

Every House

by

Christine Holm

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Sara Ball, Chair  
Beckian Fritz Goldberg  
Norman Dubie Jr

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## ABSTRACT

The poems in *Every House* find themselves exploring spaces of expected comfort and asking how survivors reconstruct safety in their worlds when the beautiful is burnt to the ground. With little more than memory, maybe a photograph, or the chorus of a song, these poems mean to tell a truth even as perceived dangers make vulnerable the mind and body.

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//1.

## Detours

Because the beginning was before honey  
and the orchid – because there was an August,  
a prairie August with impatient promise,  
broken porch swing, vines that wrapped  
around the ankles to knees to thighs of figures  
not yet stationary though there was white  
already blossoming on her tongue, brittleness  
broken over the leather case carrying his knife –  
because I knew the sound of stripped speaker wires  
made my veins ache – because I knew going back  
might be painful – because the needle is broken,  
scratching new noise into vinyl and nobody listens  
enough to make out the difference – because I went  
to gather lemongrass for the one I had to leave  
behind, willow branches for the one who bruised  
my windpipe, nettle for the one who couldn't take  
me too – because I let grapes go bad as the property  
foreclosed and don't own that noisy house anymore,  
or the space where its metal swing-set used to be –  
because everyone is so polite – because the apiary,  
the stone garden, I can take care of them – because  
I want to be a workhorse for my sorrow everyday –

## Stay in the Ground

The fire at the pageant made headline news almost nowhere. The eldest of the jeweler's daughters wanted to wait until smoke cleared, make the scavenge for precious metals through embers easier.

The youngest, she boarded a 9:54 to Victorville alone. Though cautious, her sisters kicked up small flames, set off false alarms, sirens that quieted, quieted, as St. Catharine's became her backdrop.

Nearly a teenager, she'd only been so west as Detroit, on a school trip, to hear a gospel choir. Her breath held, sweet carcinogens from burnt plaster and woodwork now seeped into the bloodstream to rearrange

her memory. By the time the train stopped in Chicago, she was six-hundred miles removed from the tone panic takes beneath an orchestra of heat coming-undone rafters, light fixtures, paneled walls.

As the passenger-car pulled across California, she was seventy-one hours absolved of flammability. Everything at the playhouse was buried. Her sisters couldn't follow; already, they were keepers of graves.



## The S-Curve of Return

Reentry is the most dangerous hour of an astronaut's flight.  
You were never a cadet, but understood the importance  
of angles, heat of friction, how uncontrollable the atmosphere.  
Someone you loved is dying, sends word with a request you come  
home for a church-lady luncheon before he is laid up at the altar.  
Your mother calls to say it is where she does her sewing now,  
but your childhood bedroom has a mattress and they'd be happy  
for you to stay, a homecoming, she says brightly, as if you hadn't  
been back in decades. But you had. The day before they expect  
your arrival, you sit on a bench across the street, not waiting for  
Bus 38 like you did just before graduation twelve years ago, when  
to rebuild seemed more difficult than apocalypse. You'd asked  
them to burn all the telephone poles on your way out of town, keep  
the ash in case they got hungry. Never had you watched preparation  
for your own return before. There are flowers, streamers taped up,  
pulled down as if shy, uncertain colored crepe-paper is enough  
or too much. A brass key you've kept since high school presses to  
the inside of your cheek, turns over each time your parents pass  
by the front bay-windows, cleaning surfaces in the kitchen, then  
the hallway, then the dining room raw – shining like new skin.  
You stand near the garage, close enough to see steam rise from

something boiling on the stovetop and remember cinnamon  
in the air, hint of release as they told you to go, anywhere else.  
Go – but maybe slowly. How you were made brave when your feet  
swung off the edge of the ladder and you put the helmet over  
headphones, didn't blink as they drew honeybees over each eye,  
said you were chosen for this task by criteria: *are you periodically  
luminous? Yes. Sometimes unobservable? Yes. Then you be the moon.*

## Ars Poetica

The kid in the R.O.T.C. Junior jacket climbed  
into the tree without anyone asking.  
He flipped out his blade, began hacking off  
low-hanging switches while the photographer

changed films and I tried to explain the project  
had nothing to do with the light of dusk,  
the light of a Circle K convenience. Unless  
when the 200 year-old cottonwood split the hood

of Kory's truck, when the steering wheel replaced  
his breastbone, kept his heart from launching  
into the asphalt on the other side of the ditch,  
burying itself until another kind of harvest –

unless, for all those years my night-mind  
existed within the glare of that intersection:  
the home I built in the hardwood's branches,  
meals cooked for my ghost-groom, the children

who had my eyes but his bone structure,  
the children with my organs but his ectoplasm.  
Or, we're sitting in the Chevy, my shoulder  
dislocated, the locked seatbelt leaving my nose

within bruising distance of the dashboard, Kory's  
barreled posture from the steering wheel ribcage,  
his left arm reaching through the windshield  
maybe for the frozen wipers, maybe

to feel the texture of bark beneath fresh ice.  
I don't have time to ask before everything  
is underwater. We are underwater but have  
the lungs for this kind of breathing, have the skin

for this kind of late April snowstorm.  
In the soundlessness, Kory gestures towards  
the glovebox, but all the paper inside is soggy,  
all the pen caps are sealed and this isn't a place

for us to use our words and it isn't a place for us  
to worry where the blood is coming from, so we

recline our seat backs to watch twelve other  
bodies slip through the thin ice.

As the photographer positions R.O.T.C. Junior,  
I tell them about *A Nightmare on Elm Street*,  
how I slept with my back against a wall  
for twelve years, how I pretended it was

a kind of foreplay when I'd cut men's nails  
before letting them into my bed. Junior, he  
isn't afraid of heights or heavy machinery.  
He has blue laces on his left shoe. He says

he chose to be a soldier. He says, *ma'am,*  
*CPS showed me this whole entire state*  
*and pretty much everybody is like*  
*pretty much everybody if you're from here.*

*You just aren't from here. You've got some*  
*nice teeth though.* After the third cigarette,  
he cuts enough brush to start a small fire,  
talks about a battle I do not believe

he fought, pulls out his license like  
some kind of proof he lifted the headscarf  
of a young woman to kiss her so he had  
a blessing to give the missile coordinates,

unless – when I took the photograph  
for my driver's permit, my head was shaved  
and I had lipstick on my front teeth. It was  
snowing again, but this was the season for it.

## Makeshift Lightness

It takes so much to feed us, to make our mouths  
empty enough of moths to walk across the alley,

knock at the neighbors' door, tell them we  
haven't found ourselves hungry in eight months.

We hold out fists of ginger,  
ask if they can teach us how to eat again.

