

Ghost Town Blues

by

Kathrine Keller

A Practicum Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Approved April 2014 by the  
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Sara Ball (Chair)  
Terry Hummer  
Norman Dubie Jr

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2014

## ABSTRACT

This manuscript of poetry examines the weird and the wonderful of the worlds of science and popular culture. The poems touch on such topics as varied as tabloid inventions, shipwrecks, wandering planets, and Davie Bowie. A focus on figurative language, intriguing vocabulary, and the interesting tidbits of life provide the foundation for the thesis both in individual poems and as a whole. This thesis draws from three years of work and revision as an MFA candidate. It contains sixty poems of varying forms and lengths.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the assistance and guidance of the MFA faculty. Special thanks to my committee, Sally Ball, Norman Dubie, and Terry Hummer; Alberto Ríos for all his guidance; Jeannine Savard and Beckian Fritz Goldberg for giving me a dynamite foundation as an undergraduate and for their continued mentorship as a graduate student; and to Oscar Giner for encouraging me through all my time at ASU. Further thanks to my amazing cohort—Nathan Slinker, Christine Holm, and Spencer Hanvik—who inspired and motivated me with their incredible work and camaraderie.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

POEM	Page
In Medias Res .....	1
Batboy .....	3
Midnight in .....	6
Ophelia .....	8
Pluto .....	11
Girl Detective .....	12
Midnight Zone .....	14
The Patchwork Girl .....	16
Psychopomp .....	18
The Butterball Heaven Hotline .....	19
Cerebrovascular Accident .....	22
Chevron Blanket Song .....	24
Parable .....	26
Ghost Town Blues .....	28
Pvt. Hess Writes Home .....	30
Girl Detective at the Prom .....	32
Junkspace .....	33
Construction Paper .....	34
Blue Period .....	36

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

POEM	Page
Three Months In .....	38
On Being Dust .....	39
Girl Detective and her Sidekicks .....	40
Carthorse Orchestra .....	44
Electricity .....	45
Corresponding Calls .....	51
Tmesis .....	52
The Things We Kept .....	55
Smoke .....	56
Correspondance .....	57
Getting to Moscow .....	59
All My Threesomes Happen in Vermont .....	61
Girl .....	64
Chemicals .....	66
All Fall Down .....	68
Breakfast Apocalypse .....	70
Afterlife .....	72
Cocoon .....	73
Flying Machines .....	75

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

POEM	Page
The Collecting House .....	77
First Storm Since .....	84
Bystander Effect .....	86
Undiscovery .....	88
Slither .....	89
Girl Detective Under Water .....	92
What We Wore into Space .....	94
Elegy .....	96
Hymaniacs .....	97
Into the Side of the Mountain .....	99
Jaws .....	101
The Mad Scientist's Love Song .....	102
Planetesimal .....	104
Last Response of the Oracle .....	107
The Alien's Wife .....	108
Girl Detective in the Bedroom .....	109
Orbit of Sensibility .....	111
Promenade .....	112
Saxophone Solo .....	114

Glam Rock .....	116
Sedona Vortex .....	118
In Absentia .....	121

## **In Medias Res**

IV     In the night,  
little lights are reflected  
red and unrepentant,  
like the eyes of crocodiles  
flooding the Nile. The old man  
had so much blood in him.  
Who  
would have thought?

V       In between the leap and the landing there are daisies and roses and bicycles and  
loam. This is not to be confused with Bernouilli's Principle, which states that airplanes  
are able to lift off of the ground like chickens do in their dreams. This is not to be  
confused with Orville Wright catching butterflies in a steel pot for examination. This is  
not to be fused with shards of glass and formed into a candelabra.

VI     She finally told him  
everything. After that night  
there were no more words  
for anyone to say.



\*\*\*

\*\*\*

\*\*\*

## Batboy

Like a newspaper freak in springtime, the boy  
runs across a field of GMO daisies to his beloved,

who wears a tiara of suckerpunch tentacles:

this Juliet of deep-sea divers' dreams with her mermaid hair

twisted up in seed pearls and seaweed, chewing  
on bait-fish and biting her nails. Like a moth

is confused by the moon's equilibrium of light  
and turns to chasing candles, the lovers run knots

around each other and weave limbs together. *Sick*  
the old folks say, watching from the sidelines

pipes dangling out of their wrinkled lips. Old men  
in argyle and flat caps, old women in floral polyester:

they watch this display with the salivation of a bear

in salmon season. On the field, the boy dances

like a satyr. Juliet responds with a tarantella, whirring  
around the room in a fit of satisfaction. The old folks

call out, *Young love is sick and twisted*. The old women  
pull sweater vests off of the old men, who rip

their house dresses off in turn. *Here's to you!*

they all growl at each other from cracking tracheas.

In the grass, the damage is done; the boy goes through  
his morning-after ablutions: sweeping a fork

through his hair, rubbing pearl dust across his teeth  
and Juliet combs spider silk across her breasts,

picks out the bug bodies and hands them to her delicious sweetheart.

*Everything in the world is an orgy,*

he tells her. From the audience, there is little more

than the sound of voices calling *Anything can happen.*

(anything can happen.)

## Midnight in

Yellow eyes like sap becoming amber; the hyena girl in toe-shoes stalks the grocery aisle at the neighborhood Quick Mart, picking up pixie stix and watching over the rows for the camera. Feel the arch in her back. The fluorescent light flickers like a seizure.           Blood licks across her teeth, torrential.

Killing clouds is a sacrifice, caressing the red lust of ire, violating the undertow. She will open her chest like a present, take the chambers of her heart and tie them to a harpoon: *use them as bait*. She doesn't mind. She likes it when you echo into her body and cut in with a scalpel, into her thoughts

because that's the one power you can't take back; her right to run her own self through somebody else's fingers and touch the electric current of her neural fire to the Stranger's skins. Run rabid. Eat ash. Sever seduction.

Can you see her toes, twisted under her weight but erect, beautiful, holding her aloft, until the rain leaks through the roof, puddling

beside the racks of gum and magazines? There's no choice between paper and plastic. Only the cylinder of light

fluttering its wings on and off and on and off and on and

## Ophelia

I picked up flowers disguised as stones,  
put them into my pockets  
while the ice around the sun took its bow,  
and there was also a gathering scream,  
colored the colors of not-knowing and betrayal.

Flowers in my hands: blue for rosemary,

white for alyssum, blue for rosemary.

Each one the cold roundness of a stone,  
each one etched out in lines of betrayal.

When I called to you, I kept my hands in my pockets  
so they would stay warm. I heard them scream—

I watched each flowerhead string its bow

and felt the season change from the bowers  
of springtime to the lake-song of winter. *Marry*

*the red dust of sunset*, I sang. I screamed

every word and waited for the stones

to answer back. They never do. A pocket

of time can blossom love or bloom betrayal,

which cures like meat. Betrayal:

the angry beast destroying the hunter's bow

pulling its rage into a deep pocket

of biding-my-time. But then, here's rosemary,

telling me its old blue story, its face stony,

waiting for an answer, my unkindly screaming.

The river is the way I will answer; the scream

of water pounding out its unbroken trail

tumbling and crushing and polishing the stones

that make up its bed. Water over a cliff in its final bow.

The frost reflects a sky the color of all the rosemary

I have picked up and put in my pockets.

And there, too, with the flowerheads in my pocket

are flakes of coldness that bite and shiver and scream

and blend their cold with the smell of the rosemary.

Even here, I can feel your breath, decry your betrayal.

I am stepping from a field of blue and white into a rainbow;



I am collecting all the stones.

I pile snowflakes into my pocket; count the betrayals.

The flowers scream the last song of my unready rain; they bow:

*Rosemary. Rosemary, rosemary, rosemary.*            Stones.

## Pluto

In the city, you can't see the incredible depth of space, only the brightest stars, marred by smoke, and a hazy-haloed moon.

There is not even a porch swing here, only a plastic chair and cracked concrete.

The world seems so small, and the sky so huge tonight,  
running the globe over in its studded hands, that great and tiny blueness,  
looking toward the spiral center of the Milky Way and calling for home.

*Never lose hold of your self.*

With all the love of a black hole for a pulsar, keep your knowledge whole:

*You are a planet of your own.* Your skin is home to tiny craters of dreams—  
millions of them—and in that the coldness, we orbit one another,  
my eyes linked to your nickel-iron core by that inevitable gravity of desire, but

I cannot keep mourning for you. Both of us know that tomorrow,  
you will still be rolling around the sky, waiting for the call: *Come home to us;*  
*we have never forgotten you.* And I will sit on my makeshift veranda,  
take a swig of moonshine and toast to your icy crust. Have a drink with me, Pluto;  
A year so very long there, and life so very short.

## Girl Detective

Girl Detective drives a blue convertible with a V8,  
all around town. She's careful to keep it just under criminal speeding,  
her hair blowing out behind her perfectly, topped off  
with a little polka-dot scarf to keep it out of her eyes. Her sunglasses  
look designer, but she got a great deal. Girl Detective knows  
how to shop sales and haggle.

