

The Body Snatcher's Complaint

by

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ABSTRACT

Ranging in subject from a Tuareg festival outside Timbuktu to the 1975 "Battle of the Sexes" race at Belmont track to a Mississippi classroom in the Delta flood plains, the poems in *The Body Snatcher's Complaint* explore the blurring of self hood, a feeling of foreignness within one's own physical experience of the world, in the most intimate and global contexts.

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I.

All the Night Long

Wish for us, friend.
Wish, mosquito bite in the ear,
clench of swollen arterial breath,
cardboard sign stapled to my chest.

Hot in the hollow of your mouth
is wish. Useless as galaxies,
this paper trail across our ocean,
whitecaps sighing on repeat.
We order the wind to turn inward,
the arctics to flip their poles. You lace
through my mind, water to creases,
contrails encased in the clouds.

Knock on my door now, please
be more than a voice in the speaker
stillness. Be a hand, hair to touch,
loud body heat an echo from the dark.

II.

“The Battle of the Sexes,” Belmont, 1975
for Anna

They never had to touch her with a whip.
The pulsing crowd of fifty thousand watch
as their bodies breathe and rock with this

beating of her strides, muscles fly then taut
under the glimmering coal propulsion
of her form, each hoof striking at the sod

in blasts of green, the stallion closes in
to worry her churning shanks, a nose ahead
she keeps the lead, careens her forward motion

past his length to round the quarter mile bend
to her break—in a slowed down second her leg
snaps twice, stuttering shoulder, dipping tread,

Vasquez pulls, tries to stop her flailing gait
but she sets her pace, runs on, pulverizing
bones, ripping the fetlock’s hide, stays unfazed

as Foolish Pleasure pulls ahead, driving
herself on and on as shards burst through skin—
the stands ring with screams as Ruffian grinds

her wound into the ground, slows only when
her tendons sever, hoof uselessly hangs,
frame folds as her rival eases into the win.

After the surgery’s twelfth hour she wakes
thrashing, still pumping her legs in the race, her cast
begins to split, the plaster hits her flanks

and knees, redoubling breaks, her own legs bash
the others as she spins circles on the floor;
irreparably shattered, her will outlasts

the doctors’ skill, their ability to restore
the structure of life. They had to put her down,
queen of the fillies (good as Man O’ War),

they pit his derby against her triple crown,
and it's not that her win remains assumed
and never proved, or that they've always found

her best of second class, not even her tomb
at Belmont's track, nose grotesquely gazing
towards the finish line for which she was consumed—

it's the whip she used, the circles she chased,
that over, and over, she makes herself break.

The Body Snatcher's Complaint

There's nothing worse than skin
except tongue,
degradation
of sunlight into sound—
give me back
to the world where we took
the air;
it was only movement, never word.

Long months,
and language fragments atoms. I am still not fluent
in human, in hands,
awkward instruments
of my intentions.
I remain
water-weighted,
foreign within this planet
of blood and muscle contractions.
I'm a constant
longing
for the permeable, gaseous
state of self: memory
of sky
from under ocean depths.

Remember
the agony of condensation; everything here
is grasping; sinew to the bone; root
parasitic to the dirt.

The Stellar Realty

—on Ash Wednesday

shluffing off of cells to the air – who
we breathe in can be disturbing, why
we clean, try to sanitize the previous
tenant's remains in any given space
to lessen the feeling of tomb or grave

disclosure of death on the premises
seems redundant as we're a constant
process of disintegration and dust
build up, patterns of sand pushed
to banks of higher ground, held

then overwhelmed, form forced and
folded over on itself, pieces in light
years of dispersal – heat makes us heavy
to each other, attracts, concentrates
swirling pieces to a body, temporary mass

Risk

He always deploys the same strategy,
manipulates allies
to help him gain
the largest ground

first, then spreads out and knocks
them down with each turn
while she
lightly laughs it off,
gives tokens to his advances,

having barricaded herself in the farthest corner
just there to amicably watch
the maneuvers of the rest
and have a chat, hardly playing at all—
but he attacks
relentlessly

turn after turn, stakes a space
within her zone, opening
routes—she grapples
for diplomat, peacemaker,
let's-make-a-deal, unclear
if her plastic smile of I-don't-care,
it's-just-a-game

is or isn't seen
by him—the object is to win
and he begins to, doggedly.
She goes quiet,
rolls the dice—
snake eyes—

he laughs; she flips
the board into his smiling face—
red, green, black plastic pieces
flying at his eyes—

a play which lasts
much longer
than a single night.
Dread's Knackery

Farmhouse in a wheat field
swaying stalks.

There's blood in the groundwater,
seeping into soil, coming up in wells
and the sky is dark of course,

the house in front of me isolated by its light.
Puddles of my footprints fill with red.
I hold out hands and clasp thick air,
humidity collects on finger tips.

Salty, dank taste my tongue
licked from the grooves of palm.
What are you, out there in the night?
There's no shape to you I understand.
The blood floods these plains:

liver, intestine, spleen, rising tide,
calves covered, splashes stain my legs,
the hem of my dress. I am rooted, sunk.
I see no where or way to run
among this thick jelly ground
of liquid clotting in the grain,

a hardening unimpressed
by the persistence of the rain.

Claims Race

The horses are starving. His father's drunk
away the winnings, slumped over varnished
oak. So Gil mucks stalls, sweeps hay, cleans tarnished
saddle buckles under the constant bug
zapper hum.