*Let this closeness be a lesson*, the woman says,  
positioning you and me within the window frame

as a way to demonstrate risks of insisting  
twenty-three inches is the perfect distance to keep

between two bodies, as a way of saying she knows  
how many miles I troubled I wouldn't get to Wilmington

before you closed the doors  
with all those sharp-shinned hawks inside and waited

for them to give the house flight. But in that time,  
you learned new patience, ways of explaining eclipse

or aviation. When finally I arrived, you gave the question  
careful thought, but no, you didn't think it would be good

letting those birds find occupation elsewhere.  
We filled your house with flea market tapestries, replaced

new drawer handles with chipped hardware,  
invited versions of ourselves to dinner, ones

who wouldn't tie wings to our shoulders if we talked *loss*.  
Full of makeshift lightness, who tore off the roof?

## His Legs Don't Come Home from War

### I.

Street-corner kids move aside when he rolls down the sidewalk.  
Their intent is to be reverent when asking,

*Papi, you get around fast on those wheels?*

The boys want him to know they know something happened  
just above his kneecaps, that they are grateful  
for his service. One day the boys wear fatigues instead  
of their thugged-up gear. Another,  
little yellow ribbons are stick-pinned to hems of baggy t-shirts.

Now, one of them quietly opens the door when he goes in,  
the rest watching through the window until another can pull it open  
when he leaves the store.

### II.

For the first time in months, I hear joy: the last of summer's  
city songbirds raises the hymn my Vet always played when battle  
seemed closer to the barracks than normal. Over the phone,  
a Post reporter doesn't understand

*hope my baby boy grows up to be a hustla,*

how it was meant: child of cheese food and hand-me-down

Adidas knock-offs, Skee-lo sensibilities and always  
wishing he was a bit taller. When the Army recruiter  
came around Washington Park courts, half the neighborhood  
was cocaine-frozen. There were no other options.

He would talk about the raid only because of the song, thinks it  
makes his loss complex, his last verse before the bomb broke,

*Let me tell you what priceless is, some advice to give,  
a sacrifice is what I made...*

*yo, let him be a hustla, baby be a hustla.*

After his final note hums down, he pauses, asks the Post reporter  
what other phrases Vets told her were the last

with their own two feet beneath them. I don't know when they plan  
to print his story, but a newspaper now shows up in our mailbox.  
Daily, we read it, thumbs rubbing ink along the columns

as we search for the amputations.

### III.

I would spin him if we danced, but we don't.  
Grafts over the stumps haven't healed cleanly enough  
for prosthetics yet, so his new legs stand in the closet, propped  
between boxes of issue Air Jordans, vintage Nikes, sneakers

he no longer has the feet to feel. While he goes  
for debridement at the wound clinic, while he makes plans  
in physical therapy, strengthens his arms, loosens his hip rotators,  
I sit with the shoes, tie and untie laces like I'm practicing  
being attentive. I want to drop them off at Goodwill, be done  
with what we used to rely on.

### IV.

Just before a cumulus releases rain, he asks me to help him  
double-darken the windows, sheets draped over drawn blinds.  
He asks for help getting to the rooftop, where he can soak,  
forget about what he left in the bombed-out truck  
in that province north of Baghdad – St. Christopher medallion,  
wedding ring, pearl-handled penknife, APO-filtered letters –  
along with his legs, those tattooed records of marathon finishes,  
the trust of a dog's rapid tongue along his shinbone.

## Vibes and Stuff

We've got a boombox bumping  
'91 Tribe on the summer-slung  
front porch, watching kids  
we used to be pedal by on rusty  
hand-me-downs they daydream  
into or motorcycles, noisy  
with Brewers' baseball cards  
tick-click-ticking the spokes  
as they ride between

Walker's Square barriers  
of Washington Street and 9th  
when a group of Kings rolls by  
and the smallest boy throws  
a five-pointed star up, showing  
the lion and crown already  
inked on his palm before he starts  
playing gangster, hisses how  
he's *gonna rock this motherfucker*

and I forget I'm not also 14 years old,  
ready to spit the blades I was recruited  
to carry under my tongue because  
being the white girl at South Division  
meant I got through high school security  
before homeroom without any question  
from Officer Diaz, who mostly  
wanted to smoke what he confiscated,  
but sold the bags back  
so he could afford his mother's bail.



Cold Rock a Party (MKE Remix)

The DJ at the club I ducked into  
to duck out of rain and adolescent blues  
these decades of sometime loving you  
haven't quiet matured, he

rocked the party that rocked the body,  
put a midnight bass line on the dance floor,  
my slightly sullen self, she threw her hands  
in the air, slipped through samples, tried

to keep the beat, but tried to keep the beat while  
placing a Coo Coo Cal track  
the rhythm reminded her of, and tried  
to remember if Cal used to rhyme

at the service station on Kilbourn  
where your brother found out he wasn't a father  
or the one on Clybourn before the interstate exit  
where she learned the strength of the skin

covering her teeth. In a different way, we learned  
elasticity: bent our bodies through the slack  
space of the front gate lock at Solvay Coke & Gas,  
krumping to the sounds we imagined

the broke-down piano in the blank lot  
across the street would play if tuned  
for a hip hop we were trained against: your  
confusion of posture: how you curved around

a Stratocaster not to tell about your agave roots  
from Puerto Escondido to Mexico City  
to San Diego to San Jose because you were born  
in a suburban Colorado hospital, crooning

Old Blue Eyes as soon as the nurse wiped  
the placenta from your mouth, your first exhale  
all Websterian diction, perfect pitch.  
The DJ breaks the chorus, *rock, rock the body,*

*rock, rock the body, body* and a boy in leather  
who wanted a name for my moves – “not that bad”  
not the same as “good” but enough to keep me  
moving – he had a way about his red-rimmed eyes

that took me back to you: you three weeks after  
we settled into Sunset Park; you as I got on  
a Greyhound for West Center and North 54<sup>th</sup>;  
you as I found I could fail and fail

at dependency, wanting your reminder  
of how to move, how to be creation,  
destruction, love or lust, instead of a woman  
fading into roughneck scales of downbeat grey.

## Into Tides

Girls come seaside for summer. Girls chart patterns of dried salt on legs, arms. When swimsuits constrain the survey, girls become naked enough the lifeguard doesn't call their mothers, tries to bring them safely back. Girls sing boys into beachcombers. Girls pool their nets, catch boys, drown them as fish, as men they will never quite become. Girls stroll boardwalks swinging hips they don't yet have, sighing with a significance overheard from Chubby's dancers, women who go to swim on their day off from the club, one day each week for their bodies to return girl-like, soft, now shimmering in strobes of sunlight fractured beneath water. They shout white-capped hereafters into a salty wind – *spend a someday making campfires in Eastern Washington during autumn, nights without sequins except for starshine mirrored off snowy mountains; learn family recipes; call home after, not before, work to ask about your day; sleep at night.* They shout their lungs dry, never realize how silly they don't sound.

## Long-Shadow Songs

### I.

*Nothing dares to be enduring*, my grandmother wrote,  
inking my palm, then hers, with these excuses,  
trying to convince at least us two these words

were worth our not diving from semi-dangerous heights  
into Dixie-cup pools of seawater from the coastline

those tens of miles beyond her hometown.  
She whispered, *nothing dares, nothing dares*, then sang,  
a good grandmother, grandmother stroking my hair

blue-streaked as I sat at her feet unable to cry  
how she taught me, turning tears into the melody

*I'll lie here and learn how, over their ground, trees  
make a long shadow*, giving me something to sing  
as her son enlisted in one kind of war.