Girl Detective earned 400 merit badges as a girl scout.

Now, she volunteers with the GSA, making a great camp counselor  
over the summers. When the girls found a mysterious man  
in a capsized canoe, Girl Detective investigated, got the kids interested  
in crime scene observation.

Girl Detective has a boyfriend, but that doesn't keep her  
from noticing how attractive some of the younger cops are.

One, Darrin, gave her his number: Call me if things don't work out  
with you and what's-his-name.

Girl Detective wonders if she's a jack-of-all-trades—she does

so many things, how could she be great at all of them?

The trophies, pictures with the Chief of Police,  
and keys to the city don't lie, though. She really is.

The man in the canoe turned out to be an escaped inmate;  
Girl Detective dispatched him with a quick judo kick,  
kept him subdued until the police got there. The camp  
has asked her to come back next year, to teach a few classes.

## Midnight Zone

The weight of a single bird hanging  
upside down like a bat; the clouds of the sky  
that move like sluggish waves, the clouds in the sea—  
blossoming algae that thickens the water—matching them  
with unadulterated life, raining potential down the food chain,  
down all the way to the sand and silt.

A shipwreck is the ghost town of the sea floor—waltzing,  
the visions mingle with cephalopods and whale sharks,  
their own spectral glow mirrored by bioluminescent fish  
as they beam eerie lights out into the gloom  
hoping to attract a lover, or a meal.

The night fuses the bird to those algal blooms.  
Its beating heart sloshes warm blood through the inks and veins:  
constellations of krill. Ghosts, calcified, stand on deck  
overlooking their ex-skeletons. *You might*  
*be coming apart*, Mrs. J. says to Mr. P, who is busy  
tickling the octopus that lives in his ribcage.

They watch the bones crumble and fall,

while in the sky, against the constant spin and thrust of the sea,

gulls dive for fish and an albatross scans, hunting for bad luck.

## The Patchwork Girl

In the dark, I can take my body apart, counting pieces  
the way a dying man counts seconds, minutes, hours, days,  
one blistering into the next, but each one so pregnant  
with—Wait. I will take off my left arm. See it here?  
In the green light of stormy weather?  
Can you understand? *I don't need it.*

In spite of everything, I loved you like a spider woman.  
That most peculiar ache: silk and leg and the hunger  
for feeling. You move like the short bite of instinct;  
I'll give you a curse in the arrow of a lizard's tongue.  
Wait is an aching; it makes my heart vibrate like—  
*a hummingbird wing. a song caught in a virtuoso's throat.*  
*a meditation chant. a glowering stone.*

Do you think I need you?

It is my time now; you are left a skeleton moan,  
unattuned to moving. So I will lean into your ear, peel

the curls of your hair away from it  
and smell the way your scalp smells when I whisper.  
You see the smoke? It bends a small finger, beckoning.  
I see you in the mouth that looms toward me:  
the warm wound of a kiss.

Look. I can take off my right arm—there, can you feel?  
Fingers like springs, gaudy and taut, ready to be used.  
I can do what I want with it.

I sleep at night like a mummy, hands crossed over my chest,  
dutiful as a brown dog at the door of a dark house.



## **Psychopomp**

The host at the gate wears a coat and tails,  
carries a silver tray of champagne.

He had grey eyes once,  
now luminous, and the color

of lightning bugs in May. His smile, your smile;  
his hands, your hands. All of him utterly suave.

And when it is time, I will not turn to wax,  
to a cold well-stone. I came in with the stars,

out with the wind: swaddle me in white cotton,  
weave the fibers through with mycelium spores.

A dirge is a cocoon; don't sing it.

## The Butterball Heaven Hotline

Somebody called about the rain,  
complaining it'd been going on too long,  
that the rutabagas were drowning  
and the cabbages turning a moist, sickly shade  
of luminescent. Somebody called  
about the storms, that the lightning  
was keeping the baby awake  
and peering at the sky with awe,  
tracing root patterns and rivers  
in all his new drawings as he tried to guess  
what this sky light was. And somebody,  
of course, called about the fire.

Somebody called about the neighbors  
who went all night and day  
*fornicating*, the nerve! That call  
was put on hold, not that it stopped  
the caller from talking. Nothing stops  
a righteous indignation once it's on a roll.

Somebody called about the neighbors' cat  
always making the rudest of sounds  
and making a mess of the garden.

Somebody called about Those People  
moving in down the street.

There were the classic calls, too—  
people who didn't deserve it being elevated  
by bosses or the government or the media.  
Mothers with cancer, fathers with ALS,  
children with whooping cough contracted  
from the kids at the daycare. These calls  
forwarded to a department that answered  
only sporadically. And the calls for peace,  
for an end to bigotry, these filed sadly  
under "Maybe someday."

Somebody called about the snow—  
where was it? Ski season was starting and yet,  
only a dusting of frost. Somebody called  
about the sun being too bright in the fall,

about the caterpillars getting into the spinach  
about the butterflies' disappearance, about the cave.  
Somebody was always calling, about trees or ink  
or the dog, or the sea. Angels on the switchboard  
sharing stories of their most ridiculous calls  
offering to pick up coffee for everyone on break,  
sneaking candy from Gabriel's secret drawer.  
Then somebody would call to complain  
about the new pastor's disreputable facial hair,  
or about the kids these days, or about  
what to do with the damn turkey;  
nobody knew quite what to do about *that*.

## **Cerebrovascular Accident**

### I

The face of old age is the petal of a dying white rose  
yellowing, bruised, wrinkled—turning to dust on the outer edge.

Clear as a cantankerous bell, my grandmother  
tells my uncle, “No.” Almost the only word she has left.  
After a moment, she presses a swollen finger onto the menu.

### II

Every moon of Jupiter is named for one of Zeus’ lovers:  
Europa has the smoothest surface of any object in the solar system,  
run through with cracks like a shattered china cup; Callisto  
is heavily marked with the violent embrace of debris.

My grandmother’s face is half an empty garden,  
where words no longer grow, only weeds. The other side of her mouth  
twists into the knowledge that she can no longer move her left hand.

The ghost of a crater is also called a palimpsest.

### III

The waitress brings her a Reuben sandwich;  
the rest of us eat dinner, conversing across her, unable  
to navigate the labyrinth of her shorn mind.

In its corona of silence, the moon counts back  
the pockmarks in its skin—the polkadot pattern left by meteors,  
the boisterous footprints that Buzz and Neil left in the dust.

In 1969, my grandmother watched on the tiny family television  
as they took those first small steps. Now, her face is like the moon:  
watchful, clothed in age, scarred with the luggage of time.

## **Chevron Blanket Song**

During the storm,  
the dogs came in,  
hid behind the water  
heater. Is this what  
shelter is?  
to have a warm  
and careful spot  
when the wind  
comes calling?  
I laid my head  
onto your chest  
and we slept awhile.  
When we woke  
the rain had cleared  
and an impression  
of shirt buttons  
lined up across  
my face. You  
were kissing me,

I was kissing you,  
and the dogs outside  
were still huddling—  
the blue metal  
of the water heater  
shining beside them.

There wasn't a rainbow.  
But there were  
your hands, your  
beautiful hands  
running like water  
through the dry wash  
of my skin,  
flooding me,  
like molten copper,  
like clear glass formed  
with flowing years of skill.  
Like a quiet mist.  
Like the soft bed  
we fall into.



## Parable

Once, there was a man who lived in a haunted house—  
haunted, that is, by junk, stacked high as memories against the walls  
and it did not take long: a misstep on the first floor landing,  
gravity pulling down on the man's beard, yanking him hard to the lip  
of the third step from the bottom. Stair meeting hair,  
winking tweely at each other the way rhymes do, then hair meeting scalp;

Scalp, epidermis, dermis, subcutaneous adipose layer, then blood.

Blood and the unassuming eggshell of the skull.

On the staircase, he puts his hands out onto the worn oak of the floorboards  
and curses the box of old letters that tripped him.

In a moment, he will push himself up and continue the day's work.

Then comes the turn,

from lonely old man in a mansion to the tale of corpuscles  
inching their red way from A to B, tumbling slowly through spaces  
that were not there in the moments before. Watch the parade begin—  
fluid oozing into the crevasse, each red doughnut of a blood cell  
exploring the gray fibers of the mind it finds itself in, the brave new world

it will mean the extinction of. Like children lined up outside,  
eager for the playground, the cells link hands and flow,  
one after the next, into the brain.

## **Ghost Town Blues**

Oh, now I got those low-down, ghost town blues;  
Who can say whether it's all been for the best,  
This rush-and-ruin town left behind in a footprint—  
I want to howl like a wolf missing moonshine,  
howl the blues tonight. Come midnight, packing  
old whispers into a suitcase, wicking spiders  
from the walls and humming that same old same.  
Better pull a guitar down off the wall  
and hurl it into some lonesomeness.  
'Cause I can't hold all these ragtime tears to myself;  
yes, now I got those dog pound, ghost town blues.