The old man stumbles in, raving
that trainer Bill's been poisoning the feed—
them's the gaping ribs and losing streak.
He grabs a pitch fork in a blackout rage,
tears across the track mumbling that he'll kill
any man messes with what's his—

his son
follows, trying to talk sense, begins to run
as the bastard picks up steam—*hell*— Gil tackles
him, they fall. Son braces for more chase, a blow,
but dad waits, skin lathered, panicked eyes in a roll.

∞

The worn out stallion waits, coat lathered, eyes
the oats tucked under Gil's arm. He offers
up the treat, shovels hay into the trough
as Number One Hawg digs deep into his prize.
Gil sneezes in the dust loosed from stalks
of straw; flecking motes rise in sunlight
that beams softly over the stable's stalls.
He turns the hose, moves close to water —*Christ!*—

the horse rears back its massive head and butts
him in the chest. Rage radiates from his rib's
break, flooding fingertips and eyes, blood
blind, he grabs a pitch fork as his fury brims,
raises it to stab — drops it as he sees
the panicked shying of another starving beast.

Hong Kong

Buy Me!

the hammerhead shark,
crazed-eyed, screams in neon signage.

HOT ITEM!

above a window
of pandas in sailor suits, dolphins
in bow ties.

Traveler's Pantoum

I check for my passport, one last time.
Again I pay more money than I should,
each day a struggle to retain what's mine,
to interpret smiles behind words I don't comprehend.

I keep paying more money than I want,
though what's it matter, worth a dollar
for their smiles when I couldn't comprehend;
laughter, above language, what we understand.

What's a dollar matter, what's that worth?
This tourist tax comes bodily too:
laughter, the language I have to understand
as the sun overcomes the pigment of my skin.

This tourist is taxed in body, too:
a strap on my bag begins to break,
a face the sun's turned a burning shade.
I watch it set through a bus window's view.

The strap on my bag finally breaks.
After a mile walking, I regret the extra book or two—
still, the dawn through a window's moving view,
the birds that waltz with wind in a hornet swarm.

Along the miles, I've lost a shirt and shoe,
but happiness is the meal that reinvented food,
the shadows of birds waltzing in a swarm,
my feet on moon-bleached sand, salt on skin.

Another meal, bacteria masquerading as food.
Yes, tonight I need a toilet in my room;
hallucinate my skin is moon-bleached sand,
and insects worm to bite beneath my clothes.

Immeasurable comfort in a private room—
at times I paid for what I got.
I'll keep the scars of scratched bug bites,
the moon-bleached skin, all full of sand,

and lose my passport, time again.

The Nomads

I filled a film canister full of sand.
I haven't felt the grains inside
since I taped it closed
that early morning,
when I stood at the bottom of the dune
I had saulted and tumbled down,
the dust my body disturbed
swirling in the air, swept aside in the wind.

I went to a Tuareg festival in Esekan,
a town outside Tombouctou, I
don't know how far, I could guess
ten miles or eighty.
For the nomadic salt traders
crossing to Morocco and back
in their camel caravans, location
is as transient as the shape of sand,
it moves with the Sahel wind.

The center of the globe
still points to Tombouctou.
Mud walls awash in the color
of the earth, we walk
through twisting alleys, sloped streets,
some spaces between buildings so narrow
I have to turn my shoulders to the side
to pass through.
The libraries here were once
as vast as those of Cairo.
All roads converged in Tombouctou
before the desert swallowed the scrolls;
the center of wisdom and learning
before the Quran was torn apart, the pieces
of the pages burning as they were re-fused,
re-formed; before the black-clad specter of a woman
slunk guilty through the shadows,
her eyes unseen.

Cell phones ring in the streets
of this desert town.
Men walk past with
hands casual at their hips,
resting on the hilts of swords.
From boats, cars, camels and planes
the nations of the world
descend on Tombouctou
for the Festival au Desert.

We share a tent
with a French couple, their two friends,
and Bodi, our leering driver, who steals
alcohol and weed and touches our necks
from behind when he steps out of the desert,
asking one or the other of us
to be his wife.

Krum-kruns stick to every fiber,
lodge themselves in our skin.
We pick the little burrs
out of our food, brush them from our hair.
Merde!

Alex swears at the translucent scorpions
crawling across our feet.

I listen to the bickering of our neighbors,
two British men, ridiculous red-faced
in caftans, with legs swollen from stings
Are you really going to assume that position?
Yes I'm really going to assume this position!

David fevers in the corner of our canvas tent.
Music pulses through the sand under our bodies
from a stage three dunes away.
I watch him twist
and thirst as he dreams.

On the opening day
the men ride out of the desert,
robes a blue reflection of their open sky.
Long ropes of black fabric
twine around their heads
from pate to chin,
down their necks, the loose ends
flowing against the robes,
protecting them from sun, sand, wind—
and in the tiny slit
around their eyes—
they flash that one
narrow glimpse of skin.
They descend,
storm through the camp—engraved swords
raised, sounding a battle cry,
a furious hello, victorious
to live to meet again.
And it seems to me the question is
not where am I
but when.

Behind me
sand obscures the sky
but light hits the horizon
of the dunes,
marks the people sitting on that ledge
with a framing radiance,
turns the sand a dirty rose.
I stand pressed in with hundreds of bodies
around me, waiting for the musicians
to take the stage.

As I kneel, sand makes dents and crags
in my knees. A light dusting mixes with
the sweat on my palms, sinks into the cracks.
Sandals and a scattering of New Balance shoes
step on black wires that run
from cameras and raised lights to a control booth.
Harmattan winds blow
through the robes of the man on stage,
filling out
his rippling wings.