### II.

My uncle was returned to our family in a body bag,  
wrapped in drafts of his obituary written on the backs

of bar tabs. His brothers gave me these threads  
and dressed him in a tuxedo for the funeral.  
It was hard to say the words aloud, to put him in the ground

after it seemed we'd just talked about driving  
to every Midwestern town one of us had run through drunk,

called it ceremony, a way to find ourselves  
sober enough to make a chorus meaningful, to make  
*I sat by fires when I was young, & now I'm not,*

*I sit by fires again*, an answer to give his sister  
in exchange for questions about not giving in.

### III.

Days I struggle with speaking, I call asking my mother  
to warm my ears like she did the first time a nurse  
put me in her arms, a forewarning of these days,

*you must not believe me when I say there's nothing  
left to love in this world, never, never.* Then she made

for me a freedom song, a rhythm to carry the sounds until  
they formed sense again and I wouldn't stop after  
each phrase wondering what else I might have meant.

## Mock Disaster

We come to the tarmac around sunrise,  
before the day's air-traffic picks up  
and gives nervous fliers opportunity  
to point at the broken plane, reinforce  
their phobias. Most volunteers here  
are civil servants, health-care professionals.  
A few theater students come late, looking  
to study apocalyptic scenes, logistics of  
coffee-drinking after wounds of flour  
and red-dyed water have been made-up  
around their mouths. One victim with abrasions  
to the right temple brushes muffin crumbs  
off the bruised lip of another passenger.  
I am triaged *expectant*, black-tag classification  
barely visible beneath trauma of my neck, jaw –  
bones burst out of skin, the casing of me  
costumed to congeal low and bloody on the chest.  
My sister is given red status, a forearm  
so nearly amputated at the elbow that when  
the hand bumps against her walking thigh,  
she looks down in disbelief. *Body integrity  
identity disorder*, a night-nurse tells her.  
Coordinators give out boarding passes,  
we walk to the crash site, situate ourselves  
for rescue and wait for start-sirens.

Because there is nothing of me left to save,  
I will be the last carried off the plane –  
will watch first responders the long morning  
from the American floor. A young EMT will falter  
over my blinking, fake blood an irritant to my eye,  
until several walking wounded set their forearms  
to a stretcher, help carry my sister, who  
will hemorrhage beside me, out. So unlike her,  
she will reach back with her good arm, hold  
onto a frayed bit of my shirt as a paramedic tries  
releasing her fingers to check her pulse.  
And so like her, my sister will demand, *let me,  
I am taking this*, as she practices another response  
to disaster, tears the fabric, a small keepsake.  
We will sit in the airport parking lot longer  
than needed to peel away silicon lacerations.

*You looked so dead*, she will keep saying,  
as if just realizing one of us will not survive first.

## Golden

Why the children wanted death so badly  
they wouldn't say. I showed them sores  
beneath tape and gauze on my feet: *this?*  
*Is this what you want?* The smallest girl  
stabbed my cane through the willow tree's  
trunk, filled her hands with sap, brought  
her hands to my mouth, her mouth to  
my ear – *bury the birds in the sand before*  
*men make a sidewalk with their concrete.*  
*Bury the field-guides and whistles between*  
*cracks in the dam for authorities.* When she  
started crying, the boy with lavender crayons  
transcribed. A man I'd never met waited  
for me, soaked dandelion stems in spit and  
club soda. He could not help me walk again,  
but would remind me of a dream I always  
wanted to have, help me remember how  
my eyes felt when open.



// II.

For Now, Winter

I traded a hot ham and cheese sandwich  
for a bag of defective pistachios for a bowl  
of buttered English peas  
for two paperclips  
and a tennis ball  
for an apple with a worm  
and a bruise. The worm I knighted  
Sir Saturday, and he someday died  
happy enough.

The bruise made its way  
to my collarbone when I forgot to duck,  
forgot damage could be saved for remedy.

The apple rotted at the bottom of my bag  
next to packets of seeds, a cassette tape  
with Q-Tip reminding me Joni Mitchell  
never lies. I got distracted --

I got  
distracted by a box at my doorstep marked  
*To Be Archived*, a box filled with postcards  
I'd been promised were taken to flame,  
displayed on a mantle

with other ashes.  
These are the images I took in and  
out of focus when relearning  
how to sleep,  
to make my winter self not so hollow,  
not cry in gas stations or rest stops; how  
to knead bread, press olives, tap maples,  
carve curves in picnic tables;

how to not  
write out instructions for my lungs, take  
to cataloguing all the disasters and  
almost  
disasters wrapping their copper fingers  
around my wrists, stories I could tell  
when less solitary.

These messages  
were questions I thought I could ask  
without a return  
address but I found each  
altered by a reply of skyscrapers

or prairies  
or whatever made a destination remarkable.  
I repeated those shadow-phrase answers  
until I did not recognize my voice. And I  
repeated them

until the voice was mine  
again. I cut out the words that made  
my lips swollen and I swallowed them.  
I have heard this is not

uncommon grief.  
For now, I have these maps: from  
the postmarks came plans, places  
to bury

and unbury more boxes soldered  
shut with amnesia. I've been told to keep  
these blueprints to myself.

I've been told  
the road sign says *Entrance to Orchard –  
Closed*. But who reads  
those things anymore?

## I Will Love You Like This Later

The second boy I kissed in the gym closet  
during middle school morning latchkey  
died fifteen years later

while the cupcakes he was baking  
for the anniversary of his mother's death  
were testing the kitchen's fire alarm.

Whenever you ask about other boys,  
I want to tell you that in 1988,  
seven minutes in heaven

with Caden Roenig was mostly  
finding where the joints  
of our thirteen-year-old bodies aligned.

His mother was already dying then,  
a third recurrence diagnosed.  
He used his fingertips to show me

anatomy he'd learned from CT scans  
of her metastases: the liver,  
the right pelvic bone, the occipital lobe,

the hilum of the left lung.  
When my own body became home  
to a similar pathology in spring of 2009,

I went back to the Salol Mission Cemetery  
and sat with the Roenig family headstones.  
You were the only one I told,

and I told you because the list  
of my necessary confessions  
was becoming longer

than I'd been given to live.  
How I could die without asking  
if you'd finally recognized this way

I've tried to love you? Carefully, patiently,  
reading your palms as you slept

in the moonglow on a wintered dock:

creases that led from your boyhood  
ended abruptly with scars  
from farm-life hazards

along the base of your fingers.  
If this excision is successful, I'll ask  
to calibrate what disfigured us:

your foster home to my malignancy,  
misbehavior to irresponsibility,  
saw to scalpel, knot to knot until

we are both practically teenagers,  
unafraid to find how skin feels against  
an open palm here and here and here.

## About the Man I Followed to the Delta

Eight months I combed forests for truffles he'd roast with cow-feed corn  
over a trashcan fire lit with my letters home.