Who sings misery when they don't have to?  
That tune's got no business here, eking out a beat  
behind wind-bowling junk. I got the ghost town blues.  
Nobody lives here anymore; the wood has all gone grey.  
Where the roof used to be, there's sky and under the floor,  
rodents can barely remember the days of crumbs.  
And there's nothing left to hold at night

but the ragged hungry body of a dog that ran away from home.

Can't face the fall-down roofline or the dead wires. I got the ghost.

And every night I'm singing what I wish someone could hear:

*Why do we keep on holding on*

*to the things that let us down?*

**Pvt. Hess Writes Home**

Missing you again here in NM and listening  
to cactus as they coyote-call and here we are  
oh, the nights! the unready days!

Look to the scorpions, Mom. When night slinks  
over the horizon here, it has already left Cleveland behind.

A man on Main St. has a bar there where the boys and I go.

How are the kids? Are tulips dying into the ground;  
are the squirrels running wild?

Everything is rushing, you know. I said, *Man,*  
*what do you want with your Santa Fe bartending?*

*Like the red sand on the ground*

he said, *I do it for the company*

*Pardon me, do you need to be refilled?*

Oh Cleveland, I miss your oaks watching out as the air makes little icemen  
and the wind off the river pulls in my hair, knocks my uniform around—  
not like the sun here, not like the sun and the dust

## **Girl Detective at the Prom**

She looks like a Bond Girl in slinky black, slit up the left side, negligee neckline, the whole shebang. Girl Detective always makes an entrance, tonight with sky high heels that she walks perfectly in. Girl Detective has great posture and an excellent sense of balance.

Girl Detective was on the decorating committee; the gym has been transformed. There are no cheesy photo stations or cardboard palms—Girl Detective wouldn't put her name to something like that. She knows what she's doing.

Girl Detective knows fifteen traditional cultural dances and she can Charleston, but tonight on the dance floor, it's all about the close-embracing slow dance and the arms-in-the-air shimmy shake. Girl Detective dances just as well as a pageant queen or a prima ballerina, but she knows how to have fun, too. Behind the gym, she and her boyfriend get to third base: Girl Detective was sick of waiting for him to finally make the first move.

## Junkspace

linked wings, one  
to the next; make  
a butterfly chain,

and this is the price  
of life, with all  
its machiavellianisms,

to walk naked from  
the snow to the sunset  
to revise.

I am the *maker*—  
of decisions. I eat snails  
like you for breakfast...

like a charm  
out of your soul  
I coil a dove

for redemption  
its undead, halfhearted  
petals,

love into the vacuum  
of space  
it will be worth it.

I am not responsible  
for the shells, glimmering  
abandoned on the shore

made of glass  
a red button  
martyred by sky

do not make salutations  
tissue paper flowers  
little gray hearts.

against apathy  
and time itself—go, now  
I am abyss

for the effect  
shaped like a galaxy—  
the body makes its peace.



## Construction Paper

Using the allen wrench from the bookshelf, I took myself apart,

piece by piece, note by note. First came the shell,  
hard like beetle back. I pulled it out so the wings sputtered like a fan.

Underneath were fifty years of nightmares, coiled  
like worms under the skin, under the skull. They're spring loaded,  
ready to lunge. They sting like the poison tips  
of jungle arrows. They itch and run. The skin comes attached with screws  
to each joint and scar; undoing them is nothing  
but the quick flash of a wrist. It takes scissors along the dotted lines  
to separate it into its composite parts, an eyelid,  
a foot, a patch of scalp, a shin, folded up neatly and stacked together  
there on the high Sunday-best shelf. Then the bones  
released one by one by untying the thin pink ligaments that hold them.

\*\*\*

We make a gingerbread house out of construction paper, picking up

bright colored squares and circles, sprinkling them  
with silvery glitter. It takes no time at all to cut the shapes out, carefully:  
selecting green for a wreath, red for a candy cane

brown for the cookie walls. Stir the cocoa while cutting, take a too-hot sip

while the glue dries. We'll hang it up on the refrigerator.

It'll look good there. See the happy family and their shining candy castle.

See the scraps of paper swept into the corner.

\*\*\*

Lay out the pieces, sort them by color, size, and kind. A fibula beside

the sugar doorframe, a pair of lips beside

two triangles of red. Always, the hands stained with ink in the aftermath,

the single frowning eyelash left to hang.

## Blue Period

*If no*  
*body could breathe, we'd live*  
*like little sardines,*  
*the color and speed of mercury,* he tells me  
from the edge of the mattress, the curve  
of his back descending into the sheets. He turns me  
inside out like a Picasso, making anagrams out of my body  
and strong, divisive lines out of my bones.  
He twists my wrists: I am the kaleidoscope,  
spun in his hands, wrestled, kneaded  
like dough into something irresistible.  
Every touch  
    makes me tense and curl in, kinetic.  
  
See, he makes me into new patterns;  
I will never be the same twice.  
I watch from the left eye somewhere near my stomach,  
and wink from the center of my forehead.  
He turns back, looking at me

through the bottom of a cut crystal glass

*when I look at you like this*

*you become all one piece again*

and I tell him

*come on. i want you to take me apart*

### **Three Months In**

Under the lights, I hold my mother's hand  
as the hair begins to fall—great swaths of it  
hitting the ground, silent as a first snow, crushing  
and collapsing into themselves, bending to the taupe  
of the linoleum. People have said they'll be praying.  
They've told stories about sisters, mothers, aunts.  
They've hugged and held. The first cuts are over.

Now, the woman in her pink smock  
washes my mother's head, rubs it dry  
with a scruffy towel. It's time. She gets the razor,  
runs it gently across the scalp. You never know  
what bumps and bruises are hidden beneath  
until you see them. Her head shines, like a halo.

In the mirror, my mother tries to pose, the way she would  
after any haircut. She can't quite manage it though.  
As we walk to the door, not looking, someone behind us  
takes a broom and begins to sweep.

## **On Being Dust**

I:       We were trodden, dashed, collected, made mannequins of in that house,  
our colonies created and disturbed, but mostly grown (and carefully tended) by solitude.  
The king had offset pupils and a lopsided face in photographs. His home  
was our kingdom; we became fruitful, and multiplied. His faceprint in us—  
that was the signal, and then new feet came. New soles,  
and a sight we were unready for: these strange palms and faces.

II:       In the shipping container, we settled once again,  
and made patterns, in layers thin as eggshells,  
on the cardboard boxes and old furniture, on the debris of three generations, piled high  
and packaged for transport. We lived in the old envelopes,  
in the crackled letters. We arrived in a moment and were unpacked.

III:      Here is where time fell into place.  
An eternity in a haunted house, then a month on the road, then,  
here—the garage, the back room—meeting unfamiliar junk from someone else’s life  
a parade of hats and coats, business documents from a long-closed shop.  
We have become accustomed to waiting. We make the corners our home,  
and weave our gray fibers together like moss on a weathered brownstone. And yet

the sounds of grandchildren growing up surround us. The kitchen stove  
once white, then grime-covered, then restored to its shining glory  
collects new dust in the garage. Blossoms.

## **Girl Detective and Her Sidekicks**

Girl Detective brings her best friends along to investigate.

There's something rotten in the state park: mysterious moving vans driving through all hours, sometimes screams coming from the back.

The drivers say they're looking to see the Aurora Borealis, but the rangers, they know better: you can't see it from here.

But without evidence, what can they do? A job for Girl Detective, who disguises herself in a brown and green uniform, stakes out the little map-and-ticket booth at the entrance.

Her friends come with her, for company and for backup.

Betty works out at the gym 5 days a week; she's working toward her degree in criminal justice at the community college. She's sick of Girl Detective's infamy. She wants boys built like Ken dolls to buy *her* a drink once in a while—not that she doesn't love her boyfriend.

It would just be nice, that's all. It's the principle of the thing.

Wasn't she, Betty, the one to tackle the perp running away from the gas station?

Wasn't she the one who discovered that the Chinese restaurant was really a front for money laundering? Though she sometimes regretted that: the food had been so good.



On the other hand, Veronica is happy playing second fiddle.  
She's better at karate than her friends, but she doesn't showboat,  
not like Betty. She's fine with her few extra pounds, proud  
that no one who sees her would guess she's run marathons.  
She aims a littler higher, hoping to scholarship herself to Yale.  
She doesn't get high on the weekends. She doesn't need to party.  
She doesn't resent Girl Detective's newspaper front page stories  
or her frequent disappearances. She's glad to be Watson—  
Watson was the one who made things possible.

