
I’m reminded of Tim when I smooth  
a blade of grass between my fingertips,  
slit it with my tongue and whistle  
a shrill blast in the August heat, a warning  
call to those randy dandy slivers of men  
who invaded my lawn on summer days.  
I still recall their pale flesh  
feel their hands like insects crawling up my leg.

I know the Latin names of flowers  
as well as my neighbor’s maiden name  
embraced after her divorce. Since then,  
she won’t answer her door when salesmen  
knock or petition bearers wave their clipboards.  
She wants nothing and no cause is good enough.  
Yesterday, I watched her cut a daylily  
doomed to die that night.  
She poked the fragile flower through  
the top buttonhole of her black blouse.  
Orange pollen bloomed on her right breast.

I plant sentries, yellow marigolds, brilliant  
suns firing messages into the sky.  
These guards are women who run  
for life and tell our stories in dance and song.  
Their names nourish me and my neighbor  
as we toil in our gardens.

**Window of the Black Moon**[[1]](#footnote-1)

February is the fast month,   
full of shackled hearts and lunacy,  
that cold, cold month when cousin Mark  
limped off the plane at Metro,  
thrown out of Vietnam, no longer in uniform,  
with silver crutches  
and one pinned-up pant leg.

His mind a savaged moon  
puckered with unmapped craters  
where the air strikes whistled  
a catchy refrain to an old, old tune:  
Persian Gulf, Iraq, Kosovo.

He alone faced the TV news,  
with red-streaked eyes,  
with tributaries of red, red blood  
flowing pure from the source,  
his heart.

Even today,  
he longs for war, a bloody battle  
against the black, black moon  
that bumps against his chest.

**The Woman’s Field Guide to Survival**

I have seen the chrysalis  
of the painted lady. Her  
brown house is upside-down  
before walls crack and fall away  
from the green, globe thistle leaf,  
from her butterfly body slick as mine.  
Motionless  
we hang onto the damp hours before dawn

and count the high cost  
of a single wrong choice,  
a split-second indiscretion

before our colors blossom: our camouflage complete.  
Our wings tipped with eyespots expand, a burst  
of pink and purple woven lace across our backs  
strong as any grocery sack that holds our sun.

I have seen the painted lady  
perch on goldenrod  
and heard her wings rustle against my lips  
as she wrangles the wind with me.

We hear the whisk and woosh  
as the blue jay tilts his beak  
and dives for us.  
He may get one

eyespot but we still see  
the everlastings, white puffs  
of baby’s breath and moon-red  
crests of cockscomb. I have seen

the painted lady  
lay her froth of eggs and leave me  
alone in wetlands

where I stand on one leg  
in the warm shallows  
like a blue heron. I choose

fish words that streak  
through waves and I wait  
for one perfect trout.

**Women Past and Present**

See the darkness in my eyes  
inherited from my grandmother  
who came to this country  
from another place  
where women plucked tomatoes  
from tangled vines, bit through  
skin, chewed chunks of red,  
let juices dry on their chin  
in remembrance of green words  
unsaid, growling in their throats.

Here she settled on farmland,  
knowing soil could be tilled,  
planted with wheat and corn  
or lay fallow for a season.  
She picked corn, shucked ear  
after ear, tossed tasseled silk  
in the compost heap where it decayed  
with green husks and table scraps,   
a fertilizer for next year’s crop  
which rooted in her eyes  
and withered in the drought.

On this land, she waited for a sign,  
gave birth to my mother  
who gave life to me on city streets  
one November day when snow  
froze its crust of ice  
over my mother’s eyes shut in pain  
until she cradled me and saw  
my grandmother’s eyes, her own eyes  
staring back unblinking, black as screams  
echoed by generations of women  
who want their voices heard  
through the ragged drapes of time.

**Women’s Poems**

Women’s poems are personal.  
Politely phrased participles modify, clarify  
identify sauerkraut boiled on back burners  
and onion rings fried round their fingers.  
Odors crest like waves,  
crash against typewriter keys,  
cramped fingers snap like lima beans.  
Their words encased in skin,  
stripped now to kernels.

Women serve stanzas on stoneware.  
Iris lie in sinks. Cut stems  
leak milk onto porcelain  
and husbands, mothers children even  
lovers wash their hands  
in poems, read at conferences   
to other women who wrap their hearts  
in IBM ribbons and paint  
their faces with liquid paper.