Behind us, at the foot of the dunes
the Tuareg men sit high
on their decorated camels,
shifting in the sand.

I want to hear again the sounds
of the drumming and humming voices
and breath and steps of a thousand people
dancing on the Sahara's sand.
I want to wrap an indigo band
across my face, against my lips
smell the musky fabric, let it tinge my skin
a darker, purple shade.
I would eat the stewed rice full of goat hair,
grease, the crunch of sand

and I remember the drumming circle
at midnight
ten women's hands clapping sideways,
the ululations from their throats
spinning out in desperate welcome,
a cold thin cry.

Mawun

our moped cools beside us, an enclosed cove, finest sand
beneath our bodies

his
just far enough not to touch

swollen clouds, blue fishing boats in the distance with peeling paint
a crab scuttles past

my face
I think it was worth it

the onslaught of words, his humid morning tone to arrive
at a top-five destination

down
a pitted spilled-wheels road

it is perfect I sit on our new cloth, glower and smile
at him

falling
gracelessly in the waves

children run in the far distance, daring the fluctuations
of shore

is
this scene worth it?

I don't know the values of variables in the equation
he returns, stands

water
falling on my tongue

this, the loneliness of being with a (not right) person
the cost, exacting

precise
to cut out the heart

of what I loved wanted, so that acquisition of the win
is simple

loss
of meaning all sand

and no sun in a moment, he will touch me smile
the invitation

and
we'll return to our rented room

Narcissa and the Laptop

Look how prettily I posture
for this talk,
keep his gaze on me
across an ocean

listening? as he speaks
of work and various
incompetencies. My eyes
dart to the corner of the screen,

littlest square of my face—
there I am, laughing at his
joke—*focus*. He
smiles at me, gestures grandly.

I dip my head, look up
through lowered brows...
yes, that turned out nicely.
Mmm, my hair, I play with the ends,

flip them over shoulder;
resettling, let the screen dip below
my neck for an instant.
He becomes distracted. Stretch

my back, slyly check
that he observes the curve.
How lovely a waist looks
in the frame (this contortionist

act of angled adjustments) I
could take my whole
body in fragments, most
pleasing piece

of breast or leg, hip or face.
I lean forward, close-up collage,
monitor reflection, absorbed
by the screen.

My Orientation Family

I.

My host mother points to the leg
peeking from under my skirt,
asks for a trade, and laughs.
Ah, Akua! I like it! You give it to me.
(she shouts my name every time,
clapping her hands)
Do you like black men or white?

She is delighted
when I say both (hands clap)
shimmying her large frame in her seat

Ah, Akua! (I jump)
You must love Jesus in your heart
she gestures up to the pictures
of a white-faced savior
lining the room like wallpaper trim.
Do you love Jesus?

Is there another answer in this moment
than *yes*?

II.

I walk through Kwame Nkrumah's tomb
with my host father and his son
 while golden trumpeters arch water
in the fountains, and the president's
 statue points to government buildings,
old British quarters of slaves

Akua,

 my serious Ghanaian father turns to me,
*why do black people in your country
call themselves African American?
They are no more African than you,*
 and he sighs, as though this was something
 he'd waited a long time to say.

III.

Before dinner, dusk glows
the red dirt of the roads. I sit
in front of the house playing
hand games with the neighbor's girl.
Abena slyly touches
the ends of my hair.

I reach up and undo the band
Do you want to play with it?
the small fingers move through the strands,
against skin, exclaiming to herself in Twi.
She becomes excited, squeezes a handful—
and gasps, drops the hair,
claps a hand over her mouth.

I take a section and yank,
show she won't hurt me, pulling
until she believes. *I like your braids*
all it takes before Abena
is surveying my scalp, plotting lines
so soft, she sighs.

I want to believe

I can leave no trace
but tracks of my mistakes fall
in a palm-shaped bruise
on Abena's cheek,
blur of my host mother's hand swinging
open through the air,
Ahne! Don't touch, too fine.

Fatima

Ouaga is a dusty town,
like an old western film
the streets are wide and
bleached tan, particles

of dirt obscure the faces
of the Burkinabe on mopeds,
dodging carts and beggars
in their paths, staring as we

climb down from the tro-tro,
swinging our backpacks
over sweaty shoulders.
We check into the French

ex-pat oasis, a guest house
run by a suspicious white face,
which immediately sizes up
our American accents, frayed

bags and unwashed hair, and
gives us the mosquito infested
room in the back. We decide
not to stay here to eat. In

the torch-lit night we walk to a chop
house and collect an entourage
of unintelligible Rastas. We eat
couscous avec legumes, fingers

dripping in the oil sauce. Papa
sits next to me, a bigger man
without the usual dreads, he stares
silently at my face. Yobije

rattles out in broken English,
"America is so cool. They have
brandy and Bob Marley," at which
Papa feels compelled to speak

urgently, he talks to me through

Tessa, who is left to translate. So
my friend professes her love for me,
through her grin Papa asks

for my hand in marriage. "Oh!
I insist, I am already a wife,
my husband... Roberto, will
join us tomorrow." "Your husband

cannot love you as much
as I do!" Tessa exclaims, "I will
take him down... He is big man?"
I say, "You know Arnold

Schwarzenegger?" Papa's eyes
open wide in appreciation.
"Bigger," I say, holding my hands
out a foot from my shoulders

on either side. "Ohh," he sighs.
We walk through the smoky
night on our way to a club,
and Papa, still hopeful, says,

"You are Madame Afrique, beautiful,
your Burkina name will be Fatti."
We break into hysterical giggles,
the Rasta men around us stare

in disapproving confusion. I bury
my face in her shoulder, while Tessa
explains fat-ty is a name for someone
"tres, tres gros" in America. The men

are delighted, they slap me on the back
and shout, "Fatty! Fatty!" convinced
we share a joke. I decide to smile
over my shattered pride, and laugh.