He'd ask we eat in silence, in reverence of the brother lost in the rapids.

Yes, I was once a woman who followed. I wove grass into blankets,  
thatch into mattresses. When he laid down, he put his arms out

like airplane wings, making sure I would not fall asleep too close

to his fingertips. But in the night, every night, he pulled me  
beside him to draw maps across my eyelids, whisper apologies to women

he thought he hurt. I have met these women. He hurt some.

Some he stood by as they took the stubble from his chin and scratched  
their thighs until they bled enough to make scabs they'd pick

until they bled enough to believe he'd been more than just the weapon.

I don't know which woman I was. I didn't bother asking.

If he happened to know he would not tell me and when I looked  
at my legs there were tattoos of his words, no blood.

## What Gets Through to Morning

### I. St. Brigid Watches Her Insomniac

How often has wakefulness wrested her  
to leave the apartment for a 24-hour chapel

nearby? Twenty-nine unsettled nights now  
and she's ready to pray: after bar-time, without

shoes so she can feel warm desert asphalt,  
she genuflects before the light at the crosswalk

turns off its orange hand, lets her proceed.  
Midnight-to-noon a Midwesterner living against

wheatless elevation, some nights she waits  
for one, two cars to pass, pretending the road

is countryside and this 4am will become worked  
by farmhands. Tonight she walks through

the church courtyard, pretends herself ghostlike,  
fills her perceived transparency with piano scores,

still frames from silent films, melodies –  
collage-cuts pasted to skin with the images

facing outward, backlit by a bit of whiskey and  
a cigarette as it ashes.

### II. The Insomniac Tries, Then Prays to Her Saint

Wait, and –

or, start over.

How am I supposed to do this?

Dear God, it's true: I don't take

those capsules for sleeplessness anymore,

but fill prescriptions all the same –

for the language of side effects,

an education in chemicals, reactions.

A doctor recommended I test these within

my bloodstream but, too,

I would have to open up.  
I meant to plant pills in the vegetable garden,  
but then the tabby cat started coming around.  
No doubt he's sad too, but certainly  
in different dosages.  
What wasteful thought, a prayer for  
shrubbery from the seeds meant  
to lessen longing.  
Almost, St. Brigid, I can keep time by phases  
of dawn until there is no darkness  
in any direction.  
It is nearing nautical, 11 degrees  
below morning's horizon.  
I know I'm not translucent; I happen to notice light.  
Do other lives react to strangers' kindnesses  
some different way?  
A person offers space past the waiting room  
of melancholy and I bow my head,  
appreciative, but shaking.  
*Oh, no thank you, I'll save this possible comfort  
for a night more desperate, for –  
what if there is, only, one offer  
I can welcome myself into?  
The bed has shaped to my silhouette, not my muscles,  
but no, thank you,  
I'm yet just a bit more than bone-tired.*  
Brigid, if you were beside me, when would you  
first notice how starless the sky has become?  
I think I misunderstood how long I would have  
to live with the mistakes of me, aftereffects  
of a body fallen in on itself.  
Maybe I've begun it, prayer: tiredness is a symptom.  
I ask for us all today to open everything.



## Nightshift

Fuck, Ed, you've done it again –  
fallen asleep on the floor  
at the foot of your bed, no knuckles cut  
how I do, but a night enough  
roughed up by this heartbroken landscape.  
You don't need the reminder, any

precision is a luxury easy to lose.  
From down the hall, I wait  
for the trumpet of your sleeping breath  
to smooth before I come to check  
on your glasses. You rest: light overhead  
left on, one bright bulb a courtship  
to stoneflies, neither shoe  
kicked off completely,  
bartender's apron as blanket with  
stack of guest checks paper-clipped  
beneath a Never-Gonna-Make-It note  
slipped from the pocket,  
this study of gins and histories  
their garnishes can tell but you can't  
quite yet. Like a good friend,  
I take your glasses, prop them on carpet  
just beyond arm's-length.  
Lazy roommate – the lights, the shoes,  
they stay how I found them. While you rest  
I thread fragments of seasons spent

in wanting to make a Heartland  
from desert that leaves bodies coraled,  
bleached, windblown:  
I write the next rainstorm beside  
a nearly dried up canal. Salt from sweat  
patterns around jeans at the knee-creases,  
sunshine saturates my pores,  
disorients to a point where risk of water  
becomes an afterthought to my heels  
pressing against the riverbed's warm mud.

I write the next rainstorm  
from the passenger seat of a sedan  
in a parking lot behind the bar

behind the Sizzler, shitty whiskey better  
as antiseptic for perforations  
on my palms formed  
when cacti thorns, burrowed in  
to break a fall, are plucked, pulled,  
pulled out. I write the next rainstorm  
with the crunch of a black blizzard  
between my teeth, hum of *so cold, so  
cold*, in my ear, the granules  
in my mouth could be ice-chips  
broken from the block you'd been working

for hours: you had to ring the doorbell,  
dexterity needed for a key  
and midnight-dark door handle,  
that was the luxury.  
Boy, you didn't know you'd been lost  
until your name called out over  
a PA system at the summer park –  
*please come to the announcer's booth, Ed.*  
*Seems someone is looking for you.*

## Four Glass Jars and a Passport Stamp

I am a difficult recollection. Prior mothers  
    who keep vigil in brief  
roadside chapels pray that with season-change

and showers, living children like me can become  
    more than the somehow spoiled harvests  
we came from. I am a bad heart.

I am sixteen mishaps not worth mentioning,  
    a set of braces and repetition.  
A bad heart. Tomorrow, early, one of these

will break the day, not as fog of morning, but  
    smoke of tar, plaster heated  
beyond their strengths. Me too, a bad heart.

As instructed, I made requests for recovery  
    based on locations I could diagram  
within arm's reach, then found

everything I asked for was wrong, surprisingly  
    replaceable, except these four jars  
at the end of the countertop, nearest

the outer hallway, beneath a rack of wine bottles,  
    beside stacks of cookbooks.  
Once, when poorer than now, I went

to a romantic city where a friend of a friend  
    had a rented room. I wanted  
to knife only my own initials on a padlock,

latch it on the bridge, melt the key into a ring  
    I'd try to pawn then leave  
on the counter because it was worth nothing.

Which is why I'd traveled  
    away, to call my time a bloodletting.  
I'd eaten little more than bread and jam.

## First the Heat, Then the Letting Go

For months, I introduced myself by fire:

*Hello, nice to meet you. I used to have those Reeboks in black with the pink trim – until 6 am flames blistered paint from walls enclosing an air-shaft of my apartment building and firemen laddered over the roof made waterfalls out of second, third-floor windows facing Webster Street; my own burst open, letters I'd left on the kitchen table floated down to the sidewalk blocked off by caution tape, engines. The Red Cross nurse suggested holding the coffee in both hands, suggested changing out of my robe and slippers into scrubs, or sit in the bus brought for us residents, a cool place to watch our homes combust, then disintegrate – they don't make Freestyles like that anymore, I've checked. They look good on you.*

When the season's first snow hit Wisconsin, everything black and charred became blanketed in stillness.

