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A Pin Holds the Broken in Place

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**PURDUE UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL
Thesis/Dissertation Acceptance**

This is to certify that the thesis/dissertation prepared

By Elizabeth Jane Cooley

Entitled

A Pin Holds the Broken in Place

For the degree of Master of Fine Arts



Is approved by the final examining committee:

Marianne Boruch

Chair

Robert Hicok

Kristina Bross

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Approved by Major Professor(s): Marianne Boruch

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Head of the Departmental Graduate Program

4/15/2016

Date

A PIN HOLDS THE BROKEN IN PLACE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Purdue University

by

Elizabeth Jane Cooley

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

of

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ABSTRACT

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These poems attempt to liken; that is, to consider how seemingly different objects, ideas, and people can fit on the page together and say something new about each other. So broken buildings and memories are pitted against each other. Dream and reality blur, as they do in dreams and reality. The unexpected fits together: muscles, flight, and cathedral arcs; bridges and grief; swimming and deafness; dreams and meditation; MRI machines and classical music. It's all held together, barely, with that pin.

PREFACE

Nearly every night the summer before entering my MFA I spent at my parents' house in Milwaukee watching episodes of PBS's *Nature* with my grandfather. They were typical nature documentaries: we're rooting for the tiny bird, we're also rooting for the fox, both are struggling in the world, we love them both, the fox eats the bird, we're heartbroken for the bird, somehow happy for the fox, we don't know how to feel both at once. I was watching those shows as I always had, amazed by nature, by these animals, amused by the dramatic voice-over, how it fit every time into those nature documentary stereotypes, feeling for the bird and also glad for the fox and his meal.

I don't know how much of it my grandfather understood. His dementia was advanced by that point; he was living in my parents' house as patient more than father because he needed their help, couldn't make his own food or take his medication or use the bathroom or bathe on his own. He wasn't the grandfather I remembered from my childhood—one who read the books in his Library of America series in chronological order not only by author but also by book, so he read Emerson's *Nature*, then *Society and Solitude*, then Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* and *Walden*. My grandfather said he understood the trajectory of literature this way—how each movement bled into the next—as well as the trajectory of individual writers. After he retired, my grandfather began completing the Sudoku puzzles in the newspaper, then stopped because he said

they were too easy. He'd developed an algorithm that worked for all of them and it wasn't a challenge anymore.

He was a World War II veteran, Navy, Pacific Islands. He went away on a minesweeper (as seen in "Dear Love Poem, Dear Memory") toward the end of the war, 18 years old. He left as soon as he could. He and his shipmates looked for leftover bombs in the water and when they found them turned the ship, chugged it far enough away, turned around, and exploded the bomb. My grandfather, amateur artist, amateur swimmer, sketched the bottom of the ocean floor pre-drones, pre-underwater video camera. He held his breath as long as he could (minutes, he told us), looked all over the bottom of the sea, popped up and sketched what he saw on the page. In my parents' house are two of these sketches, the ocean near the Marshall Islands hand-drawn by my grandfather, his steady hand. The drawings sit in the entry foyer, next to my grandfather's watercolors—mushrooms and fungi—and a sketch of the minesweeper itself, a steel ship that looks big until I think about anyone spending months on it during a war. Periodically diving off it must have felt like freedom.

By the time I started living there that summer, my grandfather didn't remember any of his family. He regularly asked who I was, who my parents were, where he was, whose house. My mother gave him a Sudoku puzzle and he couldn't finish it. He couldn't read anything of much length because he couldn't remember what he'd already read. He couldn't see well. My mother started to read him poems, one at a time. Those, he seemed vaguely to understand.

When we watched *Nature* those three months together, my parents out at meetings or getting work done upstairs, I remembered the old grandfather—taking hikes

with him, his telling me the names of planets and constellations and where to find them in the sky. Those nights in the living room in front of the TV, we were in nature again, together, listening to those birds, on the look-out for foxes. I think he liked the show because it wasn't a story really. He didn't have to remember some narrative arc to understand it but just enjoy what he saw there, like he could enjoy the poems as they happened. Short snippets. Pockets of images. Blasts of sound.

...

I was an outdoorsy kid, probably by nature. My outdoorsy parents took my younger sister Becca and me camping in South Dakota, to the Badlands and the Black Hills rather than Disney World. As soon as I was gifted it, I took a little book of Emily Dickinson poems with me nearly everywhere I went in the world—hiking in New Hampshire, sitting on Lake Michigan's beach so close to my house, cross-country skiing up north in a little rented cabin in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. I loved Dickinson's snippets, her isolation. My parents took me to see her yellow house in Amherst. Hers were the first poems I memorized: "A Word is Dead" and "I'm nobody! Who are you?" I remember repeating the words to myself:

I'm nobody! Who are you?
 Are you—Nobody—too?
 Then there's a pair of us!
 Don't tell! they'd banish us—you know!

That thrill of being nobody. Invisible, ever-present observer. There was such validation in that for me, a girl who was often nobody and didn't mind it. I liked being invisible. So

did Dickinson, one assumes. Here was a poem telling me these secrets, telling me it was good, it was desirable. Loving my invisibility, I was in good company.

...

My dad tells a story: Becca and I are at some sort of science show for children, probably around eight and six years old. The guy running the show brings out big snakes. The other kids back away, Becca and I stay put, let him wrap the snakes around our arms. We're both mesmerized. The feel of that snake skin against my skin. I still remember it, but I don't know if Becca does. Maybe I don't either. Maybe I've imprinted some false memory in my mind.

Before the snakes, when I was maybe four years old, in the year's Christmas letter my mom wrote of me, "Bess is tall and poetic." I saw the letter around two years ago, home again for Christmas, and joked that we didn't have to write another one that year, we could just keep this one from over twenty years ago. Maybe we would write the same thing, see if anyone noticed. Because it's still true, whatever *poetic* means. Bess is six feet tall. Bess is getting an MFA in poetry. Somehow, the spaces I occupied as a child are still the spaces I occupy—in height, in interests, desired occupation. (That question people ask well into adulthood: *What do you want to be when you grow up?* and it's true—I still can't really say *poet* in response.)

...

As a girl I wanted what was small. I wedged myself into the corners of each room to read. It may have been because I was never small—I reached my mom's 5'7" height by 12 years old—and that tininess was foreign. Dollhouses, the Thorne miniature rooms at the Art Institute of Chicago, Colleen Moore's fairy castles at the Museum of Science

and Industry. Each time I visited I wanted to fall into them. This is still the case: I'm an observer obsessed with details, always trying to spot the one thing. I find abandoned places, mostly once-working buildings: warehouses, factories, mills, an orphanage. I want to explore everything about them, their beauty in brokenness, shattered wooden planks and bricks, the tiny things I find in them. Then I write about it. I rediscover it. This obsession is all over my manuscript: "Abandoned Warehouse, Highway 52," "Photographs of Madame de Florian's Paris Apartment, Abandoned 1942." Even "Mid-September, Last Summer Storm in Indiana" with its dilapidated barn.

I'm finding ways to fit that deterioration—a man-made building destroyed by time—into what I've seen of bodily destruction, memory loss, brain cysts, seizures, Parkinson's disease. This collection wants to find what's worth looking at in that, too, and here I'm the little girl in a Chicago museum looking through the glass, now a woman picking out each detail my grandfather used to remember and then forgot, noticing each time my father's mouth shakes slightly, imagining my own brain cysts in "On the Chicago River." That poem does the heavy lifting here, bringing my architectural obsessions up next to newly-found health obsessions, the two happening side by side in that poem and me, unable to stop thinking about both.

...

But how is poetry ever able to stop thinking about such things? Poets almost invariably have obsessions; there are even forms for it: *sestina*, *villanelle*, *ghazal*...anything requiring repetition. I remember as a first year undergrad being fascinated by Elizabeth Bishop's "Sestina," how she got to repeat words over and over.