In the club we are the only women, ten
men form a circle and start clapping
their hands, howling as each one
takes a turn in the middle, shaking

their hips or grinding their asses

to the air. Papa decides it is my turn,
and starts the men chanting my name,
“Fah-ty, Fah-ty, Fah-ty,” I have

a sudden memory of middle school
nightmares, naked at a dance and
everyone points and laughs, shouting
fatty over and over. I have realized

a dream. So I raise my arms above
my head and dance, rolling my hips
I laugh, and know that here in this circle,
I'm a daughter of Mohammed.

Braided

I've sat through seven hours
hunched on a child's stool
as coarse red and brown strands
of synthetic hair are wrapped around
the wispy roots of my scalp

The women braiding my hair talk in Twi
as they stand over me, my head yanked
from side to side, the end of a comb sharp
as they part hair

The long braids ache at my neck
the weight pulling
back

It's grown dark in equatorial consistency
at exactly 6:30, the sky a vivid blue on the edge
as they tug tight the last braid

The women bring a bucket of boiling water behind my back.
Wordlessly they tug my braids, inching them down
into the chemical wetness, an acrid smell of fusion,
the soft lapping of the water against plastic,
their chatting words.

The bucket tips and soaks my back—
burns wash over me in *screams*
I jump forward and the braids *slap*
spilling more bubbling burns
I
am
wild
unreal howls and shrieks as skin melts
a caged animal panicked – I run – my tail chasing me
whipped over and over
hair pounding me forward

– until –
the frightened woman grabs my braids
with a towel, leads me
back down

Crowds of Ghanaian students have filled the door
watching wide - eyed as the abruni
pulls up her shirt to reveal
a blistering back,
tanned flesh contorted

Sobbing in my seat, I don't know what to do.
Tessa asks, *what do you need, what do you need?*
while someone pours Pure Water down my back,
cold water from the plastic bag cooling.
I ask them to pour it lower, *lower*
but shoulder blades are first, surface red,
shouting for attention.
It's my waist with nerves killed by heat,
white, thickening, blisters
around the edges of a smiling scar,
a finger beckoning
closer

I stand up from a puddle of cold water
bag of ice against my back,
my skirt soaked, dripping, sticking
to thighs

My dad's going to be so angry
He arrives in two days,
bags full of deet, weatherproof khaki, protective instincts.
How will he ever see how we are,
how this has been,
if he can't hug his daughter when he steps off the plane,
arms a burning braid

We cross campus in the dark,
my shoulders quake, cold in shock
and Tessa petting me, asking,
what do you need?

Uterine Device

She's several inches inside me,
 latexed finger beckoning
toward the anterior wall.
The extremely pregnant assistant
 distracts me with a story
about giving herself a concussion
twice
 by walking into walls
while half-asleep nursing.

The blond helmet-
head pops up between my thighs,
 looks levelly at me
above glasses to say,

you have a beautiful deep pelvis

just as she shoves
 the pronged plastic
all the way inside

*you should have no trouble
giving birth*

naked from the waist down,
feet spread, it's the same
from bed to table to bed,
plastic wrapped insertions to prevent
absorption the thing foreign from making
 land of my body,
conquering seed, time cultivating,
productive engine swollen beneath
 stretch mark property lines

when you want to

and it's funny that these keep coming up:
the spread of my hips;
 a body
made for other bodies;
assumption of, not if, but *when*;
these older men

in hearings and courts
condemning the modes of control
I might employ (or that I have employment
at all); what
I'll eventually want
to give up

I should have eaten this morning.
Limbs rope-stretched weak, zipping my pants
leaves me dizzy, hand against
hip as I see the pad
on the bed, red and dark spots
above the stirrups. The doctor calls
through the curtain

*we'll need to check on you again
next month*

I cover the pad
with the paper sheet, crumple it in white
and stuff it low into the hazardous materials bin

it's normal to experience cramping

III.

The Twenties

In some dreams I'm a parent, in others
a child home with mom and dad. I realize
one is no more real than the next; awhile
since my parents split, when their shared
story line became just as impossible as
the daughter I meet in sleep, long-haired girl
whose hand I hold, playing in a park we
laugh—I let go and instantly she's gone
and I run, calling, searching through trees,
in fields that are empty. I panic, wake
myself with loud sounds of grief, grabbing at
the sheet in the space beside me, at this state
in between, where I belong to no one,
where family is all ahead, or behind.