Girl Detective doesn't sleep while she's on a stake out,  
but Betty and Veronica take turns. But nobody is asleep  
when Girl Detective takes the truck driver down with a series  
of carefully pointed questions based on clever guesses;  
when she opens the back and sees the endangered wolves  
who've been kidnapped by poachers masquerading  
as devotees of the Northern Lights; when she calls 911,  
reports that she's caught the criminals. Girl Detective  
takes Betty and Veronica out for Chinese to celebrate.

Everyone thinks it's strange that those are their names,  
but they are.

## **Carthorse Orchestra**

Your letters have always been my letters—  
but crushed by hooves, caressed  
in the wind of running. Did you feel it  
when you were mixed up? When you bolted?

In the pit, they're tuning up. They're practicing  
with their strings and arrows. You are evermore  
my outrageous fortune—take me away in the night  
let me press my self into your self and become.

## Electricity

*for the 1960s*

I sat with electrodes  
strapped like quarters  
to either side of my mind,  
and the world lit up,  
all the grayness wiped away  
and for seconds, I saw years.

Let me explain: I saw everything—  
buildings shooting up  
into the air, skylines  
blossoming and wilting,  
the whole cycle running  
over and over and over:  
blueprints to rubble,  
and back again; castles, cars,  
and kings, built up, brought down.

Fifteen seconds.

There were thousands  
of aggregate voices

joined in cacophony  
but I heard every one  
and their harmonies  
and their contradictions  
and their swarm.

I saw Mom, blanched and wide  
set in an old brown chair  
her eyes gone milky.  
Dad like a waxwork  
breathing by machine  
in his hospital bed, the bodies  
of unknown children  
standing around, looking  
at his weary exoskeleton.  
I saw radium and radon gas,  
saw embryos made in Petri dishes  
and frozen in place, the tiny eggs  
like planets, and saw huge planets too,  
in orbit around a dying star,  
around thousands of stars, careening  
into themselves. Black holes.

Soldiers slamming the butts of rifles  
into ostrich-egg skulls.

There were whole worlds  
spun together by wires  
that transected the globe  
like synapses, like my  
synapses, aglow and throbbing.

Ten seconds. Naked  
like a batwing in summer  
I watched as atoms were split  
over and over again,  
their whispered lament  
for their own weaponization  
sung like the song of a whale  
hunting for a mate. I counted  
extinctions, two by two, as  
big cats and solitary birds  
rolled their way into death.  
And it was all death, at least,  
a little. Death and erasure;  
buildings and their ghostly

remains, palimpsested over  
by memorial statues, then, later  
by a resurgent wood, deer  
and wild turkeys picking bugs  
from the meadow where  
there had only just been homes.  
Every tree grew like lightning,  
died like fire blown off the match.

Have you ever looked into  
the swirled eye of a nebula?  
Five seconds. My left hand,  
shaking, sending sine curves  
through the whole of my—  
four seconds—and dust—  
men with globes for heads  
charting silver-white craters,  
painted flags on their boots—  
birds dripping in muck—lights  
on the bay flickering—three—  
my hands through the thick  
white wool of a ewe, her sisters

surrounding her,  
her one brown eye—two  
and the focus moving back  
through the hall at the hospital  
the bodies going from blue,  
blue back to the soft pink  
of life—one

and Mom meets me  
on the other end, picks  
my limp hand up  
in hers and holds it,  
Dad in his horn-rimmed  
glasses, pipe in hand  
and the kids all around,  
lined up like soldiers  
Let your brother rest, now  
Mom says. Let him  
sleep a little while  
the baby in her arms,  
the white of the nurses' caps.  
I had everything,



the eye of the universe  
cupped between the hemispheres  
of my brain.

But the rat in the maze  
chased me out.

The lightning jumped,  
coin to coin across the gap  
and like a whip, I lost it all,

even the sound of my name.

Like the song of a siren  
it caressed me, then cut me  
into all of my parts, and  
now, no one can quilt me  
back into myself.

## Corresponding Calls

And along the way, the letter was delayed, the voicemail deleted  
before it could be heard. The letter was returned marked No Such Address.  
It hadn't been stamped anyway. After the wish was blown off the wick,  
it traveled by smoke, but—

it dissipated. There would be nothing left to reach the ears of angels.  
Only the ghosts of vinyl records and their scratched voices  
that slip in, like an echo, when nobody's watching. In the afternoon  
tea is brewed; milk is mixed in, or lemon, and perfect cubes of sugar.

None of it makes any difference, after all. While the steam from the cup  
ekes out a twisted path, it vanishes. Its atoms spread farther and farther,  
like the stars, born and dying, and always, always accelerating outward.

## Tmesis

One idea can be carefully packed into another,  
wrapped in linen and tucked into a suitcase;  
like a pearl, a secret is both valuable  
and dangerous

a thing that can catch the hem of time the way the lip  
of a lock catches the head of a key.

The box jellyfish has an eye, but no mind,  
drift*dive*ing in the no-man's-land of unseeing sight: it sees  
but it can*utterly*not comprehend its vision,

like a lost girl, waiting up all night for angels to visit  
to come, to speak, to command, to pray, to absolve, to rescue  
to fix and finish, by infinitive action, all the world's faults and faultlines.

In between the knowing and the question is a moment,  
cut in with a surgical delicacy:

An eye that is not connected to anything  
bathing in the softness of a jellyfish body—

it has an eye, but no mind, like an angel.

What the angel *does* do is to divide, to take that girl apart  
and plant, in *bedelicate* between her halves, something alien, a thing that does not  
belong, but that remains whole—a seeing eye that transmits like the Voyager:

to nothing. It exists as an image,  
floating in a soft white orb, as though she never existed  
as though it  
were all alone  
and she was a nonentity, an *unthing*.  
It floats in a halo, smiling like beneficence  
when really, it is an interrupter, the fracturer of a system.

A single syllable. A sound. Really,  
a sandwich: one idea packed carefully into an *infinite* other, its crusts cut off;  
she stands in a t-shirt and dark denim. She says, “My name is  
Shark,” and she rolls up her hems and tucks in the sticks and stones  
and thinks about the unseeing eye that has planted itself inside her,  
of the angels, and the voyagers and the flutter of jellyfish

of the weapon she uses to fight off volleys of words and declarations of love and eyes,  
eyes, that watch her when she's sleeping, but eyes

that do not, that will not, that can *despicably* not comprehend.

## The Things We Kept

in a left hand, the dried body of a seahorse curls up  
his golden scales stinking still with death  
and his webbed crown snapped in two.

right pocket: a bat, soft as mouse-skin, tucks  
his ghostly face under a desiccated wing  
and calls for the twilight to bless him.

in the dawn, every handful of trinkets is left  
swept with dew and prismatic as an oil painting;  
they're still trinkets.

sunsets are beautiful nowadays, light reflecting  
off the particles in the air and the radiating earth  
leaves the sky orchid colored and flaming.

in the lining of a jacket, sewn up safe,  
a photograph, a needle, the matchbook, a key.

## Smoke

I. After a time, we began using our tragedies as fuel,  
stacking them together, splintering flint spark  
over their grain. Bone, but not dry. They cooked  
like comets in the sky, burning in an arc that half-lit  
our small and smaller faces. The cannibals of our own  
misfortunes. The fire isn't red or gold at all—  
the chemical reaction of chartered pain  
burns green as copper, and conducts itself  
just as well. In the forest, all the leaves begin to jump  
from green to gold to scarlet. The pop like bubbles  
off their dried stems. Not bone, but dry. We gather them.

II. Once upon a time, there lived a house, built on marshland,  
covered by Spanish moss and willow roots. Once upon a time.

## Correspondance

Red sunset—we write each other letters;  
you from the hammock stretched  
between the far stem of the laundry line  
and the backyard ponderosa, knots of white cotton  
making ridges in your back, waves that I can feel  
through the twig of my pen, scratching your address  
into the right side of my postcard—go,  
I look into the caverns on the photofront,  
paint your eyes there with my eyes, sitting  
in the highback chair next to the kitchen bar.  
Your hand in Santa Barbara is blushing  
against my lower back here in Carlsbad.  
I can feel the hammock ties  
and the rope burn when you twist over  
to take the sweating iced tea from the stump  
you use for a table. It is only sunset for you, of course.  
For me it is twilight—here, a few hours in the future,  
watching the stars start to emerge  
from the black sand beach of the sky



and wiggle their toes. You can feel the shag of the carpet  
as I walk from the bar stool  
to the mail slot, slip the postcard in. You're signing  
your name, putting mine on the front  
of the lavender envelope, making up  
a brand new middle name for me to add to it.  
It's too bad stamps don't get licked these days;  
I'd love to have you, just that little bit more.  
Walk with me to the caves; I'll walk with you  
all the way to Santa Monica.

## Getting to Moscow

I keep forgetting things; every day I forget more and more, and life goes by and it won't ever come back – Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*

I sit at the window. I can see the clouds steeping an eventual storm:

the pressure, the smell building up for thunder, for lightning, for stony rain.