And it's true: grandmother, child, house, tears, almanac, stove become characters in this poem. They're what make it up and I can see it in the ending:

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

Those six obsessions living together in three lines, playing the same space together, the same small room. It's about the relationships between them, how they fit together to say something new about each other.

...

So this collection concerns itself with metaphor. For me, metaphor *is* poetry. It's how we understand what's difficult to understand, by looking at its relationship to what we already know. My poems seek to relate, to make new associations, meanings, and connections—all by metaphor. And metaphor done right seems to me the true making of poetry, what really makes it tick. Aristotle agrees: he says the ability to see likenesses between things makes a poet, that poets are the ones who can make associations between things—metaphor.

Louise Glück in her essay “Disruption, Hesitation, Silence” writes of John Berryman: “*The Dream Songs* are quilts, collages. One way to read them is to insist on coherence, to elaborate the associate process... We can supply what's missing.” She's talking about lyric poems here, but I think she's also thinking about poetry in general, how associative it allows us to be—readers and poets alike. Glück writes, “The electricity of the poetry derives from Berryman's refusal to narrate these transformations,” and I love that word she uses, *electricity*. The “electricity of poetry” isn't only about language,

pause, or silence. It's about the transitions left unsaid, the associations left *un-transitioned*. Just those likenesses sitting together, getting to be likenesses by proximity rather than explanation. As objects sit together in a room.

...

Here's how I liken architecture and memory to each other and to poetry: *stanza* means *room* in Italian, so poems occupy physical spaces, metaphorically as much as literally. Stories, memories, thoughts always exist in some kind of space and for me, poems are a means of exploring that space. Mary Oliver's "An Old Whorehouse" illustrates this:

We climbed through a broken window,
walked through every room.

Out of business for years,
the mattresses held only

rainwater, and one
woman's black shoe. Downstairs

spiders had wrapped up
the crystal chandelier.

A cracked cup lay in the sink.

I see this exploration of an out-of-use whorehouse happening on the page as we move through rooms or move downstairs with a stanza break. "Spiders had wrapped up"—and for a while we see as the speaker sees, just a wrapped up *something*, then, after the pause a line break gives—"the crystal chandelier." I want to explore these spaces, and what does poetry do better than explore? Physically, rhythmically and visually, we move.

People use the house metaphor for so many things. A well-known, well-loved, and well-used trick is to imagine that each recollection occupies part of a larger space. Think: a library or file cabinets. In the ancient world, philosophers and orators and perhaps poets, too, used “memory theatres,” lacking the technology we have that makes computers remember for us. If you Google images of memory theatres, several kinds come up. Some look like typical amphitheatres, thoughts and notes written out over the seats as if they sit in the audience quietly waiting to be called. Others look like galleries, libraries, with images painted on the ceiling. There are little cupboards and hovels everywhere and they each hold tiny objects, images, phrases, anything worth remembering. Like an Internet in the brain. I don’t know if it’s as easily searchable or if it takes minutes to look through the files, open each tiny door.

I’ve never tried this trick but there must be some use in that physical imagining, that remembering. What I’m interested in are the spaces packed with too many objects, too many thoughts, falling down because they’re old, or in the brain for decades. So many memories, too many stories to tell. I think about my grandfather this way. I can study the pieces and fit together what was there before. Or just let it be.

...

When I’m trying to memorize a poem I swim with it, literally. Back and forth in the lane, just laps over and over. I repeat the lines to myself, match the rhythm to my breathing, my strokes, my kick. They all fit together into one body cutting through, hands cupped enough to nearly grasp that water. I am the type of person who seems as though she has always been swimming. I started in Diaper Divers, or before I was born, in my mom, in her pregnancy classes at the pool. Then competitively at nine, my first meet. I

was never going to be a professional swimmer or a Division 1 athlete, but I have always loved being in the water, that quiet space, me in my own lane going back and forth. Now that I swim for fun, not on a team, I don't even have to count the laps. I just jump in and go.

For whatever reason I often equate swimming and music. It may be partly the sound, how water dulls any kind of music, or because when it's playing on the speaker I come in and out of that music as my head turns to breathe. But music, too, was once my two-hour-a-day passion, and would now be called my hobby. I played flute from fifth grade—private lessons, multiple chamber ensembles, orchestras, wind ensembles, honors band, college auditions. Something about the breathing suggests poetry to me, how I've had to learn to control my breath to break the phrase where the phrase needs to be broken, not in the middle of anything.

There are some who'd say music and poetry have nothing to do with each other, swimming and music, swimming and poetry, but I can feel that metronome inside my head. Note, note, note, breath, stroke, stroke, stroke, breath. Those rhythms and sound all fitting together into something like lines. I have to let it take me over.

...

There's metaphor in all this—some means of understanding. Poets do this all the time. So Gerald Stern tries to understand the mind in "I Remember Galileo:"

I remember Galileo describing the mind
 as a piece of paper blown around by the wind,
 and I loved the sight of it sticking to a tree
 or jumping into the back seat of a car,
 and for years I watched paper leap through my cities;
 but yesterday I saw the mind was a squirrel caught crossing

Route 80 between the wheels of a giant truck,
 dancing back and forth like a thin leaf,
 or a frightened string, for only two seconds living
 on the white concrete before he got away,
 his life shortened by all that terror, his head
 jerking, his yellow teeth ground down to dust.

That's just the first stanza. But I love how Stern takes this huge idea—the brain—and narrows it down to a piece of paper blowing, narrows it down to a squirrel running between tires. That's the work of the poet: to look at the littlest details and turn them into something huge, something that helps us understand the world, the mind, people themselves.

Dreams fit in here, all my dream poems. I've always been fascinated by them, especially the lucid ones (that is, I know I'm dreaming when I'm doing it). I wanted to add that aspect into poems: how the knowledge of what's happening to us, our place in the world, can let us do anything, let us fly or take the poem where it will go. Those dream pieces question reality; they blur the lines. And all poetry does that, too, doesn't it? I don't have to label something fiction or non-fiction. Mostly people aren't going to double check that all my poems are correct, or that I'm not taking something from real life and calling it fiction. There's such freedom in that, just letting the poem be the poem. It's an observer. It takes everything in.

...

In this manuscript I've taken what I already love, what fascinates me (stillness, abandoned buildings, miniatures, old factories, anything falling apart) and if I put that on my grandfather, I can turn his deterioration into something beautiful. So many of the poems here are poems of grief, loss, sadness. They're countered by small love poems and

I like letting those live in the same space together, the love poems some kind of breather among all the grief. They play off of each other.

John Rybicki in his book *We Bed Down into Water* is a master of tenderness and sadness mingling. He writes about his wife dying of cancer. Loss and joy in love existing side by side, simultaneously in lines like these in his poem “Her Body Like a Lantern Next to Me:”

Over there’s the toilet bowl she’s been
heaving her roots into. One time I heard her
through the door make a toast to it,

Here’s to you, toilet bowl.
There’s nothing poetic about this.
I have one oar that hangs

from our bedroom window,
and I am rowing our hut
in the same desperate circle.

The delicateness of this grief, in sound, in image, strikes me. Even in the line “There’s nothing poetic about this,” Rybicki allows himself to be intimate—with wife and speaker—on the page. I’d like the intermittent love poems in this collection to add an intensity and an intimacy different than the sorts of grandfather love poems I’m writing, or the father poems or the mother poems, for that matter. They offer relief.

...

Now back to nature and the great world as it appears in this book, and my attempt to fit everything in. Experiencing nature is about my grandfather, my grandmother, my family. We’ve spent so much time in it together. And the quiet in it. All the *non-humanness* of that noise. I think this is how I’ve learned to observe: existing in a space.