Driving the Blues Highway

Mississippi, California, Thailand

I've got the flat land turns
down to the movement
of my wrist

It's near dawn, and spring,
with the cleared fields and catfish ponds
full of misty purples turning to yellow

I'll be leaving here soon
enough that I don't mind mosquito bites,

professional development Saturdays
or pantyhose in humidity,

the length of this Memphis drive
past the devil's crossroads
I make each time
I fly

∞

Her husband left for Afghanistan today
so Cheryl and I drive
to Pt. Reyes

There's a lighthouse
we haven't seen since we were kids

The day is blue
skies and Pacific cresting
above the windows of the car
on Highway 1 curves

long sea-grass rocking,
rolling hills
that drop to cliffs

∞

I love it most as I'm leaving it,
the same old Walnut Street
Blues Bar on a Saturday night
the levees and levees and levees

Bri and I drive her car for hours along the ridge,
cattle grazing the land side, the flooded
oxbow lake level
with houses on their sunken stilts,
where we tipped a Huck Finn raft
in the cypress studded water

last summer. Bri taught
me how to be northern in a south
that cared nothing for the difference of west,

in this place you may love,
that will never claim you

∞

Tin plays
in flickering candle light,
a lantern glow on his guitar;
Karen men wander out of the dark
village to join in, their Thai
the tonal whine
vibrating at the edge of a string

He explains,
but the land is there in the notes,
loss and home, *I miss my babies*. These are the same
songs pulled from his chest, smoky voice
curling out into the winter sky

Without language the songs
collect, a weight in my throat

A last note hangs over the table,
travelers and villagers, eyes unfocused
on flames, and then Tin
begins "Country Roads" in English

and every person sings

∞

I feel each of the three hundred
stone stairs
echo in my shins
as we race for the whitewashed tower
jutting out on the lowest cliff

Long drips of rust
come into focus, the park ranger
full arm waving, calls to us
over here, hurry, until we reach
the lighthouse

I don't need his binoculars
to see the pod

We clutch the guard rail,
lean over the sun-flattened
ocean, all of us crying out together
when a huge tail
slaps spray over the waves

The humpback stitches itself
through the current
in dives and surfacings,
keeping slow and perfect time

∞

The Mekong is lake-wide
and this feels like an escape,
running from the mopeds, throwing bags

in the back of the long boat
we barely catch, brown water
splashing our calves, silt
in sandals. I grab the roof to lever
my body through a glassless window
and take my seat

The air is orange, smoke-filled,
field burnings

The Laos side:
steep, thatched
houses anchored
to the hill on diagonal
wooden shafts, palm tree mountain,
dense leaves, the gravity
of vines; two golden dragons
guard the landing, fire tongues
flick over the dock,
their green serpent bodies roll
in waves along either side of countless
stairs, with a top that's disappeared in fog

∞

A calf rolls
in the surf, flirting
with rocks and break

South
an oil tanker noses
through the breach of the bay
under the Golden Gate

The ranger tells us
the whales are not migrating,
climate change confused, they won't go north,
they've been named,

and food will run out. *What
will happen to them?* I ask.
Cheryl, as though in reply, says,
His plane'll be over the Atlantic by now

How many times
have I turned my face to the sun,
given myself over
to a moment acutely temporary,

and I wonder if she too
loved him most
just before he was gone

North Becomes South

"...but when you head west, you're heading west forever"

—Rolf Potts

what could be arbitrary
becomes absolute, magnetic
polarity written on ocean stone

as charges flip
as one travels a direction all the way
into its opposite

it seems to mean something
the western world chasing its tail
finding ourselves

at all points of curvature
homogenizing power of axis
difference's death

At the Berkeley Marina

—after "*Ella se siente...*" *Alaide Foppa*

The fog lies low on the city
a movement of water's densities
gradation from sea to spray to sky

Birds fade in and out as they fly
and dive, an orange glow pierces
the monotony of place turned gray

She's gone like this, without definition.
The voice is clear, the hearing awkward,
ears turned a darkened rind

Serous Pericardium

Have I imagined the memories
of red footprints on the tiles,
bare feet going numb on concrete
as she's carried past
to the ambulance?

A month after her heart surgery
my mother woke just before dawn,
went to the bathroom, and there was blood
in the toilet. An hour later, more blood,
then woke my father to more.

She leads me through the story:
*I don't think you ever knew
that I called for you.*
As the paramedics got her oxygen, revived her briefly,
she insisted my father wake me.

I begin to remember
touching her hair, *I could feel you in the room,*
kneeling at her head, her face pale
under the weak light of the glass door,
I didn't have a pulse,
watching them strap her down.

I was only there a few minutes
before they took her down the outside stairs,
nearly dropping her as the rotted wood
pulled away from the house.
Then the moment I thought I'd lost her twice—
when the staircase groaned almost perpendicular
to the wall, throwing the two men,
stretcher between them, against the rail,
rusted nails tilting to the sky
as they hurried their load
the final steps to ground.

It was your presence that pulled me back.
My mother has metal webs to hold open
the arteries of her heart;
my hands are there too,
fingers spread against the thin-tissue collapse

of a system that cannot bear its own weight.

More than my birth
my mother gifts me her belief.
*You have to know what you can do—
that day, you saved my life.*
It's beside the point
if she really *pulled back from the light*, as if
I could somehow save her life—
the power is worth less than the prayer.
I needed you, because I wanted to live
my hands in her veins, her faith in my hands—
she lived, because I needed her to.

Inhibitors

His face slackens as she cries
What's inside the skull? Lobes, tissue, wire—
we kiss the synapse of what
wet shock, chap of frozen skin
against cloth, the mind's irritated bumps
rashing across corrugated flesh—here's her indent,
the neurological depression of event
he tries to smooth out, forget
himself, like worked wood forgets the rough

Tarweed

We are dirty,
resin on her thumb where skin pressed stalk.
I think of nights
in the dark of our driveway
outside a party, parents gone or detained
and just the spark
at her mouth,
cupped bowl of smoke encircling us
the way heavy seeds drop in a skirt
around the mother plant, choking growth
to a carpet of short sprouts.