The mirror is the face of two futures. One is a sham reflection;

it goes nowhere. When I run, I crash into glass

and it splinters the sun into a hundred thousand pieces, cuts my hands

to shreds and ribbons of outrage. *I am never getting to Moscow*, whispered

into my ear at night by even the air. It sinks in the creases of my mind. Knowing it

is like begging to a no-story saint: I am never getting to Moscow.

The time in the hourglass of sleep is nearly spent, but the dreams

keep coming down the line, full of mockery: *here it is,*

*the beautiful thing you'll never be.* Soon, I'll have to sit up to turn on the light,

pull socks over my feet and shoes over those and brush my hair and go out again.

I am never getting to Moscow and now, I am losing sleep.

Where did it all go? I'm too old to ever be a prodigy.

My eyes in the mirror are like meltwater, cold and clean.

Once upon a time, there was the idea. I could have landed in the sky,  
made a name for myself; but I just keep this life digging deeper and deeper  
into the hole of *could* and *might have* and *should* and I

am never getting to Moscow and the hole is growing here inside my chest,  
filling itself with sludge, a clockwork heart flushed and done with hope.

## All My Threesomes Happen in Vermont

*With apologies to ASM*

Something about oak trees or snowy winters  
I guess, something about the boys up there:  
New Englanders with frostbite in their beards  
and eyes chock full of understanding; boys  
who know just what they want and how to get it.  
It isn't always sexy, like you'd think,

I mean, of course it is. I think  
the problem is that fantasies get cold in winter—  
but you know, it's something to do, isn't it?  
Even under ice, blood keeps pumping. Up there  
a log cabin doesn't mean a cowboy,  
no it means an Appalachian forest, red-bearded  
in fall with trees that sweat out sugar sap, bearded  
like the boy I'm in love with. Sometimes I think  
that mistakes are never worth making. A boy  
in the moonlight is someone different come winter.

But a mistake made is a regret savored, there  
in the frost of memory. Everybody knows it.

I never missed for waiting. Want to know what I call it?

Luck, pure and simple. The tickle of a beard.

The awkwardness of a smile during a kiss. Their  
*warmness* in the sheets like early springtime. Think  
back to a time when we loved our bodies, wintering  
beneath a quilt canopy, understanding boyishness

the innocence it grants to debauchery. One boy  
with a giggle, one with a grin, wearing it  
like sunshine over his body. It's been a hard winter.

We huddle for closeness. There's something about a beard  
leaned against your shoulder that can't be thought  
into being. You never know what's out there

on the horizon, rising with the sun. They're  
rustling the sheets, moving fingers along skin. That boy,  
every boy, those kisses with fire and rust. Bodies with ink  
writing love letters under the skin. You'll never get enough of it.

Don't ask questions, react. Run fingers through his beard.

Breathe the smell of the fireplace, of snow-falling winter,

of one another. You can't stop it. Even there, in any dark winter,

bodies want to find bodies—lips, eyes, arms, beards.

Whatever you think you want, you can have it.

## Girl

When smoke curls  
up from a dead cigarette,  
it twists and broils  
into a face. Your face. The face  
that almost looks at me

on the bus—that girl  
who rides on Mondays,  
her uncanny *youness*,  
as though she really were  
you, echoing back to us here.

When I travel, I visit  
churches, even though  
I don't go at home.  
I light you candles,  
offer you a quiet sustenance  
of prayer. What is it the dead  
do with words

when they reach you?

Braid them into long ropes  
of sorrow or plant  
them in the sky  
like fragile seeds? Burn them  
and gather the ash to eat?

I see your face every day,  
not because I miss you,  
I don't. But you have  
an uncalled for twin,  
who is not your twin,  
or even your sister,  
or even a ghost.



## Chemicals

It's her skin, somehow looking like a wet sweater hung to dry,  
pink ribbon pinned to the concave lapel, jersey draped across a clavicle,  
veiling the injection-site bruise. Hands red and crackled like a preemie's.

This sickness is just sort of one damn thing after another, isn't it?

Like paddling through the smog of a hot day.

She takes the car like a Radio Flyer loaded with IV drips and books  
rolling bags of chemicals over sterile squares of plastic carpet,  
clapping to warm the tips of fingers that can't hold a charge.

Waiting in the chair, eyes covered, counting down.

*It's her skin:* like old, old leather or sage leaves—be careful, now,  
everything fragile. Beholden to any act of kindness.

\*\*\*

I wish I still thought there was someone listening when I make bargains  
for the future, bargains for life or something like it. But there have been  
too many contracts reneged; there are only stars above the earth now, no listener.

And even the stars—there used to be so many of them, but the city has grown,  
has borne too many points of its own light, cut them out of the sky, hidden them away.

## All Fall Down

*And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. Matthew 6:5*

The apocalypse will not go out of fashion,  
so now is the time to *repent repent repent!*

and buy up plenty of cereal and ammunition, too.

BE PREPARED, thus sayeth the Lord, who speaks

to us in small caps. Thus sayeth the Good Book,  
(available at local retailers). But on to repentance:

Make a list of all your sins and swallow them whole,  
then belch them out to the congregation

loud enough for God to hear even behind His blessed  
noise-cancelling headphones up in Heaven.

Wear all the marks of your submission in careful-drawn ancient torture  
on your fridge magnets, in your business cards—make it show

black and bullying against the skin. They will know us  
by our high-necked sweaters and knee-length acid-washed denim skirts,

by our silver-dollar sized crucifixes, the van's back window blocked out  
with JOHN 3:16 and REPENT SINNERS! and the long, sloping line

of the stick figure family, the omnipresent outlines of fish.

This is the way the Carnival ends: giving up our indulgences for forty days

and making damn sure—*watch your language!*— everybody knows it.

## Breakfast Apocalypse

### I

Over oatmeal with a few carefully thawed out raspberries  
you stuttered it out. Just a few words, and everything  
sort of exploded, like a berry dropped onto the tile  
or a soft sea slug brought up too quickly from the deep.  
“That’s it,” you said. “I don’t love you.”

### II

Over lunch, things were quieter. I made grilled cheese  
and cut it in half crossways, the same way my mom does.

*Cheese is good at times like this*, I told myself.

I am in shards on the floor and all I can think about is melting  
two cheese slices in between sheets of bread  
and examining the wave patterns my teeth make. No one  
should be able to leave you if you’ve still got a hickey.

That’s what I say, and it makes good sense.

### III

Circles are symbolic because they never end, they just

keep running into each other. Were you a circle?

Were you the tattoo of a rose above my left ankle? I say

you were a smiling face, drawn on my hand in green ink.

But maybe you were something ever better, even more—maybe

you were something special, like a kissing booth kiss

that left a little glittering check mark on my heart,

one that fluttered. We skipped sleep for sex.

#### IV

Dinner was lonely. “I keep wanting to say something,”

you told me over a steaming bowl of chicken flavor ramen.

“I keep wanting to say something, but I don’t know what.”

## **Afterlife**

If I had to grow old,  
I would spend my aging days with you,  
sitting in green striped deck chairs in London parks  
and lighting each other's cigarettes;  
feeding the pigeons and ducks  
from a small loaf of white bread  
we've bought just for the occasion.

## Cocoon

1:

It takes less force to stab than it does  
to pull the knife out afterwards; the body protects  
itself, creates suction to stop the blood  
from spilling after the strike. This is like love:  
more force required for the exit, more strength  
to complete the job.

2:

A blind man falls in love with a bald woman.  
Her body is Braille, his hands aching for definition,  
here, it spells *desire*, there they read simply

*yes*

3:

An angel watches you sleep. He isn't golden  
and light. He carries chains and likes to use them.  
He sees like a snake, with his tongue.  
He knows what the inside of your soul smells like,



and how to taste the air for the vestiges of sin.

And you? You gather up your wrongs and put them

in a basket at the foot of your bed

hoping to give him something else to look for.

4:

The taxidermist fucks in an antique brass bed. His wife

is quiet, hoping to spare the neighbors. He moves

like an aged buffalo, roughly, with only the memory of poise.

She is careful, complacent, burying any excitement

under the ancient veil of modesty. He wishes she wouldn't.

He wishes for the breaking dawn of pleasure

to arch itself across her face. *Then*, he thinks,

*then it would all be okay.*

## **Flying Machines**

In the cool morning, it is possible.

It is possible to carry a great balloon of silk into the air and with a breathlessness that cannot be spoken, float yourself into oblivion, into the dawn. You can only caress me this way in the morning, when the sun has not yet dried the cactus blossoms and driven the birds to shade.

In the hot sun of a baked summer, glowing aluminum can still force upward in the shape of planes. Salute them with the open-mouthed buzz of cicadas. Stretch your arms out from your shoulders to greet the sun. I will kiss the space where your collarbone reflects the daylight. A bee will land there and leave a dust of pollen on your skin.

Make me a song like the ballet of bats against the blue-gold of twilight, fluttering from saguaro flower to night-blooming cereus sipping nectar. Above us, there are satellites rushing the horizon, their outlines blurred by the waves of heat coming up off the street. Hold me and let me feel you breathe. Take my hands—gently, silently,

like a waltz—and we will rise up into the incomparable sky.