I thought healing could look like this, a covering up.

While whiteouts drifted into that bedroom, I stood across the street, opened the broken window of my mouth, held out my tongue to catch flakes, desperate for a simple gesture to remove the taste of soot I'd thumbed along my lips, relieve the need to warn acquaintances of this damage before they came too close. In my quietness,

I had a hard time moving on from that building, wanted to hear familiar creaks where joints in the floor were weakened, wanted to look for my copy of *The English Patient* filled with notes exchanged with my sometime lover and, not finding it, think it was time to call him again, get my book back.

With spring came demolition plans.

Half of us made homeless in June went for groundbreaking, stood where we'd been when Officer Olson told us we wouldn't be sleeping in our beds that night.

Not understanding, I'd gone to touch the fireman's forearm as if he needed comfort – he'd fought, lost to ten-hour flames.

I went back there for this: the man from 7C got so homesick in December, he jumped chain link fences, walked along what was left of hallways, knocked on each axed-open door.

He let himself in, scavenged for good news to take out in his pockets. From my 5A, he'd pulled a water-warped photograph from when I was eight years old, dressed in a sweatshirt I'd puff-painted with my mother for a Girl Scout patch: *Every House Needs a Holm*.

## The Nearly Frozen North

He taught me how to love a good winter.  
On the back deck, he'd set sunlamps  
around plastic tropical trees, sand,  
seashells; mugs of warmed bourbon placed  
in the cup holders of lawn chairs, marshmallows  
and medications for long nights floating beneath  
paper umbrellas. We made a snow family,  
invited them for lunch, apologized when rice soup  
was more than they could handle,  
the snow-toddler falling asleep in my arms.  
We scooped what remains we could  
into ice cube trays.

\*

Everyone knows a wedding dress doesn't wear so nice  
with winter boots, but that's what I wore.

He trusted states of matter, photographs,  
anything wrapped in satin. I didn't know how bones froze,  
wasn't convinced water could change my feelings.  
I wanted to find out, and if he would come along.  
At the end of the pier by the sewage treatment facility,  
he kept my ears warm with his hands.

I didn't tell him I couldn't hear.  
He might have said the lake wasn't solid yet.

## Variations on a Theme

### I.

They must build their own city, pouring the concrete foundation  
beneath a crack in the sky 3,000 miles west of their original  
destination. They will never be prayers or prey-birds. I guess  
this matters to me, getting close enough to cloud-cover.

### II.

Don't go to New York, Q. You must build your own city,  
filled with your own sapphire skyline washing  
to the roots of seedlings recarpeting worn lawns. Funnel  
the ghost town of your grandmother's legacy into

a canister you can drink from and let the rusty pink of that  
sundowning horizon be a slow burning of the prison

no one needs anymore. Listen: empty the ice in those  
styrofoam barrels into the canal, making a new river,  
a new climate, an apology to the rough desert  
for a western way you were born into but couldn't crisp

the edges of through any lens. I've lived like this too, all  
backdrops and bodies so blurred they became shatterproof,

no straight lines to splinter and scratch until I searched for  
someone I could call doctor, look at my hands, understand  
which crevices were repentant, which rapturous when I said,  
*I think I broke something*, and know how to repair

other damages. But, listen: no one will call you Golden.  
They will look at your willingness to see questions, Q, and bet

on your certain failures: song of dusk before practice bombs  
fall over mountains, song of waterless buoyancy,  
wingless revelry, not the fleeing from gas station parking lots,  
but the staying to dance these grounds sacred again.

### III.

Take the wood, the railroad ties, the canisters of nails.  
Take the fathers who broke down the buildings

when they'd heard of tornados heading east. Take the prison,  
the prisoners, their prison-songs to patch the crack  
in the sky rented inaccurately against not the limbs poised  
prayerfully for phases of dissolution, but the fog

of their shadows lagging all those miles behind. Beneath  
the patching, safely, so safely, return to the unrelenting

memory. Rebuild this city of dusk, the passages and  
pathways of ghosts given to change their mind, say yes.

IV.

I guess it matters to me, our inability to ever become  
more birdlike and then name, rename our species,

our habits, without rewriting everything that came before.  
I wish it mattered to you, our crashing through clouds,  
our hands first grasping for water droplets to taste  
the night's cover. I have to build my own city, try not

to make too many mistakes in the construction, the inevitable  
isolation of so much space made something else.

## Of Copper Excavated

The man who died behind the rope shovel  
on his youngest brother's wedding day  
wouldn't stay in the ground. He kept climbing  
out of the coffin, brushing debris  
off his borrowed burial suit, walking

into town for one more apology.  
When he'd get to the diner, he'd hold up  
an index finger for the waitress  
to bring coffee as he'd slide into the booth  
across from the woman who engraved

his headstone. This is how my mother  
describes the last twenty years  
of her marriage, the quiet madness of his mind  
soaked in a whiskey that preserved memories  
made while sleeping

and sleeping until thirst shook him awake.  
I never mention it because all the fathers  
repurposed themselves after the slag pile  
settled. Mine, I didn't know any other way:  
clean-shaven, tired-eyed, apologetic

in his rye-laughter, reminding us girls  
we weren't guns, worrying over  
ammunitions before asking about  
melting points of metals, of copper,  
of copper he excavated while working

beside men whose ghosts would wake him  
for daybreak drives to the closed quarry.  
The week before his funeral, I tried singing  
the hymn handwritten in the book  
of breathing exercises propped

on his hospital bedside stand. They said  
my father could no longer communicate,  
but I swear he squeezed my hand  
when I asked why he never taught me  
the difference between flight and retreat.



## These Basic Living Bones

My cousin hasn't checked in with his parole officer  
in North Dakota because he hasn't told  
his parole officer in North Carolina he's left the state.

\*

Handmade tattoos of uneven hearts resting  
on top of the breast -- I always wanted to be

the kind of woman willing to wear my imperfect  
affections that openly, let someone etch

into my skin even as I knew the scarification  
might breathe in something solemn before it healed.

Instead, I bandaged up bullet-holes of carelessness  
my lovers lodged along my spine before I walked

out into an after-dark South Side  
where I could never roll my *r*'s soft enough

anyone believed I was raised in Lincoln Village.  
The edges of the wounds, they burned orange

in the open air, made my body fluorescent, made  
known the sort of men I loved. The neighbor girls

followed me, pointed to the broken brightness,  
asked *why? Why?* Then, *por que, tia? Por que?*

\*

When we last spoke, I asked if my cousin  
remembered rules he made for entering and exiting  
the chipboard playhouse in his childhood backyard.  
By the end of the summer my parents sent me  
to live with those relatives, my ankles were circled

in x's from rusty scissors and screws, tiny fees  
and ticker-counts of my movements. I haven't answered  
the phone in two years; I don't know why he still calls.