Yellow flowers burn into August brown
as ovaries become a cup of shakeable seeds
which Anna pinches from the weed,
collecting on her palm
to show me the slivers
she'll save for later because this native
broadcasts well after construction, stakes itself to broken ground
as fortification from invasives.

My sister still has ashy fingers, calloused lighter burn
of the year two bedrooms grew into two houses
and we hotboxed the new upstairs, hunkering in
and in, siblings staring at tv through smoky greenhouse haze.
Taproots sink both down and laterally, interwoven
and difficult to pluck out. Can we only survive
together? I help collect the seeds, at home in the mimic of hips
beside mine, our round squatting knees,
the way we talk together, shuffle our feet carefully
around the leaves.

Cross Road Blues

SS3c. Locate Mississippi in relation to other states.

I.

Here, this bubbling border line, ox-bowed,
once paddle boats and lantern-lit rafts,
now freighter ships float past our banks on the east,
Arkansas' on the west. The waters flow down
but the people fled north, my grandmother
in blues cafes on Chicago streets, heat of bodies
swaying with slow summer accents, smoke
of their cigarettes the burning lynching trees
and lit fields of Cajun sugarcane, quenched briefly
in the '27 floods our river expectorated, silty gush
lingering over Norlean's swollen mouth.

II.

State of water, so much heat
of the levee's press, a nation's eyes and songwriter's
pen turned to the deep again as white
survivors paddle down streets on holiday in canoe,
picnic basket visits to captured
refugees on the island of high ground, typhoid
tent city watches master's children evacuate
with all the short supplies, thirsty weeks
shoveling, sandbagging unpaid, same chains
of shotguns in the night, no hoovering to untether
or ink to un-write. Guitar strings
strum in footfalls as the water drains.

III.

I rode the levee at twenty, whispering *Mississippi*
into his ear, fear of my blue-state voice
catching in the river wind, cawing
through cypress, drove down delta on the rise,
hold-em on a paddle-boat, thought I am gone, all-
in the something deep, knowing no names of no
streets, sneak stares and mimic *heys*
knew enough of history and movies to be afraid
of flags, this place of place, thrilling ourselves
in passing south, breaching the gulf,

took angled shots of working shrimp boats,
didn't notice under our feet oil
on a wet sand beach.

IV.

we country blues, Tupelo exports,
Graceland smothered in shag, city of dead kings
up in the other double-lettered state
my school-children love to spell. Delta plantations
turned catfish ponds a crow's flight from
rolling 'bama pine and segregated crimson tide,
same as it ever was, Union monuments
in Vicksburg a hill apart from the losing grey,
rotting Main street mansions a jumped track
from old sharecroppers' shacks where, come dawn,
my kids leak onto the streets, clumped dots
of red polo shirts one school bound mass
under a limp bird's sight.

V.

the time in distance: stolen notes,
steps of a great migration, flaps
of wings, tires' rotations through
a highway cut night, paddle's laps on an eddied
stream, plane engine roar that hurtles
a yank over a country's miles, to a land
thought self-contained, unchanged, where we
sink in mud that sticks to our toes.
I finally locate that stuttering song
of alluvial mud I'd known all along,
vibrating off a grey guitar string.

Phonics

There are things I teach
that I barely understand

how do I break down the sound
of *e* sliding into *w*
eee...ooo

do I name the process, say the word *diphthong*
to a roomful of third graders, so those over-exposed few
can snigger, whispering *thong*, while the rest
can feel the shame of not yet knowing
all that these words mean

eeeeewwww

What sound do we make when we smell a fart?

ew

It's a math of sound,
popping in a bubble from the mouth, musk of
classroom in the afternoon,

body plus body,
vowel beside vowel
marriage of two into something new

oh *ew*
o-u

this exclamation of pain: *ou! ow! ouch!*
(paddle smacks on bent bottom)
these sounds and I meant to be
the key to decode this cryptic activity of reading
the slide from teacher to student to teacher

promiscuous English,
that takes, and takes, and incorporates
words of French and German and Latin

so that there is no single system,

no rules which are not also broken

so that *sew* catches an eight year old's tongue by the tip
as she stumbles through her reading,
unerringly confusing

I too thought I was absolute
single consonant sound, individually defined
but I am English, diphthong, straddling the slide of *o* to *u*

and how am I to say:

I couldn't teach the space between understandings

where a child senses the shape of a dirty joke in the air
but not its meaning
where I, northerner in Mississippi
paddle students, for discipline,
to keep order
and after lock myself
in the teacher's bathroom, shaking, covering my face
with a dampened paper towel
as the pipes groan
and light arcs into shadow
under a swinging bulb

the dissonance between what we want, and what we must
what we intend,
and what we do

where innocence is an addend of guilt,

where the patterns of sound break down

Good Teaching

2a3. Text Structures – simple cause and effect

Mrs. Taylor grew up in one of these houses
I drive past each morning, still dark in winter at 6:45.

Four children packed in one room, water dripped from ceiling
onto her mattress. She hated her daddy with his belt

but never could stop talking in class. I love her
make-up caked face, the way she shuffles

her feet as she hurries down the hall with gossip,
that she lets me sit quietly in her room to grade.

Wednesday I teach a lesson on cause and effect:
What happens when you leave milk out overnight?

I search the blank eyes, the silence, until one hand rises:
ants'll get it? The obvious answer, pencil lead on my tongue—

Mrs. Taylor, walking past my door, hears, saves me with that voice
made to invite children to take milk with their cookies:

What happens when mama don't pay the electric bill?
The lights get cut off! chorus the eight year olds.