How to be *in* it (my parents used to play this genius game with us: how quiet can you be when in the woods?). Cross-country skiing, I swish along sound-dulling snow. Running, I don't put headphones in and listen to music—I want to hear my breath and my feet hitting the pavement. Online I found audio clips of the last silent places on Earth, recorded by Gordon Hempton. As many mornings as I can I'll listen to the clips—inside a cave in Hawaii, prairie winds howling. Sometimes birds, sometimes coyotes. Poems get white space, so they live at least partly in that silent place. It's where I live, too: the quick breaths, the pulse of underwater, Emily Dickinson's lonely writing desk, the Chicago museums' glassed-in miniatures, all those abandoned places, those ruins.

I can discover some kind of humanity in that natural quiet, a counter to humanity. I can listen and just look. And what does that mean for these poems? What does it mean for the poet? This book is about just that.

I.

THE SQUIRREL

He shivers up the tree, his shadow
shivers after him. I think he sees me,
slinks his fur down to bark-level.
On the hill on my porch it may look
as though I'm sitting in a tree,
surrounded by old oaks and bushes, a family of birds
living there, nest of many twigs
and hair—probably mine—and another
larger nest in the tree grown above
my big, white house, so I can't see anyone
pass on the sidewalk. Not the short man
carrying his tall boombox on his shoulder, hopping
to its beat or the man who lives
across the street with his two loud
dogs, his banging on the screen door
to quiet them or the kids who coax
caterpillars onto leaves with their grubby hands.
I have done this on purpose.
On purpose I've moved my chair to sit
behind the high bushes. On purpose
I drink my tea on this porch
each warm morning, angle
the chair, and bring things to read
on purpose, mostly conversations
between writers who tell each other
their successes: books to be released,
their good writing habits, hunkering down
for hours each morning,
mug of tea in hand and clacking away
or picking up the pen then
setting it down, finally starting
their day. Suddenly
the squirrel.
He has shimmied along
the branch and I've moved
my legs so they may not be seen by traffic:
loud motorcycles gunning their engines
which sound like shots,

chugging their way up this high hill.
The squirrel and I,
we are nothing alike. We eye
each other hiding.

LAKE MICHIGAN BOARDWALK, CHICAGO

The people here are polka dots on a skinny tie.
They mill and mill, they follow the lake.
I walk the boardwalk where it will take me,
watch geese fly overhead, land in the water to feed.

Their little legs kick even before they land.
I used to watch the older boys on the swim team
enter the water this way, already kicking,
heads tucked to their chins.

But I was never good at making
my body that streamlined knife.
I was not an animal built for sleekness.
The seagulls begin circling

and won't land. People leave food on the ground
and the gulls stay overhead. I circle the pier,
follow the boardwalk and come again
to what's familiar. I learned to turn myself

into something graceful in the water,
practiced shaping my body to best
cut through it. But there are the geese.
There is food, there are the gulls, landing.

PETER AND THE WOLF

I listened to the music on the radio this morning
and afterward every sound on the walk to the bus,
each sound in the day played

by some instrument. Flute transforms
to bird, the bassoon to grandfather
the one everyone already knows—
oboe the duck. Rain scattered like a snare drum

that morning and when I dove into the pool
cymbals clashed, then underwater

a muted French horn, somebody's hands
cupped around the bell. It wasn't

the world suddenly a symphony
and I the conductor, or that each person I encountered
in the day played a duet with me, my love

the euphonium humming trills into my ear.
It was more an orchestra warming up,
all of us in our private corners playing our own
most difficult passages, marking reminders

in pencil on the score, closing
our eyes, feeling it in the fingers.

DEAR LOVE POEM, DEAR MEMORY

I've been writing love poems to my grandfather who has started
to call me *the poet*, the stranger poet. He remembers
the words to the old love songs, sings them from his chair

to his stranger daughters, the songs of husbands
away at sea though he doesn't remember
that once he was the husband

away on a minesweeper
scanning the bottom of the Pacific for leftover bombs,

diving into the water praying
they wouldn't blow.
I'm writing love poems to the lemmings who hurl

themselves into the ocean, not suicide
or because everybody's doing it
but because they've eaten the land bare.

For my grandfather I write the family names
over and over as they dive

into the shallow sea: *Leslie*,
Deborah, your daughter, your daughter.

A MURMURATION OF STARLINGS

Other passerine birds, which means perching birds,
which means songbirds, which means birds

that copy human speech, may join the pulsing flock,
more physics, more the wings
of one starling turning into the wings of the next, more the air
turning between their wingtips

than evolution, as a whale rising,
as an ocean, this system poised to tip,
a hovering black wave.

WINGING

We wake slowly, wanting
to stay in bed. It's not that

the waking itself is long,
just that the bed's warm,

I'm leaning into your chest, the dog
curled next to us, usual

morning laziness. When you
turn your back to me,

jut out your shoulder blade
so I can see its ridge along the back

where your muscles
are too tight. You say

the name of the massage: *Winging*.
It's done by finding the blade edge

where it looks like flight, working
the fingers underneath. I say,

I'm not a professional, but still
I try to slip my fingers between bone

and muscle. They meet that solid cliff.
I want your shoulder, my fingers

to weld together into one wing,
fly off.

MELROSE ABBEY, C. 1100

So the cathedral ruins fall.
Imagine them still holding
monks in prayer, their hands

lifted to lifted
ceilings, their voices pressed against the broken
bell curve of this room, still whole

enough to keep them. Imagine
the monks saying *My God—*
I'm holding my voice in my hands.

I step around
the monks' old bedrooms, now
outlines in the grass, stones

one row high. See how
they could bed a person down.

See how they can shelter me
if I lie flat and turn my face.

AL-IDRISI'S WORLD MAP

That blue's somehow inconsolable. Medieval
color the only shade left standing on Medieval map.
How's it still that bright, that cobalt?

In Scotland I watched artists reweave a tapestry.
I spent hours in a castle likely built before 1100,

Stirling. There, they were repainting the walls.
They pressed brushes onto the old patterns,
remade the colors. I'd never known castles

to be so bright. Goldenrod, violet, fire brick, yes,
cobalt. But those colors faded. How this map?

How the dark sea? It's painted into what looks
like an elephant, then some kind
of sea monster above that, opening

its mouth. I want this warning.
Warning: the earth is round.

Warning: it's covered in blue, its waters are dangerous
and we don't know what's
at the center: Rome, England, it changes
every time we redraw the lines.

MID-SEPTEMBER, LAST SUMMER STORM IN INDIANA

I've broken into abandoned places just to write.
In the old mill, I got paper cuts from sheaves of paper
older than I am. I tell you, trespass. Leave nothing marked.
Remember the storm? I ran out, opened my mouth,
yelled in the mud, waited for a strike.
Afterward we watched the cicadas tighten their shells
before they fell, their old homes left clinging to box elders, bricks.
How I'd like to drop anywhere and break into new skin.
When you say horizon, I give you the torn-out barns
peeling a new color. Lie in the dust, your ankles
against the broken planks. There the old plow, harrow, sickle
once to turn, smooth soil, reap, cupping grain stems
in the crook, cutting them down. How well they rust
to weather. And the soy fields around here in plain view.

MOON CHART

I've discovered I was born
 on the last quarter moon and spend all morning
 trying to work out my fate. The Web
 says *intellect* and *strength*.

The other night that moon eclipsed and reddened.
Blood moon bleeding softly in the sky.
 That night, cloudy. I am sick of trying to figure out

what it all means. I wake now to a red sun,
 but do not take warning. My mother
 tells me of her trip back home,
 where all houses and their barns connect

in case of weather: house, front shed, back shed,
 barn, all right in a row. *Sorry*, she says,
no picture, because she knows

I want to see it. She says, *All flannel*
and no frills—these are my people, which means
 they must be my people too, because
 she is my mother and I came from her

and her people on the quarter moon.
 I remember trails and mountains
 and ocean. I remember her in the car. I do.

I lie like a lizard in a meadow across
 two big boulders and look up at the sky
 at my grandparents' place. Both of them

down there with me telling me
 the moon's a sliver
 winding back to new.

FLORENCE

May Day and I've come home
 a stranger to my grandfather.
 The schoolchildren are twisting

tulips from tissue paper and pipe cleaner,
 pretending they smell like tulips.