**Words from the Showerhead on My Birthday**

Clearing of the throat:  
Nagged and pounded,  
straight down wet.  
You glistened.  
You forgot:  
the meat thawed  
and red-run  
spoiled. Hot  
water leashed,  
treated on schedule,  
a city decree,  
a birthday trust in purity.  
You remembered:   
white, the coconut cake,  
blue-tipped orange,  
the candles’ flames  
extinguished that familiar song.  
You raked:  
red maple leaves  
cupping rain. Little  
birthday boats afloat,  
sunk under by   
tire treads rolled over  
November.   
You lit:  
the arson spark,  
the ark of pairs,  
the hope in dreams  
beyond despair.  
Liquid birth  
day. Celebrate  
the miracle of waterfalls,  
the day’s beginning.

**Writing a Poem**

Think of it this way:  
 a tangled ball  
 of words  
 wrapped loosely.

Fling out the yo-yo string.  
Make it sleep, walk,  
go around-the-world  
and back to the cradle.  
Humming, purring, pulling  
the metallic plastic moon  
toward white harvest pages.

Or tug red-ribbon mornings  
from the center of the sphere.  
Iron them into party bows  
perched on packages  
full of silk images  
and velvet phrases  
slithering across paper,  
shedding dead skin.

Yank the dangling sisal.  
Shake those jumbled words  
until frayed fiber ends  
cover erasures  
and empty space.  
Twist stanzas  
into one taut rope.

Walk that poem  
around the block  
and back  
again.

**Yellow Pencil #2 with Pink Eraser**

Do you   
still believe a pencil can kill  
you or someone you love  
or some strange man standing  
in aisle six at the giant Kroger  
store who licks his pencil lead  
(you know how you do this too  
out of habit)? He prints *bread*  
in tiny, damp letters  
making sure he doesn’t forget  
anything, especially not  
the pencil he tucks back  
into his pocket where it lurks,  
a concealed weapon  
stashed next to his gun.

Back in first grade, your mother told you  
her teacher had warned her whole class  
(and more than once so it must be  
true your mother said) not to  
suck on the yellow pencil lead  
you just sharpened or your teeth  
would turn black from the poison   
and the yellow wood shavings   
would slip down your throat  
ride your blood to your heart  
where your own wet words pile up  
sharp and shiny as meat cleavers.

And you all believed what you heard  
back then about the dirty place  
where bad kids stayed behind bars  
(and where you would be sent if  
you didn’t behave and you did,  
sort of) and these boys only got pencils  
from the guards who wouldn’t shave  
the wood or the lead tip  
so the boys couldn’t write their stories  
couldn’t even stab their dark points  
or erase themselves without a smudge.

Everything is something else. Be certain  
where death lurks (check behind your eyes).  
Yesterday yellow pencil paint lost its lead.

**Yin Yang — Tibet**

I make my pilgrimage to Lhasa,  
cradled like a lotus flower   
in the Himalayan mountains.

Yak butter candles burn  
behind doors of monasteries,  
the smell of resurrection.

One red-orange door fuels my passion  
for the yin-yang balance   
of Tibet’s life after death.

That closed door calls forth brown earth,  
blue water, yellow fire, strong winds,  
thin air and the consciousness of creation.

My hand yearns to tug the leather strap,  
enter into centuries of spirits who linger  
behind weathered wood, waiting for me.

Still, I hear shadow stories on wind,  
the way life was back then when Dalai Lama  
and all Buddhists prayed for enlightenment.

The knot of eternity is never-ending,  
even for me who journeyed far enough  
and high enough through Tibetan doors.

I circle this monastery three times,  
prostrate myself on the threshold,  
plant a prayer flag for freedom.

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Carol Carpenter’s poems and stories have appeared in numerous online and print publication, including: *Connecticut Review, Snake Nation Review, Birmingham Arts Journal, Georgetown Review, Caveat Lector, Orbis, Arabesques Review,* and various anthologies, the most recent are *Not What I Expected* (Paycock Press, 2007) and *Wild Things* (Outrider Press, 2008). Her work has been exhibited by art galleries and produced as podcasts (*Connecticut Review and Bound Off*). She received the Hart Crane Memorial Award, the Richard Eberhart Prize for Poetry, the Jean Siegel Pearson Poetry Award, Artists Among Us Award, and others. Formerly a college writing instructor, journalist, and trainer, she now writes full-time in Livonia, Michigan.

1. “The days just before and after February 26 when the moon is dark may offer the ideal window for US forces to launch a nighttime attack on Iraq.” *The Detroit News*, 02/12/1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)