In the weak 5:00 pm light I pass the dead playground grass,
the sagging, tilted houses, slatted in iron, sending me home.

After Lunch

3d. Locate ordered pairs in the coordinate plane

Mrs. McCrutchen's door opens fast Charles tall boy comes crashing out of her room nearly falls over one hand goes to the ground to brace his weight she catches him her arm rises above her head and brings the taped together rulers resounding on his bicep he slides down the wall to the linoleum tiled floor he covers his head laughing she is laughing she smacks his hip his legs his grin increasing his hand "Dang" he shakes it at the wrist as she takes the back of his neck in her grip he stumbles back to his feet now she is walking with that swagger – know who she was in high school – owns the halls this boy my class behind me falling out of line to see whooping and laughing and I say loudly "Get back on the block!" look to another teacher waiting for her class to finish in the bathroom as my students mostly fall back in line I walk to the end kick Kobey's shoe back onto his square he scowls I stare into his eyes until he cracks a smile on his eczema covered cheeks Charles breaks from his teacher's tight fist grip runs into the classroom we hear shouting and laughter pour into the hallway as McCrutchen yells and chases him back through the slamming door.

Cracker

*saltine skin,
internally bland*

Teacher: What does it mean when the author calls Sarah plain? Is she flying somewhere?
(smiles and laughter. effect achieved)

Student: I think it means she's plain, like she's just a plain old cracker.
(hushed ooohs. teacher turns red in the face)

Teacher: Kobey, you cannot use that word in this class!

Student: I didn't mean you Ms. Murray! I mean she's just a cracker. What's wrong with cracker?

The first time I hit a child
I earned the name,
wooden rulers on his bent, ample bottom,
his mother's phone call in my ear
Please! Please whoop him good!
my own hand shaking
first with fear, as I put an object to his flesh
then anger
as I saw him take the first lick,
and smile.

I hit again, and harder.

*I am become as colorless as cotton,
white pus from a wound, sheets slapping skin,
a blank, a plain face, a ghost, an absence of space, cracker, master,
whip cracker*

School Uniform

*LA1e. The student will use **context clues** to **infer** the meanings of unfamiliar words*

We are lining up for lunch,
and I've called the rows rightly,
satisfied with the procedure as the last
student stands straight on the block,
hands in pockets.

Ms. Murray, I gotta use it,
my tallest boy grimace-grins at me.
Use what, Shun?

It!

I become conscious of my pulse.
I don't understand, what do you need?

You know, I gotta yoooooze it!
knocking his knees together,
he grabs at his crotch,
and I feel myself blush.

*

My assistant principle brings an aide
to watch my room, mid-lesson.
They tell my class
to pull out a worksheet, but I
have given them none, not taught
to teach that way, and so they'll draw
until I return.

Mrs. Adams leads me down the hall
to the empty room at the end
where my principle waits.

I've done something wrong.

My lesson plans don't say
the right words, and she's angry
when I don't understand
what she wants me to change.
When I ask a question
she stares me down, says,
Do not question my authority.

*

Antoneskeya peed her pants yesterday,
my first day in the classroom.
As the pledge of allegiance
crackled over the loud speaker
I devoted many thoughts
to the positioning of my body
in relation to the classroom (never
turn your back on the ocean)
and finally settled in the front.

Facing the flag in the corner,
the whole of the rows of desks in my peripheral—
I startled like a horse
pulling a carriage without blinders
as the little girl collapsed from her middle,
folding as if punched

then head popped back up to face me,
instant tears in her eyes,
hands over the still spreading darkness
below the zipper of her khaki pants.
I made a mistake,
she whispered, holding onto herself,
and I did too, not knowing
the response, sidestepping into my teacher's desk,
spilling papers, large beast throwing
its passengers.

Scrub Oak

“...it was not natural to have come from there...”

—Gertrude Stein,
Everybody's Biography

In childhood,
I watched our cranes
from the freeway, great necks
dipped in the wind over tankers, fishing
out containers from Asia. Gulls circled, chattering
as metallic skeletons carefully teathed
rust boxes to the shore

∞

Oakland says: I am a railroad terminus, organ cage
of meeting place and perforation, track marks
on the land, wood slatted
to the skin

∞

Earthquake to fire,
our flaxen hills shake and scar,
cleared lands punctuated with the exclamations
of exposed chimneys

and I remember the various flights,
car-bound exodus through our concrete maze
as stacked levels collapsed, or were engulfed
in smoke years later, lives
wrought by elements as randomly,

as naturally as our coastal corridor erects
giant redwoods determined to reach sky, invites
stunted scrub to scatter over ridge
and field, to take the burned ground
with their interwoven snarls of scratching leaves

∞

Oakland,
I miss you,
reminded in Mississippi
as I teach a social studies lesson
on trade, *im-* and *ex-* port, of a city where everything moves,
where invasive kudzu does not minutely swallow
abandoned store fronts and my student's homes,
that a place can become an action, location
of change, land that rebuilds, and stays same,

and we, city of *no there there*, built a statue-sign
in acknowledgment, out
of defiance

∞

I want to ask her,
fresh from the loss of childhood's
stagnant memories:

what is the use
of being *from*
anywhere? We are all
experts on importance. On what it means
to be taken into a home
held and catalyzed in its warm mixture,
then sent out,
into the world again

Indonesia Burning

I read the email that you died
in a country twelve time zones away
from the spring-time flood plains
of the Mississippi, where you
removed your seatbelt in the thrill
of new love, turning to talk
closer to his body, watching each
other and not the cotton
flowers purpling the fields, the
feathery stalks of corn, fluttering.