My grandfather tells me of the bunch of goldenrod
 he's named Florence because he sees
 a face in it. He tells me, *Some things I make up*

*for a little joy, but there is no
 denying what is there.* Still,

when he leaves home he kisses
 the goldenrod goodbye. He tells me he misses her.
 The children don't leave baskets

of their tulips on our stoop like they used to.
 My stranger grandfather asks me where I grew up. *Here,*

in this house, I say, though the kitchen's
 been ripped out and replaced
 since I've been away, though the room

my sister and I shared was repainted and filled
 with my grandfather's furniture placed in the same

arrangement as in his house.
 In his new room, a whole desk
 to hold one dictionary, the roll top kept
 over framed pressed flowers,

his books glassed in.
 He keeps to one side of the bed

like he's waiting for his wife
 to end her long day, though

she's gone. He no longer
knows her name. Now only one
imprint in the bed when he rises.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF MADAME DE FLORIAN'S PARIS APARTMENT,
ABANDONED 1942

Water-peeled wallpaper the only
sign of age, yellowed and crumbled,
held up by its fine strings in a corner
like the edges of reliced
road maps to the south of France,
a war-fleer's destination, rows of green
wine fields, their browning
borders in the fall.

The rest of the apartment pristined
by dust—little perfume bottles
on the vanity, hair caught in the brush,
portrait of the glamorous
owner, a dusty silk orchid over her red shoulder.

The owner, a dusty silk orchid over her red shoulder,
sighs in that portrait, the artist,
her lover, painting over and over
her tiny shoulders, the muscle of leg
below her dress. Turn of the century *demimondaine*
in her Edwardian silks, the only one of us
whose beauty will be so preserved.
For beauty, find some lover to paint you.
Barely push the sleeves off your shoulders.
Cover your portrait with dust, lock yourself
within. Close your eyes.
Shut the curtains.

Shut the curtains.
Marthe de Florian is dead.
The bustle of Paris milling
below her stagnant apartment left quiet
in the lurch. The war
around it, the end of the war around it,
empty through Paris's celebrations,
Paris's rebuilding. How much
that apartment has missed, and how we
commend it for that, its existing

without time, oblivious to its nearly gravitational
pull. How I want to bottle myself in that room until
I rust, until that dust, preserving agent,
tells me all the wars are over, Paris is safe.

IN THE LIBRARY JUST READING A POEM

for Rodney Jones

Here strangers keep me posted
on their doctor visits and I recognize
the other patrons there now
by their ailments, the only
thing I know of them—old football
injuries that lost one a college
scholarship, or the woman
in reference, next to the maps, with brittle bones
who should have gone
to the military but first
to fat camp. *Fat camp*
she says, *I should have gone there too.*
She asks if I know a thing
about computers. *Sorry*, I say,
I have a Mac. But it's like learning a language
she'll have to practice every day. My teacher once
made us write without picking up our pens
like we were learning cursive, learning to not
cross out, which—whoops—
I've already done in this poem and I've
done worse. I've erased.
No trace of the old
thoughts left on the library table
littered with pink
eraser crumbs where I'm brushing
them off and reading the poet whose page
has torn just above *think of the mule*—

I'VE HAD THIS RHYTHM IN MY HEAD FOR DECADES

My mother at the sink trimming beets,
my mother at the sink peeling onions.

The day she learned to pull the seed
from an avocado by wedging

her knife in and twisting the knobbed pit
from the fruit, even her chopping blade

quickened its pace—liberation!
When I was in the hospital,
the rhythm slowed back again

for me, matched the drip of strangers' blood
into my IV. I asked how long

until my blood's mine again, until my body's able
to make its own. Three months
working the blueprint of strange cells,

three months with a borrowed pulse, but even
my chopping is my mother's

chopping, my walk my mother whispering
into my ear like a prayer
heel-toe, heel-toe, heel-toe.

THE ROOF WALKER

The world is deaf today—
or quiet—or I am—

walk-falling in snow
nobody can hear. So run.

Right up the wall of the shuttered
house across the street, blue, Tudor,

to the pointed roof. No one hears
the shingles loosen

against me as in summer when
that clatter would bring everyone.

I can dance up here, twist
my ankles loose. Falling will be soft.

Nobody in the house knows of the steps
above them, my hard boots.

They see only the trees stretching
their white sleeves, slight snowfall

when my heel hits the top branch.
They suspect nothing. A small wind

blowing while I quietly stampede
the roof, while I quietly tear

the house apart and let it crumble.
Anybody else could do the same:

this demolition, stepping
one foot at a time.

GRILLED ARTICHOKEs

We gather on the porch.
 I'm too early for the party,
 just petting the dog. It's Labor Day,
 to celebrate not labor but the end
 of summer, the closing of outdoor pools,
 the entering chill in the air
 somewhere, though not here, not yet.
 Soon our mothers will tell us to stop

wearing white. Jeff is trying to start the grill,
 looking for newspaper. "Nobody reads
 the paper anymore," I say, "so we can't
 start fires." A regression. We're back before
 humans discovered the flame, tearing
 uncooked meat right from the bone, probably
 not telling stories yet. But we have
 become resourceful. Jeff has found

some kind of packing paper in the recycling,
 something uncoated with wax.
 We are all saved. The artichokes he's grilling
 will be saved. Because I'm too early to the party

I watch him cut away their outer spines, sharp
 triangles nestled against each other. I offer to help, but—

Now the artichokes make their way
 to the new fire. The exterior
 should char and when the food's ready

I'll taste that smokiness,
 the packing paper still clinging
 to the artichokes' hard shells. Those I'll leave

on the plate to throw away.
 I'll dive right into the fleshy heart.

BLESSING FOR A LEG BROKEN IN TWO PLACES

Salting the walk my father
cracks. Tibia,

shin bone, from the weight of the body
it was built

to support. Fibula, slenderest of the long
bones, ends

at the ankle nub, snapped like ice from
harder ice.

A pin holds the broken in place,
each end

of each bone drilled through,
a rod and bolts

between them like a trellis.
My father's bones

will twist around it. They'll climb
that ladder.

EIGHT YEARS OLD AND MY GRANDFATHER SAYS MY NAME ANGRY

Instead I'd remember the Thanksgiving
we spent the day playing Heidi—you our grandfather

playing the grandfather, carrying my sister
on your back up our mountain
of basement stairs. You let me scout ahead
and break ground, the trailblazer.

Now I want to time-travel back to then, the day
you knew my name so well, even to hear you
say it angry. You could trace

the constellations with your hand overhead
and tell what they were called.
You could show me the brightest planets

because now I look up searching for Jupiter
and the North Star. I'd really listen

this time to what you called each layer of soil,
every rock, wait for you to tell me

of the earth, how sediment breaks down,

how to place our hands on bark to feel
the tree's age. I'm convinced if I could
remind you of the names I've lost—bay mud?

Canis Minor? Chinese gooseberry, the little
climbing plant?—you'd say mine again.

II.

ONE TIME I WATCHED YOU WAKE

Light ran the length of you—it played a path
above your collarbone. Light rendered you
immobile. It followed

the little grooves of you,
the nearly imperceptible
I'd not noticed before on your body—

a small burn just below the baseline
of your forefinger on the hard palm.
The morning opened to me its slow fist.

The fern next to me startled into place.
Days before, I'd cut off
the fully brown stalks. I was told

that cutting would help the plant live again,
allow it sun. And that morning the fern
drank it in. The tree outside drank it in.

Such starkness. I hadn't often seen it.
You, every morning rising
before me. How to explain what you already

knew, out of bed so carefully, so quietly,
that the blankets might not slip from me,
pressing your feet to the floor.

JAMES FORD BELL MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, MINNEAPOLIS

The slight fox skull,
sharp, bright white,
dried out and fragile

worn down by the Touching Room,
brittled by children's hands. Once
covered in rough muscle tugging like ropes,
sanding the bone even.