\*

I broke 9 of my 206 bones in one  
accidental weekend. By the slip and stair-fall

snapping the seventh, eighth, ninth, I wondered  
how achievable it was to break or burst

every structure of the body, just enough to make  
an autopsy interesting. By Sunday morning,

I'd decided to quit smoking, if only to help  
the bone-healing process. When my sister

picked me up at the ER, again, she'd written up  
what she called a "repair plan," a cleansing

and casting of disregard for anatomy  
that I inherited but she didn't. By Sunday evening,

I'd had enough narcotics to sit  
in front of the mirror and recognize myself.

\*

My aunt went out to the Atlantic  
to bring my cousin back home,  
back to Cass County because North Dakota  
can do this for people: erase records.  
Which means, Fargo is where we can go  
to forget. He'll be given a homecoming  
like he's really a Vet. He'll tell war stories  
that start with gin and end with bullets,  
the Pledge of Allegiance, prayers  
for casualties, air raids and explosions,  
more gin, the sign of the cross, more gin.  
He won't say why he's been brought back.

\*

I went to confession to ask about my skeleton.  
The priest put his hand to the screen and prayed:

*there was a noise, a rattling sound,  
and the bones came together, bone*

*to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh  
appeared on them and skin covered them.*

I left confession understanding  
these bones will never live again.

\*

If your father were alive today, Cousin,  
he'd be disappointed you're a drunk.  
No one seems willing to say this because  
they're all trying to save you.

Do you remember when he let us pretend  
we were fishing from the back of his truck  
after the Red River flooded that April?  
He filled empty Coors bottles with apple juice,  
let us eat thawing key lime pies he wouldn't  
be able to deliver, corrected our attempts  
at cursing as we sat back and watched  
the river of those roads.

## Etiquette for Route #9

According to a man in the bus seat beside me,  
it is rude to say I don't feel much like talking.

So I turn, make a megaphone of his offered ear,  
speak slowly in saying I am recently a patient

transplanted, that I took my left lung, threw  
it from my fire escape with the thought it either

was useless or would become useful only  
inside someone else. By the time I'd gotten

down to the sidewalk, there was the chalk outline.

An ambulance drove away without lights,

no sirens either.

## Breach

Silas is back in the kitchen after fifteen minutes sitting on the stoop, peeling carrots, “thinking about” what he'd done, but he didn't know

what the word meant when he said it and the clacking of the letters against his teeth as he formed them made his eyes sting. I'd never

seen Maria hit her son before, but my friend called me, more often since her husband's third deployment, afraid of her hands like that.

The last time, several months ago, Maria woke me after midnight because Silas had woken her: holding his teddy-horse,

his bookbag packed, his favorite sweatshirt tied around his waist, he said they needed to move out of that ghost house. I imagined

how warm he must have gotten preparing himself to leave, telling the wallpaper, the mice in the walls, the portraits he'd drawn

in preschool that week, this was no place for a boy and the broken shape of his mother. After they made a fort, talked about what to do when afraid,

searched last month's Classifieds for leases on apartments they cannot afford overlooking McKinley Marina, he fell asleep and she called me,

tired in an anger that had to soothe someone else instead of spending the restless night pretending thoughts of a husband's death were

bad dreams. I couldn't understand, but I could ask her to put her hands against something unbreakable, describe the texture, describe

the experience of reality outside her worry.

Standing beside me on a chair to reach the countertop, Silas says

he will eat the whole teacup of blueberries. I brought them for his mother's birthday cake. This is a threat, a backlash for not

knowing why he was punished. Maria apologizes. He starts slowly, not looking away from her as, one at a time, his forefinger

and thumb pick up and place five berries inside his cheek. With, *my darling, please*, Silas starts racing to fill his mouth with wildness.

## The Future of Young Men in America

How could you not  
become dangerous?  
When raised on the  
promise you wouldn't  
live past thirty, no

good men about town  
proving otherwise and  
all your friends spent  
years of high school  
working hard to test the  
drugs and sell the drugs  
and cook the drugs so  
they could afford fast  
cars and the things girls  
willing to sit beside them  
in the front seat needed,

the emptiness between  
Ajo and everywhere else  
becoming a racetrack,  
a proof the world started  
where you stood and ended  
at the mountain's horizon  
within the line of sight.

// III.

## The Moonwalker's Wife

We spent the summer before we married  
driving through Minnesota woodlands  
trying to find the barn he kept  
in the farmer's story of his infancy

as the place his mother birthed him in.  
Maps still showed the town of Georgeville  
but we couldn't find the intersection, no  
four corners with two bars, a church,

a post office. Highway 55 just carried on  
south toward Paynesville without a crossroad.  
When we were lost like this, we'd prepare  
for when he'd be called up on mission,

called to chart the coordinates of a space  
forgettable in its vastness:  
we'd follow moonshadows, find ourselves  
running downhill through cornfields so fast

we'd end up knee-deep in a body of water,  
bathing cuts we hadn't known were bleeding yet.  
When I'm lost now, I try bending light  
beneath my feet,

move in second-and-a-half increments,  
hoping the shapes on this earthshine reach  
someone up there. I'm telling a brief history  
of myself slow-dancing 239,000 miles from my husband.

This is me, gathering the dew and decay  
needed to lullaby my nearly severed self  
into wakefulness. Me, recalling how  
this Moon Man taught humility: *fall, fall safely.*



Siskiyou Plays “Twigs and Stones” with Interpretations

*built out of twigs and stones*

The wear-down of waiting: try find sleep in a faded bus station,  
all tired eyes, exhausted expectation stretched out across

plastic lobby chairs. Any departure will do – to leave the hum  
of vending machines, strikes of Arrivals clocks, to make a home

from rocks and branches, to gather disaster into a castle, the kind  
mothers lie to their daughters about before they become quieted,

satisfied until missteps become sensible.

*to give and give*

He will leave without me, forgetting there is a difference between  
not saying and saying: *I'm not going away from you.*

*storm cloud, but without a lightning bolt*

Not to be broken, no sharp edges to snag summer-worn skin,  
salt-licked to a clean surface of paislied stoneware, eventually

we will become orphans preoccupied with ledges and forgetful  
of wars, but today we drive to the city for books. I highlight

paragraphs for him to read aloud, form his thin mouth around  
phrases braver than those we use daily. We fall asleep pretending

weather will keep us responsible, warn us to ask someone  
if unsure how the lock in the floorboard unlatches so we can

get ourselves to safety.

*due to fall apart*

I know he troubles the road, the car getting him to a country  
of cardboard parks and constellations – well-fashioned, but

paper pulp still. He'll regret finding no fireflies around the barn  
because there is no barn and only music leads to the clearing,

but he'll regret the flatness his voice takes on without starlight,  
forget the firework's relief, hold brightness against his ear

like a cricket. He'll trouble the road until he starts running – –

*I am a mountain, but not a mountain range*

We were all strangers once, crowding to clear a garage floor  
of confetti and popcorn with our feet bare. Some of us slept

on blankets in the garden, our beds upstairs left cold for days.

*but I'm slowing down*

Understand the music box ballerina's ankles, how a spring bends  
after the lid shuts abruptly mid-overture, bends as the box stays

closed for months. I've twisted mechanically, too, and when not  
in use, threaded lies through tulle like fortunes gifted. Those

ribbons became heavier than supposed silk, made my balance  
uneasy as they warned to love better, this or the next one.