## The Collecting House

A tin woman lives in a tin house, eating off plates of tin.

The wire of her hair curls like a buffalo's into a sonata of copper  
played in sharps and flats. The pianist waits at the bar, pouring a shot  
while he waits for the keys to tell him what to play.

They click back into place after he strikes.

One thousand serpents unhinge their jaws.

They take their needle teeth and compare them to talons;

the teeth are sharper and more slim, *The better*

*to puncture with, my dear.*

\*\*\*

The spirit of the age is the essence of tea. Steeped in progress,

tempered with the smooth cream of nostalgic regret,

the future is built of chrome and gears. Its ticks have fallen by the wayside

its tocks slip into silence. The numbers blur into one another. They run a maze

made of scrap metal and bone.

The mane and tail of a horse are its only somber soldiers; they toss  
with forgotten vigor, awaiting the copper crush of shield on sword  
and the frenzied pleasure of sand, clotted and saturating. The earth is hungry  
like a mother, desperate for a meal. Her teeth are blackened with anger.  
She wears her hair like a wild woman.

On a black sand beach, gears lie in concentric circles,  
waiting to be carried out to sea. Chipped china nestles in the grains.

\*\*\*

Understanding the taste of lime, its alkaline power, is key to seeing  
how your love ate away my skin and left echoing gaps between my bones.  
Under the line, the pits and canyons of the mind  
pile their disappointments like snow and wheel bins out to the street.

Life is a parade of these meaningless gestures: *Hello. Good morning. God bless you.*  
*How are the kids?* The ringmaster opens the show with a flourish of empty hands...

*Thank you. Good evening. You're looking well.*

There is nothing up his sleeves but dust and dry rot.

\*\*\*

Men with matching faces announce Progress-with-a-capital-P,

*The Miracle of the Modern Age!*

*The intensive power of steam and beautiful saga of gears!*

crowning it with exclamations and wrestling secretaries out of their support hose.

The miracle of the modern age.

\*\*\*

There is a house on a green hill with eyes for windows. It watches  
the world with sad shutter sighs and blinking blinds.

Like a toad, it waits under a stone for redemption, misted skin  
giving off a phosphorescent glow in the dark, radiant. Its half life  
is some portion of eternity.

The ghost is a masked man.

He rides a masked stallion into the center of town, where he shoots a silver pistol.

The townspeople rush out to thank him, though they don't know what for.

His white hat marks him as a Good man with-a-capital-G.

The bleaching is enough to prove he is worthy of their thanks.

\*\*\*

The ringmaster holds an ancient top hat in his hands.

His eyes are gray and aged, the same as sadness

and his soul locks with a rusted key that he wears tied to a ribbon around his neck.

The ribbon is gold. The key is so encrusted that it flakes

and the flakes turn to gold as they fall. Seventeen snowdrifts of gold

line up along the street; the flakes collect on the leaves of eighteen willows

and in nineteen dreams, the melt turns the streets to rivers of metal

polished and still.

\*\*\*

I want every inch of you. Every vertebra, every rib, every scrap of skin

each tooth and nail that I could worship like an idol.

The naked sound of your voice runs through me like water in a canyon,

carving out spectacular layers and exposing the fossils of secrets long packed away.

You walk like a ghost through a camera, your magnetic parts ionizing the film,

and you come into focus like the bone of an x-ray.

In the starlight, the sky arranges its skeletons, ticking back their names  
off a list stored somewhere nobody knows. Every one is accounted for—  
we check the names twice to make sure.

Every one has come home. Now, it will be okay to sleep.

\*\*\*

An ear is a window in the same way as an eye is an empty mine shaft  
filled with dark and brackish water.

And the human soul is a shark cage, baited and waiting;  
memory swims closer, circling like water around an old drain.

The rust of the remembered past flakes, precipitates into a green and copper snow  
that blankets Cleveland, turning Erie blood brown  
and making metalwork weep ecstatic oil. Egg-like,  
droplets of perfect black sorrow align themselves on a velvet mat.

In the silence of the velvet, someone is lost, calling for help  
or a beacon, or even just a light for the cigarette she holds  
cold, but expectant, in her left hand.



\*\*\*

I walk to the station wearing a red hat. It is a Tuesday; it is raining with the sun out.  
On the horizon, a gray dog looks for sunset solace. He wags his tail, barks. He hopes  
for a beautiful moonrise.

Elliot, the dog-faced boy, howls at the stars. The nebula of discontent watches him pray.  
In the night, it shines out, its clouds beckoning like long  
bony fingers.            Their mass reflects my desire.

On the moon, a man in a glass bowl helmet  
takes dictation, listening to the sound waves radiating from his faraway planet  
and weeping, thinking of home, missing the sunflowers  
that grew, greenly, on the patio  
and the way their heads swayed to follow the sun, nodding *yes* and *no*

\*\*\*

The woman waits in the corner for her friend's memory to arrive. When it comes,  
it is wearing a trenchcoat; they order coffee. It takes a long time  
to reminisce over the cinnamon smell of the lattes.

A black dress buttresses grief, and in the same way, the same way  
you touched my left shoulder blade with your newly washed hands  
and there were seventeen seconds of perfection.

When it was over, the sunset was washed clean  
and a tall man in a white hat was walking, silhouetted against it.

It is best to return to a time when men could be judged by their hats  
and whether they wore a tie. That was a golden age, marked by grace  
and marbled by the exceptional.

## First Storm Since

The fire. A face in the stones of the cliff. Red eye,  
piñon mouth. Creosote smell thick in the air:

this is storm spirit, pressing her way  
over the burnt dust of the desert, ashes

where trees used to be. Rainwater won't stay—  
there's no soil to hold it. Instead, the river  
will glut itself black with soot and char, skeletons  
of ponderosas clinging to water-smoothed boulders.

Shining rainbow trout will wonder where  
this ink that dyes their homeland dark has come from.

The wreckage of trees and brush will wash up,  
splinter by splinter, onto riverbanks and lakeshores,

catching boat hulls, slipping between grains of sand in washes,  
grinding towards the sea, fueling a new green work  
wherever they finally find themselves. Up north, the cliff-face  
erodes, the smell of smoke still in its memory. What survives

ash built like snowbanks? Rain on the ground hits and hisses,  
steams with the smoky curls toward the sky.

## **Bystander Effect**

Surprise moves through the human eye like a wave

pressing and compressing, invisible—but it's there, you can see

the reactions hitting each other, running out from the epicenter.

You can see the blast radius of the shock. There's a space

between the last man looking on in horror and the first who walks on by

never knowing what nightmares he's missed out on. He'll get home,

his lover will ask whether he heard about what happened, if he saw anything.

*I must have been right near there*, he'll say. *I never heard*

*a thing*. They'll hold hands during the movie, share popcorn

out of a blue plastic bowl. There was a story last year, on the news,

about how that shit'll give you cancer, but they'll push it out

of their minds and dig in. The road will be clear by morning. The blood

will be cleaned up, only a shadow left on the concrete. The police-tape

put up and then cut down between the moment he passed by unaware,

and the commute tomorrow. Trial coverage says it over and over:

*Everybody saw. Everybody saw her, but nobody stopped to help.*

## Undiscovery

Like dust congealing back into stone,  
and scree into the sheer slate of cliff-face,  
let me forget you: breath for breath.  
The bell must be stopped from ringing.

In the morning,  
I will take each synapse and wash away  
the crude debris of your memory.

Beloved shadow of beloved friend, I cannot hold  
the center, but I will say your name: an audible  
palimpsest: the *you* of you wrapped in the sound of it.

## Slither

Give

a thought

for the serpents,

singers of men,

pulling along those

raw and tender spirits.

*hear me. hear me.*

give a thought

to the scum-sellers

the wrestlers, hog-bosses,

ready-willings. *Hear me.*

Give a thought

to blood-in-street,

to caught-in-throat

to underestimates.

Lake-dark and seething,

these eyes will watch

you and drink you in

with a brimstone chaser.



*Hear me, Give*

a thought to the damned—

*no.* give a thought

to the damner. I like

the look of you.

Under that skin,

there's a little something

waiting for rain. Little

something that knows

which way the wind

will blow come doomsday.

Under the gun, we all

make not-so-nice commitments.

*Hear me.* Go ahead

and lay me

all your blame.

But he house wins.

the house always wins.

Give a thought to fallen angels

and their dust-dry wings,

their simmer-slow halos,

their broke-string harps.

Give a thought to the task

of breaking. *Hear me.*

And when you hear hoofbeats,

think horses not zebras. When

you see red eyes, fire,

forked tail, fang—

remember Creator;

give a thought

to the cage and think

about who really

lays

the trap.