It's time's work: being decades
outside a body makes every
hard piece of us a little whiter.

In the Touching Room
I'm tracing the bone lines of that small
fox skull, negative space
once full of the best flesh—brain,

eyes. But it's only
the brainless elephant hip bone hardened
by years of carrying him upright

that will last long enough to someday
sink quietly into the earth.

POEM AT SEVEN O'CLOCK

At this point I'm sick of my grandfather.

Outside, the branches bare.

There is not enough firelight in his old clay brick fireplace.

He takes out his pocketknife.

He sharpens my colored pencil as he has for years, navy blue.

The tip bears through, struggles out of the wood.

Leaves in its wake the shavings.

He has old hands and remembers the days all pencils looked like these chopped down forests.

He tells of his mother, a maid who held another woman's crying child and fired for it.

The fire continues to die.

He continues to not yet.

But it's fall and the world is ending.

So our ancestors thought one thousand years ago is something he taught me.

They were tricked into Jesus by celebrating the return of light, so let's have a party.

He's old enough to have ancestors and his ancestors are mine.

The knife moves smoothly. His thumb and the navy blue pencil.

He tells me his mother's story over and over in front of the fire.

AFTERNOON

I don't mind sunlight there. Really,
I love when it moves across
the dust, slowly makes it glow.

This isn't only because I don't
want to vacuum,
but I do hate the sound of that machine

and all my furniture
scraping the floor.

Afternoons when the sun hits
I can trace what I've tracked in—

gravel from my shoes,
dirt, the single
long blade of something

from the yard, bent,
so delicate it must be broken.

WHAT ACCEPTANCE MEANS

It's not mine but my friends'
parents who are always dying.
ALS, brain tumor, bone cancer, ovarian.

Rachel's mom—gone
in third grade, though it seems she'd
always been dying—

feet black for lack of circulation,
her breathing that rasps
through flimsy plastic tubes.

She continued to die and die.
Rachel went to grief counseling,
where I imagine they did not go through

the five stages or chart her progress
with sticker stars. Rachel tells me
she doesn't know what *acceptance* means

even now. Remembering
upon waking that she no longer
has a mother? I imagine grief:

forgetting the beauty of a river,
not seeking the angular
patches of sunlight or picking up

a flat rock, lobbing it, skipping it.
Instead, keeping it in hand, rubbing its edges
like water does, until smooth.

POEM STARTING WITH A VIOLIN AND ENDING WITH THE HOAN BRIDGE

When my grandfather died, he did not suddenly
recognize our faces at the end of it all.

When I called, my mother did not say, "Come home"
or, "Skip the rest of your class and rest,"

but, "Do you think you can pull yourself together?"
The children in the after-school

writing class I teach are killing every character
and bringing each of them to life again: "The robot

broke down and then it came back alive."

We waited to write what we remembered

of him on a piece of cardboard.

There was *Stargazing* and *Shoveling bats*

out of the chimney. The time we went backpacking.

Learning to write with pen and paper

seems these days a dying art, children
learning only to sign their names in cursive.

The time he tracked its orbit and followed

Jupiter home. The time he...

I dream we give my grandfather
the pen and he does not write

of his German violin or how to build a perfect fire.

But he remembers the names of every

constellation, the way
stars move. We burn

the memory board in the fireplace

and mix it into his ashes in the pine box on the table.

Only children with a name
starting with L will learn the curls

of that capital letter, trace the loops
backward and forward, practice

where they might make the two
loops intersect, a purposeful,

impermeable third loop.
Workers are rehabbing

the bridge in Milwaukee
that took me to my grandfather's

one room and to his nurses
those last few

months. The construction men
have a deadline, so

they rebuild even in the snow.

IDENTITY

The person who signed
my name on the backs of checks

written out to me did it
more carefully than I.

In September she drove up to the window,
said, *This is me*, and the bank

believed her, handed her cash
through the sliding tray, counted it out

in 20s. Maybe she asked them to break it.
We all need small change. I know.

You signed so beautifully, slight curl
at the top of the C and two O's looped,

the E mellowing into the Y.
I want to see you write my name

on the security footage the police
told me they had. And when I watch

the tape I'll say, *Yes, those
are my hands signing, veins and callouses*

in all the right places, first, second fingers
and thumb holding the pen

dusk-paced in that transitory
glow of something leaving.

TWO-DAY DRIVE

Sky the way it is now, pink
and blue striped baby's blanket.
Trees nuzzle their nakedness

against it. Just the other week
we drove across country
and noticed those winter trees.

They might have been more
beautiful for having no leaves.
You driving and teaching me

southern stories, ghosts, bogs.
Me, just trying to keep you awake.

I say your South is this
sky blanket. My Midwest

the tree branches and you're
over here keeping me warm.

Last night the dog curled between us,
had some dream and barked
and barked. Toward the divide of him

each of us reached out to touch his head.

MY MOTHER ASKS FOR ADVICE ABOUT WHAT TO DO WITH HER FATHER'S
ASHES

Her sister says the ashes these days
can be made into anything—a diamond,

or shaped as a coral reef and placed
in the ocean for sea urchins and fish to live in,

sand dollars, starfish, for seaweed to grow over
my grandfather, to cover him, for fish to lay new eggs.

How small his body could be compacted—
to one pearl. My sister tells us that you can make

a tree—the bone-white ashes growing
into green, supple branches,

little blooming buds, oh,
I will visit every day until they open.

ON THE DAY MY PARENTS LEAVE THE COUNTRY THEY LEAVE
INSTRUCTIONS ON WHAT TO DO AFTER THEIR DEATHS

Call the accountant. Sell the house,
we've arranged for that money

to be sent to you directly, share
half with your sister, choose the cheapest

coffin for burning. Here, a list of people who will help you:
guardians, the accountant again, his number in the file.

Which does not tell me where to mingle
my parents' ashes, to bury them, to plant

a tree overhead—my root-father pitting
himself to the ground, small skinny

mother re-growing her green
arms. I'd cut blossoms from her

and keep them, scissors angled against the stem.

THE WEB

Minutes ago I

wiped away a spider web
between my plastic porch chair

and the rotted wood railing
so easily. Destroyed

a home with a swipe.

Then I set the spider,
that nest builder,

free and fleeing

along the driveway to save
her life. Had to push her

off to do it, spare
her the trash-bound fate
of strands spun out

perfectly thin,

crosshatching my paper towel.
The spider so
reluctant to leave

even her mangled web.

I watched
her climb the gravel,
struggle over one tiny

round rock at a time.

HERE IS WHAT I WANT TO TELL YOU

This morning a dog barked at such
a high pitch I thought, *seagull*.
I thought I was back home
in my city right on its big lake.

It comforts me to know someone's out there
making some kind of noise.

I really thought I was back there
in my childhood bedroom
with its still-purple walls. Then you shifted
next to me and there was that barking again.

You had already dressed and showered
and I wondered what it was like for you
to see me there—you in your plaid shirt, me
waiting for the seagulls that weren't

at all seagulls to land outside the window,
for them to transform again.

MRI MUSIC

What music I'd like?
I say, Classical,

which she forgets to turn on.
Because I'm listening for Schubert

which never comes I hear
tones in the machine's beeps

and clicks, try to follow
the rhythm in the way it jolts

my shoulders. I will my head not to move
under the bright lights, inside the big tube,

as I have been asked. I can't name
the notes but still it seems they follow

some harmonic pattern, they seem
consequential, planned.

EVE OF DEPARTURE

Tomorrow I will watch the plane
rise from inside the plane, as if zooming
out from the habitable
atmosphere with a camera,
but instead of sleeping all night
I'll look out the window into
the blank sky and down to the blank
water and pretend I'm part of it,
then a movie might play,
one in which a man
dreams of rocketing to space,
never getting there or does
get there and space isn't anything
he imagined, what a disappointment,
just the sky darkening as he rises,
just bad coffee and power bars
on the moon, which isn't like
being on another planet, just like walking
across an Earth-like desert filled
with moderately-sized boulders,
no water and no life while the helmet
the astronaut wears emits just enough
oxygen for him to feel
he's breathing air
produced by trees and then
it's morning and I'm
still suspended in air.