*give and*

– – and running away becomes an archaic tactic of speech.  
But that is it: the perceived weight of wearing white to mourn

when what he wants is celebration, that confetti on the tongue,  
sea-spray of champagne making sticky sun-tired skin. Out

goes a memorial, dozens of paper planes sailed from the rooftop,  
thank-yous for time spent together written on wings. He'll find

these loves in gutters no farther than down the block. Even once  
snow-season starts, he'll harvest, resend them weekly; the walk

from street-level to skyline becomes intentioned movement,  
reason to stay another seven days.

*give and give and give*

Small gestures, discarded and picked up curbside – I clutch  
these until hotness burns star-scars I can hold out as invention.

If not for such new methods of course-charting, I might be able  
to ask him how he has not yet become tired of watching me try,  
watching the remarkable inelegance of my waiting.

## Since Last We Spoke Against a Lakefront Air Current

A blue bike rests, wheels  
to the riverbed, rusting  
in silty Milwaukee water  
near where the Hoan Bridge  
spans, sometimes buckles.

In early thaw, blocks of ice  
still frozen to the seat and  
handles make for the body  
of a harmless horror who pedals  
towards harbor not as recreation

but a bright gunshot, the ardent  
bullet discharged from a soft throat,  
the rifle pointed out a passenger's  
side window rolled down  
to let cigarette smoke clear

the truck's cabin. Eventually  
and with frequency sounds  
of hot metal through a doe's torso  
become silhouetted in noise  
of whiskey sipped against

our lips wintered without ChapStick,  
without the milky skyline  
of an unmade city – the scaffolding  
for Hoan's repair, small plywood  
squares painted into hearts by

schoolchildren, the hearts ticking  
across framework of the bridge  
reinforced in thirty-foot increments,  
the welder working to tighten the harness  
around his waist, his eyes prayed

towards his rusty hands,  
the shapes of people walking  
away, the shapes beneath water-top  
of people's scraps maybe salvageable.  
I'm still not sorry.

## After the Storm

They dropped me off at St. Ben's  
hoping a night eating shelter food,  
feeling a top bunk's metal springs give  
after decades of taking the weight  
of women like me heavy with trying  
to find new ways to settle old debts,  
hearing sleep-talk of *the danger*,  
*the danger*, dribbling out of the mouths  
of minds inhabiting bodies made hollow  
by giving birth to someone else's hope  
tomorrow might hurt just a bit less  
when the blinds were drawn, filling  
the room with the steel-flecked smoke  
of the foundry worker's good labor –  
my parents hoped this kind of night  
would help me find rock-bottom.  
A year later, still not very sober or clean,  
I called from St. Ben's to tell them

I was coming for my things. They replied,  
on repeat, *If you are calling a Milwaukee  
area phone number, please hang up and  
dial again. If you need assistance, please  
dial your operator. This is a recorded  
message. If you* – I went to see what  
might be left of my things, if more than  
the 569-phone number of the house  
I'd grown up in had changed. I walked  
along the river to the fence I'd painted  
with my father, climbed to the roof  
by the limbs of the redwood he imported  
to keep my mother from moving  
back to California, unlocked the window  
as I'd started doing in high school to move  
in and out of my bedroom. I turned on  
no lights, found the bed, lifted the covers,

slept. In the sleep, I saw factory-sky clouds  
illuminating everything grey, showing  
how hard my habits had been on my father:  
the room was painted with gasoline,  
left to soak while he went for matches.

On every family portrait, he'd pinned  
a prayer to my chest like the gold cross  
I'd swallowed after my First Communion,  
imagining bones would absorb holiness,  
hold it much longer than wafers and wine.  
On the desk were three stacks of letters  
addressed to me or God or my memory,  
arranged and rubber-banded according  
to a kind of category: *Days I Drove*  
*Past St. Ben's and Left an Offering,*  
*A Family Tree (Not Excuses), Good Days*  
*(How My Baby Girl Still Sings).*  
In the sleep, I heard neighbors talking

how they'd watched us for years,  
watched my father take his shotgun out  
to fight thunderheads those nights  
electricity got into my veins  
and I couldn't stop screeching, a warning  
to the neighborhood bad weather  
wasn't over yet and everyone should  
stay boarded in their basements.  
Sometimes this was all any of us  
could do. I heard them saying he  
found me reading those letters, eating  
casings left on the carpet since  
the April day he took me to St. Ben's  
when I'd been shouting at the rain again  
and he'd come to my room with his rifle  
as he did, but couldn't shoot down  
the storm breaking below the ceiling.

## A Cartographer's Daughter Sleeps on Her Stomach

I took a wrong turn on Halsted in 1987  
and spent the next seventeen years  
robed in kerosene, hoops of fire clipped  
to my earlobes, my hips used  
to rearrange prayers of good men who  
wanted skin beneath their fingernails,  
crowns of keys in their hair. These days  
I sleep on my side, but we'll talk  
of that in a minute. Or – we'll talk of it now.  
I sleep on my side so the CPAP doesn't  
break my neck. I've traded in my comforts.  
And anyway, my dreams come  
inconveniently – twenty men in riot gear  
at the front door, the captain,  
his soft knock, the suddenness of a room  
filled with loud voices, artillery, stories  
my daughter was buried but no one knows  
where, accusations love must have always been  
so easy for me to turn down. The rich live  
along North now and my dead  
sell velvet dances for change.

## Sparring, or A Good Day to Remember I Have Feet

I am back at Al Moreland's,  
blistering my knuckles beneath  
blood-stiffened leather gloves  
while Coach

reads in his preacher rasp  
from a book of Badiou I'd left in my locker.  
He's taunting me with Marvin Gaye, stats  
on the kids he's saved from the streets

these nine years since I gave up,  
and the crucifix he'd found mingling with  
French philosophy and these worn mittens:  
the cross my first real boyfriend

clasped around my neck the afternoon  
he decided I wasn't as good at sex  
as thought Magdalena Mariana Lazaga  
Bercerra Galeano might be: the evening

I decided I would not sleep in Milwaukee County  
another night because someone else  
called my body scrap and I didn't  
know how else to prove him wrong.

I am back at Al Moreland's  
because yesterday something in my posture  
over the punchbowl made you certain  
you should put your arms around me.

Inconvenient Friend, what  
was my spine telling you?  
And something in your fingers  
on my scapula made me anxious

for one sincere gesture: a touch  
as meaningful as the entire motion  
of a left hook. You walked with me  
around the reception hall, betting

your first-born daughter I would not cover  
the wooden carving of William Burroughs



in drag with my argyle stocking; arguing  
you were father enough to decline a dare to pour  
your warmed Old Style into the piss-pool font  
below a hallowed *Real Gone* Tom Waits  
knighting a circa 1997 Isaac Brock.  
You slipped vodka ice cubes into my tonic,

called me hateful when several glasses  
hadn't made me drunk, hadn't let you probe  
my palms for stories: let you kneel  
beside me as I pled with saints Tom and Isaac

for a synesthetic experience. Even so,  
it wasn't really such a bad day: I felt my feet  
for the first time since you Prince Charmed  
into these troubadour's boots, and for once,

you maybe didn't quite let me down. Or  
at least I made good use of your back,  
made ladder rungs of your ribs,  
and remembered what it was to walk away.