## **Girl Detective Under Water**

She has a black belt in karate, and knows how to pick a lock in under 15 seconds, but Girl Detective is afraid of the sea. She's tried so many times to get her SCUBA certification. She wants to go cave diving with her father in Grand Cayman—he's a good dad, but always pushing the envelope. Cave dives are just the newest fad. He's done it all, from skydiving to skeleton, moving like a butterfly from one extreme sport to the next.

She's been there for all of them, seen the ski bunnies coo over him in Aspen, watched the motocross divas swarm over when his helmet comes off. He's good looking in a middle aged way: tan and just grey enough about the beard to give the impression of a George Clooney, a vintage Sean Connery. Healthy but not too healthy. Rich but not too rich.

Girl Detective doesn't resent the attention he gets at the beach. She knows he'll find something new soon to absorb himself in—maybe rock climbing or that race that goes through Death Valley. He'll move on from the dives, but not soon enough. Girl Detective is afraid of the sea, but more afraid to disappoint him, or to let him go off with the healthy blonde SCUBA suit that he met yesterday.

He's told Girl Detective she's the only girl in his life,  
but blonde SCUBA suits like that don't come along every day.

So tomorrow, it won't be the shining blue of the beach that she swims in,  
paddling halfheartedly, wincing at the salt in the air, swallowing seawater  
and little pieces of terror. She and Dad will go into the black eye of the shoreline,  
go under the island, find octopus trails and eel nests, the mummified bodies of starfish,  
all without sight of the sun. Her feet in the sand, she shudders a little to think of it.

## What We Wore into Space

Your hair [the skull-crushing pressure  
of nothingness

ravaging cold blocked out by a window  
of thickened glass]

looks so gold in the radiation-glow  
burnished in the naked sun

[the atmosphere here unblemished by atmosphere  
light not filtered by polluted air

or even air that's pure] On your boots,  
you fly a flag [identifying

the home your body should be returned to  
if you spring a leak, your body

melting, bubbling away; pressure sucking

your intestines up into the helmet;

your bones crunching]. I wait in the loading bay  
connected to radio waves

[in my own suit of latex and carbon-coated wool]

watching you reflect the planet

and on the other side of the glass

reflect the moon.

## Elegy

When the plumber died, he was remembered  
in feats of plumbing. In infamous leaks and floods.

He was a good plumber. The pipes will miss his touch;  
they will wonder where his voice has traveled to.

But he also had a white beard and a face like a folk singer,  
wore blue checked shirts and denim overalls.

There was the Oklahoma musk in his voice  
and a bald spot preparing to emerge from the crown

of his gray head which never got the chance.

There were long lists of frozen pipes and backed up tanks

waiting to mourn him. A parade of valves and drain fittings.

But his obituary would read, not brother, father, son:

*He was a good plumber.*

## Hymaniacs

They drive around in a 15-passenger van, all white—other meddling kids might paint their vans up bright and psychedelic, but the Hymaniacs know the true value of modesty. On Fridays, they take the van down the road to protest the Planned Parenthood. The van is big enough to hold all their carefully painted signs, and they ride, all of them together in the back the Pastor swiveling the captains chair in the front to get a good look at his adolescent flock. They have tiny silver hearts each engraved in sweeping Gothic letters *Jesus loves me* (because I am better than you). Mary Catherine wanted calligraphy, but Mary Kate said the spires and spines of Gothic script brought you closer to God. Nobody knows it, but after Youth Group, Jennifer and Matthew sneak out to the van. They only do hand stuff; Jen's flower is still intact. Jesus will still respect her in the morning. Matt wishes he could stutter it all out in confession, but he never seems to manage it: *Bless me, Father, for I have sinned I have had... impure thoughts. I have used the Lord's name in vain.* He says his five Hail Marys and goes back to the van. Oh, that van, the altar of ecstatic goodness they all feel God's power when they hit the road in style, little silver fish on the back bumper letting the world—the harsh, persecuting world!—know Who We Are. On Tuesdays, after school, they volunteer at a soup kitchen,



feeding their holy souls with satisfaction. Mary Kate chooses all the excursions.

Matthew plays an acoustic guitar at all the meetings and sings songs

that have been deemed pleasing to God's ears. Jennifer nurses a plastic fetus,

asks the Lord to send her a sign. Can't wait until next Friday. Can't wait to feel

sanctified again.

## **Into the Side of the Mountain**

Red rock ready and the hexagonal corners  
of what are not pinecones, but look like them.

*Have you been, yet, into the vortex?*

In the dawn and in the dying, the stone matches the sky,  
the orange light of the sun casting burgundy shadows on the dust,  
while in the embers of day, the sky turns from melon to periwinkle.

*Or the church, carved into the raw hide of the mountain cliffs?*

*It really is spectacular, you know.*

At noon, the clouds split like a supernova, then return to one another.

*But most of all, you must see the vortexes. No, not*

*“vortices”, that’s wrong.*

And above it all, lightning shooting raw diamonds into the ground.

The call of the thunderstorm, the answer of the rain-thirsty earth.

Energy like rippling sex, the body of the beloved, the meeting  
of star-crossed eyes across the festival floor and the heart pounding, blood  
rushing through the ear canal after the tryst, creating a sound like the ocean.

*You can't imagine what it's like inside a vortex.*

Feet lifted into the air by unseen force. Wind turned like a turbine.

A burnt-leaf skeleton written on skin.

Eyes wide with revelation.

The second-sight of stones, awakened, gives warning: Iron. Fire. Ice.

## **Jaws**

That September, my cousins and I all sat in the front room,  
watching Discovery Channel and eating our sad cubes of funeral cheese,  
trying to identify this one as gouda, that one as monterey jack  
and listing to survivors speak earnestly about how they didn't *blame* the shark,  
for doing what came naturally. That someday, they would be back  
in the water again. In response, I said, *Oh, Gram,*  
over and over again.

When I reached to touch her arm in the casket,  
someone had taken her away, and all I touched  
was a cold gray stone from the bottom of a dark well.

## **The Mad Scientist's Love Song**

You have got the most beautiful body  
for experiments. I want to run my hands up  
and down your spine, picking out the ridges  
of the bones to lick them. You are like radium-226:  
you glow. Your half life is 1,601 years long  
and I want to be with you for all of them.

Will you be my laboratory assistant? Will you  
bring me my test tubes and fill out my charts  
and let me lay you out on the examination table  
like a queen in a white labcoat and make you hum  
with compressed pleasure? Will you plug into  
the cathode ray of my heart and electrocute my soul?  
You would look lovely with beetles' eyes, or the gene  
for bioluminescence transferred into your toes.

Oh, so badly I want to take your head off  
so I can put in a specimen jar and soak it in formaldehyde  
and label it "Perfection". So I could look at you

every day, right there between the pickled squid on the bookshelf  
and the cat with a pig's face.

Together, we can brave the frontiers of experience.

You could be my greatest creation, your lips,  
your hair, caressed and modified, your friendly gleaming teeth and  
your feet, shining greenly out in the darkness.

## Planetesimal

*n. A small solid body following a planetary orbit; a miniature planet; spec. each of the bodies hypothesized to have formed the planets by accretion.*

Once upon a time,  
we were planetologists, seeking  
new globes to lay our maps on.  
But we caved in on ourselves.  
The orbits lost their way,  
going helical, vanishing beyond  
the edge of the galaxy, our eyes  
adjusting to the vacuum, watching  
asteroids constantly beaten  
against one another,  
becoming smaller  
until they were nothing but dust.  
Everyone uses the sky  
but nobody sees what we do  
  
We look into the past

when we look up. It's all anonymous:

astrology's the big thing now.

Jupiter rises over my shoulder

and Venus reclines retrograde

beside the cleft of your knee

in silhouette. It all means something

to somebody, somewhere. I imagine,

at least, that it should.

There are charts and diagrams

to explain

what it is we're missing

in the tiny shooting stars

we never see—bits of dust and pebbles

thrown free of some gravitational field.

Too small to be heroes, even at the end,

even when they go up in flames

*We used to be planetologists.*

Somewhere over the Oort cloud

stones are finding each other,

doing the dance over the cosmic buffet:



*Should I go to him? Should I go?*

Gravity doesn't take no for an answer.

So one by one, they give in

and meet, melting bone to bone

until they can never be taken

apart: just constantly becoming

enough to amount to something.

## **Last Response of the Oracle**

*Delphi, 393 CE*

This empire that stands before you will not be cast aside, and in the years  
that drip toward us, it will make your kingdom quake  
not with angry blows or sun-blotting arrows,  
but by eating away your peoples' souls the way dragons slice through stone.  
And the generations will not wipe it away. It will not strike the sea  
and stop its burning, but go on, gathering until the world  
can no longer hold its weight. I can see my own portrait, hanging  
thousands of years from now, a girl who looks only a little like me,  
and I can hear the ghosts of tomorrow composing their arias  
preparing to be forgotten, before they have even prepared to be born—this  
is fate struck up from the earth by generations of gods. They will let  
their petty squabbles sit and watch you dance as they have done  
time and time before. But you do not know the music or the steps,  
and my temple will be torn down before I can retrace the notes.