DIRECTIONS

In London I write directions
for myself on receipts. So my *no refunds*
reads *left on Hampstead, then*

follow the street to station on right side. I keep
the receipts in my pocket,
look at them, throw them away at the end

of each day. I can keep
many directions on the long receipts
of small things: soup, books,

little etceteras. Sometimes I turn
down the wrong street, do not
stop to look at a map because

I hate looking like a tourist.
And I like my own way back,
practice remembering

the boutique hotel I passed—white painted
townhouse with its bright green door
where I might someday stay

and sleep on Egyptian cotton, wake up
in the morning to room service—hot tea
in a bone china cup, fresh squeezed juice

before traipsing around the city's libraries,
popping into free museums here and there.
I'll donate. I'll have the extra money.

I practice it: keeping the Thames on my right
until I can follow my receipt:
tax, then turn left.

THE ESSENTIAL

If I were made a leaf

you would divide
my two symmetrical halves,

all muscle and fat.
To say nothing of the ribcage,

those hard and brittle
bones I trust

with these lungs, with either
side of the heart. Oak leaves

don't have to worry it:
Often I pull them apart

along the veins and still
they look whole, still I see

structure in them. Such grace.
I'll lie here against you

while you trace my back, that
bony column. You press each

raised knob. Your hands
follow the bones.

HEMOGLOBIN

For four months I lived
with three different strangers'

blood in me. All one night
I watched three people drip into my arm.

I didn't name them. Then I did: Owen, Gloria,
Oliver. I got to know them

so well we could communicate.
Their blood plowed through me.

Now I forget them all, but the signs
are coming back—motion sickness on the bus,

dizziness climbing out of the pool. I check them off
like a doctor's list, think,

My hemoglobin's probably at 9, now 8.
I take iron for control and think every time

about letting my count go back
down, about letting myself come in

and out of the world. Sometimes
I want to remember the people whose blood

I shared, but my body didn't know it was borrowing,
didn't think of ownership. It drank and drank.

SWIMMING LAPS

Sometimes I share lanes
with strangers. When they're
taking a break at the wall

I ask if I can join and they
say, *Sure*, usually. Occasionally
smile. Then we move

together in that pool, same strokes.

We pass each other looking down,
behind our goggles at

the symmetrical tiles.
I'm not saying I disagree.

We've tied up our defining
features—hair, eyes—
under latex and plastic.

Look how easily we share this space.
Look how we don't

even have to speak.

AN ARCHAEOLOGIST SHOWS US A SKULL

says the bottom bulb's *full blown*,
calls it *bun*. It's ancient. Only a few
months ago my neurologist showed me

scans of my sinus cavity,
the sphere of fluid nestled there, probably
not growing. This was the not-

dangerous cyst. He said *sensitive*,
overactive, any pain, lots of headaches?
I told him no before remembering

rising in airplanes, how
the top of my nose and my eyebrows
feel like a tightened metal rod.

And every time in diving wells I stop myself
suspended under pounds of water,
don't hit the bottom. That cavity thrums.

I'M TRYING QUIET

Because the only
way I can hear
my mother's half

deafness—her one ear
ringing, unable
to pick up the smallest

sound—is by
pushing in the tragus,
tiny pointed bone

against the external
auditory canal—small
passage my mother

does not hear through.
I block the connected
tunnels burrowing

through my ear. Only
the outer passages seal,
the smaller, interior ones

still hearing, so I will never
know the left-sided sound
my mother knows—

not cotton balls or muffling
but one-sided rooms,
silence that turns

as my mother turns,
that moves across
the room with her, that follows.

NEW MEDICINE

Kate reminds me of the old seizure experiments—
drilling small holes in the head, removal
of the cerebellum, how the doctors discovered
short-term memory there. She
sends me articles and I scroll through, so many
medical terms for what feels to me just

like shivering, then falling asleep. Under the MRI
machine I imagine it: the small flaps of my skull
siphoned away, a doctor flipping each
open like a latch. Would she say “Cured?”

I cut my new medicine in half over the green
plastic board, knifing the small indentation
in each pill. Even halved, they leave me muscle-tired.
The pills are dulling my brain. Which is exactly
what they are meant to do. Someday someone will say,
“Can you believe they used to do that to people, drug
the entire brain?” Someday someone will find
these pills I take twice daily, for which I set alarms.

Useless, medical unknowing. I’m beginning to remember
how similar pills dulled my sister, made her sleep
nearly twenty years ago. A child with the brain’s
extra firing, and only one way to stop it.

FOR MY MOTHER, AFRAID OF FORGETTING

After watching her father forget it all,
history seeping out of him like water

through two cupped hands. He named
a sprig of goldenrod an arbitrary *Florence*
and made way for that name
in the space for names, letting go

all of ours. My mother brought him home, painted
the walls pale green for him, balanced
his old furniture around the room. He said,

Thank you for rescuing me.
My mother says: If this happens to me,
shoot me or better yet take me

out to the lake, over the bluff,
set me up with a bottle of single malt in the coldest winter,
lay me down there

in some snow cocoon, lay me down
if ever I forget your face.

IT WAS MY FAVORITE PART OF THE DAY

He lived with us. I descended the stairs each morning
thinking, *Maybe today he will see me and know me* and suddenly
I will be a girl with a grandfather again.
Every morning. There is no way to know this.

And while I have written poems
upon poems about him, the ones I want to show him are these—
the poem in which I write about God, the poem in which

I write about blindness, the one in which I press my warm hand
to the cool glass and it leaves a steam outline that slowly disappears.

III.

OFF SEASON

In April I make hummus with lentils and use too much water and not enough lemon juice. It's

that weird winter-spring space. I do not go outside. When I do, I dress in layers: sweater, windbreaker.

Somewhere people are leaving the country again. They lay out their shampoo and face soap in little tubes lined up in quart-size plastic bags, pants with shirts

on top of them, outfits planned according to schedule—only what they need folded neatly into backpack pockets.

This spring I'm an unneeded layer. I cannot say there's a reason. If you haven't worn this jacket a year, throw it out of your closet. If it's only useful to have around in spring,

keep it packed in a box. So mark me "off season." Still, I could be a winter parka,

an every day necessity for another month here when checking the mail, taking out the trash.

Once, my mother sewed my name into the back of my neck.

CORKSCREW

Start late, pack
 the essentials: bread,
 two half-red apples, your wood-
 handled pocketknife,
 block of salty cheese, the bottle
 of red wine. The knife

as corkscrew—we plunge the blade
 as far as the neck will hold it,
 spend the rest of that day on the trail
 sucking on pieces of soaked cork.