## Places Most Hostile to Romance

### *Destination A.*

Rauli bombs his heart over everything: cement barriers around *La Boca* projects where brothers pepper their dinners with debris from the one who works the nightshift at the grocery store; windows of subway cars shuffling tourists

below the streets not highlighted on the scenic route map; aluminum siding surrounding green spaces with warnings to keep out while parks are under construction. On billboards, fire escapes, sidewalks he tags structures

with the anatomical accuracy of a med school textbook. This heart is complete: a mother crying, a man with a spray can pointed like a weapon at the pulmonary valve, and a replica of me, dead but smiling, in the left atrium.

### *Destination B.*

The back bathroom in the Tin Box is designated for couples *especially*.

Rules of decorum are posted outside the door. Inside – a toilet, ten minute shot clock, trashcan, rug pretending to be fur.

I have been here before: a man at my back; a man not interested in calling any of the numbers written on the baseboards. A man apparently not interested in having a good time.

### *Destination C.*

Six Saturday nights I've spent at the Main Street Walgreens but it only takes three to understand the script:

between two and five under-30 men  
come in for condoms; fewer than two  
purchase them

one middle-aged man buys KY, a liter  
of Coke, Saltine Crackers and one  
cosmetic product in some shade of lilac

one woman comes in to try on sunglasses  
with non-brown frames: she looks like  
she's been crying a few weeks longer  
than I've been alive; she uses a different color  
to polish each nail, avoids reds; she addresses  
several 8½ by 12-inch bubble mailers,  
fills out one page of a Puzzler's Giant Book  
of Crosswords, buys two packs of tealights,  
a box of matches

two to three groups of three to six teenage girls  
stand at the end of aisle 8 – Antacids +  
Laxatives, Eye + Ear Care, Home Health Care;  
they play truth or dare: someone calls a boy,  
someone has to buy fungal cream; someone  
starts crying; someone tries to steal  
a pack of gum but throws it out of her pocket  
before she passes the doors' sensors; someone  
starts crying

*Destination D.*

I have to flirt with the doorman to get us to the rooftop terrace of the building  
next door. I will ask later if it was worth it. At seven floors up we are more  
voyeurs than astronomers, but we are used to renaming ourselves. I will ask later

if it was worth it. I tell you I don't know how to find Orion and I don't know why  
I am supposed to care: about the stars, about the myth. Some nights I tell you I can see  
the woman in apartment 9B dancing with a cardboard cutout. She dresses

for the occasion. I can't see who she holds. I tell you about the books I am reading,  
the songs I can't get out of my head, stencils I keep seeing on street signs  
and lampposts and sidewalks – anything to keep from asking why we came here.

## Fire at the Pageant

When Ian starts shouting about the fire  
begin your fouette. Three turns complete  
the sequence. Focus, one spot. Focus.

*Fire.* Begin please. Where your eyes start  
matters. Is it really the extinguisher you want  
holding your gaze, holding you upright?  
Can you stay spinning on this stage through  
turn two as Ian screams and the children's choir  
sings angelic, sings *everybody calm down*  
while half the audience collapses wooden chairs  
trying to run toward an exit the auditorium  
doesn't illuminate, trying to get to the Amerex  
before you can snap your head around again?  
Can you keep calm, keep your balance  
for the third rotation knowing the chemicals  
were last checked in 1973 when installed  
by your father, who won't flinch until your  
relevé heel touches the waxed floor and  
the last notes of *please stop shouting*, along  
with your ballet shoes, become tinder, smoke?

## Sundays

My mother never knew how to say she was happy.  
She'd talk about soap: how she'd grown up in a home  
without much, but was taught cleanliness.  
And here she was washing her youngest daughter's hair  
with mint shampoo, cardamom oil from capsules  
harvested by hand in a region never mentioned  
during world history at Kittson County High.  
Those crops became our luxury, our passageway  
from a greyed-out December along Lake Michigan  
to somewhere warm and colorful. She would go  
back to brushing, braiding my hair while I told her  
we should go to Guatemala, sunbathe on the lip  
of Pacaya, drop headstones into the crater's throat,  
watch magma melt the colossus into caravans  
of archeologists who bury and don't bury dead  
they find, scratch their initials, date, dedications  
into the creature's knuckles: some to women who  
loved them; most to scribes of Helena Augusta  
who never asked when to bring the plane back.  
She wants me to write flowers as wedding bouquets  
or prom boutonnieres, but I've busied myself  
with wrapping daughters of my endothelium in blankets  
crocheted with threads of dresses my great-grandmother  
wore to funerals. I've made science-room skeletons  
from nail filings, sweat from people who run to run  
away, ash from orange petals and pink rose arrangements  
left outside a bank-owned house. I'll keep talking until  
my mother snaps a rubber-band against my wrist.  
*Christine, tell me where you are right now.*

\*

Mornings I want to sleep longer I mix a teaspoon  
of sawdust with a 1926 Macallan I found  
in a Kentucky-barn basement while searching for Port William  
and another way to talk about bourbon. I'd been up for hours  
giving husks of corn mismatched button eyes  
so I could watch night while sleeping, wouldn't mind  
when saints came to bless my palms with copper, resuscitate  
my skin. I'd called my mother to keep me awake,

keep me from making other phone calls, asking boys to read Andersen's tales in a different diction. She reminds me it is Sunday and I should come home for dinner.

\*

When I drove through the Rockies, I gave names of men back to the mountains. I folded fortunes into cranes, linked the cranes into scarves, wrapped the scarves around population signs of cities that still had my shoes. I don't know how else to tell my mother I am safe, still have the cardinal she drew on white construction paper, the one I'd kept taped above my headboard for years because it helped me, as a child, understand something about field-guides to unreality. And it helps me now remember there are benefits to drowning in a secondhand wedding dress and digging up the dead and burying elderly daughters and writing postdated postcards and chasing boys on bikes and trapping mosquitoes in the women's bathroom and washing or not washing blood from walls and throwing away Bibles and packing suitcases with tornadoes, maps, black bear hides and putting rotten fruit in mouths full of kind words.

Before hope,

seven trucks' worth of farmhands  
take to back-burning the field,

removing the debris, the brush  
disguised as bedding;

motion makes me so sick  
fever breaks the delirium breaks

the shunt implanted to try  
to prevent this kind of gravity

from becoming an alternative  
to weightlessness; power outages

trip alarms set to schedule  
my feelings, stuttering the clock

on loss: the signaling through flames,  
the speaking through smoke,

the ash in the throat, the ghosts  
on the mantle, the loss, the loss;

an eight-foot tall bride statuing  
on the streetcorner bows to a quarter

tossed in the hat below her feet, extends  
a daisy to say, "Here, it is you I see."