## The Alien's Wife

Sometimes, he looked and saw her only as a body,  
watched her skin as it pulled then slackened across her naked ribs,  
her breath as she slept rhythmic, as though she were an automaton  
in disguise as a woman. And he would think to himself,  
*how strange are humans; how strange are we all.*

He would look again and see her as a mind locked up  
in a dangerous chest of organ and bone, so strong and so fragile.  
Then he'd slip into bed beside her and feel the warmth of her thoughts  
as their heat echoed through her skin.

Some nights, there would not be a look. He would make  
her body's music—play scales on those goose-bumped ribs, touching them  
like piano keys or gently strumming them like strings.

It is good to remember this: he would whisper, *There are so many reasons to love.*

## **Girl Detective in the Bedroom**

Girl Detective wears thigh-high pleather platform boots.

In the front seat of the Corvette, she kneels, knees to the seats,  
and presses her breasts together. Girl Detective isn't happy  
with her cup size, but her boyfriend is. Things have progressed.  
They take it upstairs.

Girl Detective puts on a tan trench coat and a Dick Tracy fedora.

He's in such top condition, fresh from practice, planning  
to play baseball in when he goes t college in the fall.

They're going to try the whole long distance thing; Girl Detective thinks  
she'll be as good at this as she is at everything she tries, but he's not sure—  
he misses her when she's gone.

But today, they're ignoring all of that. They like to role play:  
she offers to investigate his case. She puts her boots up on the oak desk.

Girl Detective's bedroom room is like a film noir café: dark curtains,  
harsh contrast, dim yellow lights that hide their faces. She turns on  
a collection of saxophone solos perfect for monologuing over.

She offers him a scotch and slides red lipstick over her lips,  
then over his. *What's a nice boy like you doing in the big, bad city?*  
She slides her hand onto his left thigh and leaves it there. *You  
got a very intriguing case. Let's talk about how you want to pay...*  
And he does look like a dame in trouble, but she can keep his mind  
off talent scouts and test scores; he can distract her from the evidence  
they're shoving off the desktop onto the floor.

Girl Detective takes off the trench, revealing a red lace corset.  
She puts the hat over her boyfriend's eyes and wraps her legs  
around his bare, tan waist. He can't help fingering  
the magnifying glass in her pocket, pulling it into the lamplight  
and making rings on her skin. Girl Detective puts her eye  
to the lens.

## Orbit of Sensibility

Voyager, crossing and recrossing the line at the edge, never saw it, 783 light minutes from the Sun, rolling around just past Pluto—potato-shaped poster boy for planetary also-rans—the dark side of the solar system: no, this one is ghostly. *Ghastly*. Sister sign to Sense, the eleventh planetoid. Inhabited by germlike worms a mile long but only half a millimeter thick, and Regency sisters in muslin gowns and uptight hair and insufficient fortunes. The homeland we wish we deserved. In this case, though: vexing.

Sensibility's path a perfect circle, of course, not like that showboat God of Hell, with his elliptical orbit and shifting definitions: Planet? Moon? Trans-Neptunian Object? We'll have none of it. It's okay to take unnecessary angels at their word, but the aliens that call this place their homestead (the Interpreter and others, various but not sundry) ought to be trifled with. Open your textbook and read a page or two?

But only a little.

## Promenade

*Either that wallpaper goes, or I do.*

*Oscar Wilde*

In a violet suit and silk cravat, he entered,  
whistling tuneless tunes and tapping his cane  
with flourishes worthy of adoring throngs. *Walk with me,*  
he said, and Oscar went, the two of them talking  
about the grace of brocade and the effortless beauty  
of stolen kisses in the dark. *Did you ever have love?*

I did, I did.

*Did you ever make peace with the world,  
let the smell of the street roll off your shoulders,  
and step into a comfortable room that held you  
in the palm of its hand the way a child carries a baby bird?*

The cracked stone of the path was covered with the petals  
of lilies and green carnations as they walked. They scuffed  
with their leather soles, kicked up clouds of dust  
littered with blossoms, and Oscar invited him in.

Oscar talked his way across the carpet, digging his toes  
into the thickness and eyeing the damask mazes on the wall.

They took their tea with sugar and a sweet, white milk  
that left ghosts swirling around the cups. It might have been France,  
but it wasn't, it wasn't. They did not speak much,  
except to note the sad decline of decadence,  
and the warm, familiar gossip of home—Lord So-and-So,  
the Marquess of Where, and whom they have seduced,  
and whom they have defrauded—and soon the teapot  
had drunk itself into oblivion, and the lavender jacket  
stood up, its embroidery gleaming, and offered a hand.



## Saxophone Solo

You can hear tiptoe skeletons on the ceiling. It's tin. They echo.

It's midnight on Blues St., oil slick mixing with the rain as it pools on the asphalt.

The paper patter of bone knuckles on above us is like percussion;  
sounds of a planetary jazz quartet, and the man at the bar, tapping along  
mixing drinks and clacking the glasses down full.

Last call coming up, the quartet winds down the set:

*we're gonna send this last one out to all you very special ladies out there*

but the trick is that every lady is a very special lady and they'll all  
tip big, because they don't realize that *very special* is a relative term  
and smooth-voiced frontmen know to look in between faces in the crowd  
to give the illusion of looking—right there—right into your eyes

*I see you; you're my very special lady tonight, you and nobody else*

cigarettes lit in distraction, smoke making the black-dark room velvet gray  
and poking fun at perspective. The far away brick wall moves even farther, knowing

that every gained distance is a victory for someone, some very special lady  
shimmering home with her heart still ringing like a cymbal.

## **Glam Rock**

There was something so exciting about those pants,  
the way they were skin tight all over and licked  
the body and held in their tightness something else  
something unknown, the lines of either thigh  
and the cascade of musculature too much for a girl to handle.  
She could meet his eyes, she could talk to David Bowie through the TV  
her eyes wandering up the slim cut jacket and down the shining  
line of his legs and when her head would hit against the glass  
of the TV, she would stop for a moment  
feeling her heartbeat in every small part of her body  
her fingers, even, rushing with blood: in and out.

He had invited her in and she had joined, willingly, throwing herself  
into the scenery, basking in glitter and caressing the platforms  
of her shoes while she watched him dance, blindfolding herself  
to hear his voice more clearly and pretend that he was there  
in the living room, her toes curling in the brown shag of the carpet  
as they embraced, as he carefully twirled the button of her jeans  
between two perfect fingers and looked into her eyes,

waiting for the moment to tell her she was so beautiful;

if only she could just touch his hair...

It was a Tuesday when she realized that the world would someday  
crack wide open, and that she would know, someday, what was hiding  
in the leather and spandex; men in silk and women in glitter  
and women in silk and men in glitter, and all of them  
like angels of excess, carrying guitars instead of harps,  
flying on wings of ecstatic riffs and electronic pulses  
and this was the beginning, this was the new day, this  
was time immemorial and slick envy and undying lust and power  
and this was what she saw, every day, when she looked for it.

## Sedona Vortex

This is red rock sensibility: Laura picks feathers

out of her hair and whispers, *He loves me. He loves me*

*not*. Too much time is spent twisting spanners – a clock

can be wound and rewound, but if you say, *Eat me; drink me,*

those old melted watches will reform, and you will be left ticking.

Laura walks widdershins toward the door, opens it

for Nobody, who never comes. I am anxiety.

You are opalescence. Laura is the wine glass on the shelf.

Time opens up caverns in the earth. Laura watches jackrabbits

as they hopscotch through the desert, in and out of wormholes.

The air is slithering and malformed, brimmed with junipers.

This is red rock hard time: serving sunny side up in the diner,

never decaf, filling out the crossword with floating anagrams.

We don't eat apple pie here. We take our coffee black,  
  
clocking in and out while lightning strikes Boynton Canyon;  
  
burns sand into glass in the desert, startling Gila monsters,  
  
who clamber out from under rocks that are still warm  
  
and lick the slow smell of creosote out of the humid air.

Laura cuts a piece of cake—counts clouds and flying saucers;  
  
clears cups. She says, *This town is a Faraday cage.* I say, *Eat up.*

\*\*\*

*Give me your hands if we be friends.*

\*\*\*

## **In Absentia**

While I am gone, I want you to look after the stones in the rock garden.

And please keep guard over the koi in the small pond, too. They'll eat their weight in gold every seven weeks. Feed them trinkets from estate sales and antique shops; they like old gold best—there is value in nostalgia, my grandma always said—and it shines like prism crystal in their scales. Do not give them conflict diamonds; they will be ill.

Take care of the coats in the closet and the moss growing between the bricks of the pathway. And, my love, if you need me, write a message in green ink on the skin of a blue balloon; send it into the sky. It will reach me and I will write back to you on the underside of a bird's wing, in that language only you and I can understand.