By then I had a habit of trying to fly
 and stopped at every cliff
 along the way, though you, it turns out—
 afraid of heights. I took care
 to line my toes neatly against the edge

above the blaring North Sea and spread
 my wings though birds
 will dive right off, they hardly know
 the land ends. The apple cores I flung
 over the side traced the arcs I'd spend years

trying to fit myself to, the trajectory
 of flight. I graphed the jump I'd need
 to get down the cliff without lifting

my wings. You uncap
 your camera, say, *Spit out that cork*

*before you leap. Could you make your arms
 look less like you're on the cross?*

SHUTTLE GUM

I'm standing with Kara while she has a cigarette
 by the sweet gum tree, the secret smoking
 place I never knew existed. *I'm killing you
 slowly*, she says, *aren't I, with all these cigarettes?*
 and I say, *Yes*. The sweet gum is covered in small knobs,
 little tumors climbing each branch—not cancerous,
 just part of the tree. Or everything. Kara and I
 are talking about our butts, boobs, being naked
 in front of our mothers, because butts, boobs, nakedness
 usually come up when we're talking about our mothers.
 The guy sitting next to us—directly under the tree, its branches
 clawing out to touch his face—he's also smoking
 and gives that awkward laugh. He drops
 his head between his knees and shakes it—*No*—
 though in this case he really means, *I can't believe
 I'm hearing this*. Were I here alone, I would ignore him
 but Kara says, *We're just talking about asses, how they don't
 matter when you're a kid, you can show them off
 whenever*, and the guy says, *Yeah, I have daughters,
 they run around in a bra and panties
 all the time*. Waves his hand. Wanders off.
 To me Kara says, *Did you know this tree
 went to space? It's called the Shuttle Gum*.
 I look up to the bare knobs again. Kara looks to the ground,
 which is supposed to have a metal plaque
 hammered into it that tells us when, and where, and why—
 and that would be sometime before now, and space, and
 because the astronaut who did it went to school here—
 but the plaque is covered in snow, just the corner
 without words visible. Kara remembers somebody
 rocketed the trees when they were saplings,
 trying to discover how space affects growth,
 or because they wanted to see if the seeds
 would look like stars from Earth or grow on Jupiter.
 The Shuttle Gum tumors suddenly seem not cancerous
 but alien. I don't know if the astronaut
 discovered anything or just held the little plants
 uncovered in his palm.

ELEVEN

Don't say I'm good at algebra.
I'm only following directions.
Somehow when we get to geometry I lose
all the numbers though in spelling bees
I trace words out on the desk and remember
where I leave them. And my mouth
always remembers the pillow.
Don't tell me you don't practice kissing
on pillows. Okay, so I'm crazy.
There's this girl at church
selling girl scout toffee who has a pretty sister.
They're like my pretty sister and me.
At church I sit behind the one like me
wondering if she'll grow up good
at something since she can't be pretty.
Trace all the words you can't spell,
I'm telling her telepathically. *Draw Ws into butts.*
Add just a couple of legs and make a little
naked person in your hymnal. I'm asking her to turn around
in her squeaky pew and read my lips. I'm pretending
she can hear me. I want her to tilt
the back of the ear her mom won't
let her pierce so I can tell her everything
I know about being eleven. Since she learned big collarbones
are supposed to be beautiful she's been turning
just the tip of her chin that way.

POEM WRITTEN WHILE WRITING ANOTHER POEM

It seems I'm hearing this city in musical parts.
Here is where the parking garage lights up

and whirs in spite of itself. Here are two people
comparing heights and the man says he's only

taller because of his hair. Here is the part
where the girl at the table next to mine

takes a selfie with her iPad, trying to be discreet
about the phone's click, lowering the screen to just

below her ribs, slightly away from her body.
She doesn't pout. I want her to hashtag the picture

TryToGuessWhatI'mDoingRightNow or *TheStreetlights
AreTurningInStagesAllAroundMe*. I imagine the streetlights

a soft snare drum when they blink. I assume
the girl does not turn, but the world must, like a radio dial.

That fuzzy warble. Sleet hitting the sidewalk.
We tune in at winter, which drops lightly frozen

water from the sky. And people build things.

IN THE DREAM MY MOTHER TELLS ME

she dreams my sister small,
toddler sister—*You know what*

she was like then, Mother explains
it to me, *a little imp*. I know.
Blond hair, round face, ready jokes—

Dream Mother held Dream Sister
on top of the washing machine
saying *you're so small*,

Dream Daughter, and here you're going
to be married soon. And it's true:

Real Sister is making lists of venues,
asking me not to plan the parties she knows

I don't want to plan. I don't want to see her
in her beautiful white wedding dress, train
rivering out behind her. She buys

the dress in Mexico and I'm not there
to see her try it on. Neither is our mother.

I believe my dream mother and pull
Dream Sister down from the washing machine
and into the laundry basket I used

as a train car. *Here*, I say, a blanket
in my hands, tucking it around her,

you can fit in here. I have a little whistle,
conductor's hat. Behind me, she choo-choos.

THE RIVER STYX

I tried to stop the air conditioner
making its noise: the sound of rain
amplified on metal. I dream
it shoots out 9th century dust
trodden on by kings, then brought on their shoes
into the great libraries. In one night,
I dream the same dream over and over,
me in a castle always trying
to change the dream. Here is something
I can't tell you: I always find new
ways to scale the castle walls.
I hang and swing from the banisters.
I am Belle, my Beast has not yet
fallen in love with me, he remains
the Beast. Every day someone
bangs on my upstairs neighbor's door
with the same urgency. It's always
morning. The fist hitting
her door always. I never hear
what she says. If this were the dream
I might find a secret passage
roughly clawed out, a tunnel to the door upstairs.
I'll watch who has come—the woman
in the house behind us asking for cigarettes
or Charon the ferryman coming to take her
across that river. I don't think this
is a dream. It just keeps repeating itself.
You see, I've been trying to write it out all night.

MEDITATION

This morning I wake thinking
that today I could meet my next
ex-boyfriend. I'm stumbling to turn off
my three alarms, and somewhere he's patiently
letting the French press coffee sit.
I don't see him. He's married
to someone else. That jerk.
I'd go to therapy, but as far
as I've gotten is a blank waiting room
not even piled with magazines,
everyone staring into their phones,
me staring at a blank form that leaves
too much space for my small answers.
They've asked for lists of ailments, surgeries,
how's my mental health, what questions
do I have for the doctor, the major
reason for my visit. I don't
know how to answer, don't have anything
to say. I'm not even imagining things,
except my next ex-boyfriend.
And he's probably real. Beyond
therapy, I've been trying to pray, though
I don't think I know how. My next
ex-boyfriend probably knows
how to pray. He will bend to the ground
and will touch his forehead to the carpet
in front of him and look so beautiful.
Maybe I will practice with him and when
I'm out of that relationship—thank God—
I'll still remember how lightly to press
my forehead to the floor, when to turn up
my palms. Until I feel something—

INCONSOLABLE

The cat living in the apartment below me
whines and mews for me to let him
into a house I can't open. I want

to jam my keys into the lock, make them fit.
Remember the old cat we had when I was a baby?
Remember the cat we had before I knew what a cat was?

Here is how I knew him: He ran from the ghost
each time he sensed it in my parents' house.
He held his paw out for the vet and waited

to be put to sleep. The neighbor's cat's still crying
and I'm ready to bang on his owners' door.
They call for him each night, late—*Midnight*,

Midnight, kitty, where are you?
Trying to sleep to the calls is like trying to sleep
to a heart monitor. I can't until

the every-minute sound has stopped,
though I never notice the exact
moment *Midnight* is found. I don't

feel this about children's crying.
That's easy for me to ignore.
Still, I remember

walking a baby to sleep.
Each time we passed the wall hanging
in his parents' dining room

Jack reached out for the threads
and I stood there holding him, both of us
resting our heads against each other.

THERE IS A SNAKE

This isn't a metaphor. And I'm
not the snake. He was really there,
then slithered into the short grass,
under the small bushes that to him
must've been enormous, good
cover. He followed into the small forest.
Then I couldn't see him, so
I continued my way along the trail.
Here, I might as well say it:
I pushed him off the path.
I was worried a bicycle
would gut him. I grabbed
a stick and sent him. I still
want to let him just be a snake.
What else could a snake want?
Mice, water, underbrush, somewhere
to hide, a hole to carve out
channels, span the length
of this brush, narrow
dirt capillaries to explore.
And what could I give him
but a poke. I said I wasn't
the snake and it's true. When I slither
under the grass I crawl along
on my arms. While the snake
disappears, you can see much more
than the outline of my body.

AFTER THE SHOOTINGS—

how many this summer I can't
remember—in that city whose name

is the same as this city, so a friend
texts to say she almost called.

Almost, to make sure you were okay...
I sketch out the tattoo I'll never have

etched into me—traced
skyline of this city, bridge and the old

buildings, courthouse dome—
I imagine all of it a single line tendrilled

from the bicep vein, a bloodline.
This is how far I've planned

what will never be drawn onto my body.
Two years ago there was a shooting here.

We were told to *shelter*. I could see
pulling my sweater over my head,

running across campus, hood keeping me
from the rain of whatever was raining.

ABANDONED WAREHOUSE, HIGHWAY 52

Former break room more or less intact,
two couches, coffee table, side table, chair
preserved in dust. Preserved in weary state.

Blasted out corner of room where bricks
have fallen into a heap of bricks

and glass and blown tires. Seen through crack—
door blown off hinges—time or earthquake
or someone's steel-toed boots. Light

from windows as if stained glass,
vaulted ceilings as if a church.

Tree growing through, small roots clinging
to smashed panes. Train rushes past.
Straight through building, shakes

very roof, splits the seams. Doesn't. Doesn't
alter anything, even the dust.

THE FURNITURE ROOM

I asked for a table and was given a key
to the room of tables and chairs
and a standing whiteboard,
no dry erase markers but a written note,

small page torn out with her name
on it, I mean the woman who gave me
this key. I don't know why. I can't

make my way through all of it, the desks
piled on top of each other,
chairs balanced on each of them.

I didn't want anyone outside to see
the trove I found. I mean
to which I was given the key.
When I had to give it back

the door locked automatically
behind me. I mean there's no
way back in.

TO PARKINSON'S DISEASE

I know you in the shake of my father's
hand, that slight
tremor a sign he's maybe

inherited something—I mean you,
that *you* may be infesting him—
from his father. My friend explains:

a mistake in the brain's
function. As if someone tries to write
Mississippi and forgets

the S—three? the I—how many?
the P—four? Too late.
Too many letters.

Parkinson's, I ask you not to claim
the careful writer who doesn't
smudge the ink. Please don't

pick the man folding
the outer corner of packages so the points
are perfectly pointed, who uses

a ruler to cut them. Are your plans
all set? Where are you in your takeover?
Have you already got his lips,

the bottom jaw, pinched
and shaken them? If you
take his precision at least wait

until I can wrap these packages for him,
so my father will still
find all of it impeccably

folded, taped on the inside.
So he'll unwrap them

with his shaking hands and reuse the paper.

FOR THE WOMAN AT CHURCH WITH THE VOICE OF MY GRANDMOTHER

I'm sorry. When you said my name I just stood there,
I couldn't look at you, couldn't think of anything
but my grandmother, the day we played Monopoly,
me for the first time, forgetting to tell her to pay me
Pacific Avenue rent. You should know I didn't have the heart
to ask if you were from Mukwonago, Wisconsin
because of course you'd say no, of course
you've never driven the long roads out
past Muskego, you've never jumped
into Phantom Lake. My dad showed me that lake,
his mother's porch where I'm convinced
there's still ice cream spatter from those summer nights
I never got to hear her. When my dad
drove me there I thought I could hear her wide,
mouthy laugh and still it came down quiet. Listen, Lee—
because that's your first name—you're probably
from the south where it's kudzu and peaches. I'm sure
the names of the places you've lived don't have W's
but I want to hear you say Mukwonago, Waukesha,
Wauwatosa, Oconomowoc, I want you to say *Wisconsin*,
born and raised. Next Sunday I won't ask, just watch your mouth,
the wrinkles, because of course you turn
the corner-most part of your lip the same, you
saying *April, back in April*, just like my grandmother,
the month this year she died and the first
spring buds bared their tips. I can't tell you
how long it will take but if I work up
the courage to be near you, let me listen
to your voice for hours, let me substitute *grandmother*
for your name, let me count the times your mouth
pulls back like hers, let me sit with that voice,
let me bottle it, let me bury it in the snow
so when nature uncovers it the season
will be right, that voice in spring not breaking
but saying my name and my name and my name.

TONIGHT ON THE NEWS THEY LIST THE NAMES

with a line from Ralph Angel

The newly murdered: women
in Africa giving vaccines to girls,
Syrians in exploded cars. And my hands

say *Please, just give me something to do.*
I stew apples in my largest pot.
A poet reads aloud on my recordings: “A name

that’s repeated over and over again
until it’s just noise.” I don’t measure out the sugar.
The news anchor says of our own war dead

*We add their names as pictures
become available, here in silence
are nine more.* I’m thinking—this is too much

food for just me—though I will save it and use it
for breakfast for a week. I’m thinking—
these apples could feed an army

of Syrian refugees. No,
they couldn’t. The fruit simmers
until not quite brown, until the skin

is just beginning to curl. Quarter cup
water, sugar. The six apples
look small in the pot.

AUBADE

I didn't want the room to see me. I burrowed. We built
a skin over the day, attached it together at the seams.

I wanted somehow to claw my way out. The world
some gymnast, reeling in tricks, not because it was dark, not

because of the storm. The cardinal perched on the rim
of our porch let me know it was still winter.

We stood around waiting
for him to tell us when we could expect

his blue cousins and any struggling
buds from the trees. Each day I check off one to-do list

only to make another. When will I learn—
no one's looking at me. No one's waiting for me

to emerge, only the groundhog gets to be the groundhog.
When will I learn enough about these kinds of storms,

when the river breaks into chunks of ice. It moves
along swiftly the banks, it tells its hard story,

cuts under the bridge. How quickly
it's moved from where it's been.

ON THE CHICAGO RIVER

Buildings sway on the glass sides of other buildings.
 My tour guide talks post-modernism,
 says such a structure copies
 what surrounds it: the curve of this tower
 following the bend in the river,
 same height as the concrete warehouses nearby.

All week my brain has been processing images of my brain.
 On the MRI scan there's an empty space
 where it looks like a part has been washed away
 by waves. It's a pouch of fluid
 old as I am, full of water as I am, to be

sucked out by a tube, carried away to a place
 that is not my head. Buildings are constantly

in relation to their surroundings—
 the prairie grass next to the river, the high banks.
 To the styles that came before. To me,
 even, since I can see my wild hair,
 my old tee-shirt in their window glass.

In the train station this morning
 I took the doctor's call. He told me
 the name—*arachnid*
cyst, the spider cyst. The buildings
 wave at me with their pinched edges.

I have a spider in my brain.
 It crawls along the left side.

It skirts the tricky bottom
 of the cerebellum, that ball balancing
 the larger beast. I look to the top

of what is no longer called
 the Sears Tower. The warehouses
 around it are no longer warehouses,

now apartments, iron porch
railings chained to their cream brick.

No longer the warehouse
clatter they made—squeaking
grain elevator pulleys, thudding sacks
tossed to the ground, steamboats chugging
upriver delivering their no-longer
wheat and lumber. And my brain

no longer my brain. I'm no longer
a child looking up, thinking I'll live here,
write for the *Chicago Tribune*,
no longer have to imagine my life.

My spider tickles one leg against
what will become my memory
of this day. It is spinning

out its web, first the interior shapes,
then outward to larger spirals. They wrap up
the part of my brain telling me where my feet
must place themselves, on what portion of the heel
to lay my weight—wrap it up as prey.

I understand this is not how bodies work.
The cyst is always in the back of my mind.
In my brain, it lives up front. *Look at that skyline*,

says the tour guide. *Take
some pictures*. I snap with the cyst
lens of my brain. Has it always been there?

Maybe this is how I see things—
through this bubble, as if glass.

LIKENING

And how did I not notice it?—the leaves
just outside my window dropping from the tree
after changing color, which still I did not

see. My friend goes slowly blind, the hole
in her vision grows and grows. She tells me,
I can't see rain anymore, only how people

behave when it's raining. Only
feeling it in the hand. What happens after.
The leaves have turned from the window

and unhooked themselves. As a child
I put dead wet skin under
a large microscope, one with a screen—

no squinting into a lens. It was like
looking at lace, so easily
broken, the microscope screen filled

with this bit of my ear.
I want to show its delicateness
to my friend before she can no longer

see it, to collect rain under
the big screen and say this
is what we all are missing.