My van. I close my mouth and pay for my time,
heave my backpack's weight over shoulders.
I walk over flower offerings
through Ubud's incense air,
the smoke curls from shrines. The driver
smiles as I climb to the back row
over the other travelers

my body is thrown with each curve,
teeth vibrate on the cobbled streets

he was not drinking, it was Sunday, church day, you talked
of your classroom,
how you would miss the children calling you Miss D.

we pass Monkey Forest, grey faces staring from the trees
the van careens

the last thing you said: you couldn't wait
to see your students again

I feel the car ride two wheels, leaning
toward the steep terrace
of rice paddies

your body breaking through glass

I try not to think
of the arc of flight
stains in grass

stare instead at sunset burning the sky
setting the watery fields on fire,
talk to you in my head

Do you remember what you said
about hope?

and I see you smile

Is that where you are?

I should like to think this could be what death is:
you have burst forth into the fire of hope
that to die is to live inside

I know I won't see you again

(still)

I talk to you
as I watch the sky turning
different blues in the cloudy dark

Women dip their cone-covered heads,
birds in the grass,
shift rice from husk in swirling bowls,
silhouettes in the sun's ending rays,
rice paddies shivering in the flames.
Stone faces of gods
flicker in candlelight, stare down
into my shielded eyes,
wink their fingertips, dance on lotus covered feet—

I live, and you do not, and so I cry
in a van loud with German, Bahasa,
half a globe away from the crop
dusters disturbing the flocks
of birds in the fields,
resting for a moment in their migration
north over the rivulet of highway
which hugs the rising snake of our state,
where you flew for a furious instant
before the earth made its case
where we watch the country drown,
not sure if we want the levees to hold,
or to break

Te Dejo

—after “*Con tu retrato,*” *Delmira Agustini*

we live in these pictures,
more distanced than the furthest stars,
a distance unrivaled by any outer object.

 this mutual idea of ourselves
jets out in two divergences, long lines
of my idea, my idea, *mine*
take us deeper into flatness,
four-cornered plane of interpretation
- eye crinkle, jaw slack, chin nudge -
 we're borne along a narrow axis
of joined rays widening to a gape,
to loss of grace,

 and I leave you
alone in the frame, subsumed
by pale flames
 curling the edges of hands held
out to one another, swimming
blind through clouds in a blackness
 profound as sea and rift

 mute and cold
 rise of our understanding of /
needs and / wants and the life
 we aroused in each other's plans
 stains shadows beneath our eyes
in sleep lost to compounded miles
and hours, days of difference
 stretching sick

 between plotted dots,
constellations of force formed
by *try, try, try* by innate
 love warped and molded
 to perimeters of possibility
we hold ourselves inside the hinged choices
of attachment, alive only
 in the frame, alone in eye-line we

unravel in gravity, in grief /'s loosed
 into the endlessness

 of a stagnant screen

Del Resuelo del Desierto

—after “*La Extranjera*,” *Gabriela Mistral*

The desert's turned me stranger to myself,
too many nights along a washout
line or big moon lane, keeping company with
scrub and spines, so I become a mirror
of saguaro arms—dry, island-like.
Life must be thin when there's no density
of water and his skin against my skin becomes
a torture of want and enervation, leeching sweat
in finger tracks across my chest—all that's left
is the brush of salt-dust on cheek and brow,
tongue turned gummy over teeth and lips.
Should he linger in my bed we'll shrivel
as salsola planted one atop the other, blanched
in a bath of ash and legs wrapped round hips,
uprooted shank bones of clinging grass, bleached
in the heat of this desert breath sucking us
white, burning us to stone.

The Program

1.

God grant me: this open flat valley,
cactus forked like lightening returning to the sky.
The air absent moisture, dust dry and dark on my skin.

2.

the serenity: of muted sunrise over a parking lot,
surrounded by creosote and yucca plants,
endless plateau framed by the flat backdrop of desert mountains.
My sister parks our car. My brother, impassive, heads for
the adobe buildings, his fingers
twitching.

3.

To accept the name tags seems
the final acknowledgement
that we belong here.
The woman behind the desk checks us in;
we surrender
wallets, gum, cell phones.
With large eyes she directs us
to the orientation meeting
in the next room.

Our feet pad quietly on carpet.

4.

Things appear as strained for the rest of the families
scattered throughout the room: expressions range
from dazed and exposed, to masked and enraged

we accept our schedules and binders
we listen to speakers explain
we gratefully visit the cafeteria during breaks
we smoke outside and do not talk
we wait, unsure, to see her

Each face around us seems to say,
I know

5.

I cannot change

My name is, and I am.

In group we sit in a circle,
talk about our “loved one,” the paths
that converged and descended to bring them here,
the parts we played.

Acceptable feeling words written on whiteboard:

*hope, fear, love, shame, joy, guilt,
sad, anger, lonely, willing,
grateful, pain*

Today I feel

6.

courage: ebbs, crests in fear

To end the day we stand in a circle and clasp hands,
chant the prayer.
I feel my sister shake, firm herself,
and squeeze.

7.

to change; the day bursts
into the electric blue
that begins the night, blooms
a full, detailed moon, lucent pearl and craters,
that rises from behind the jagged mountain edge
and sweeps its white and burning course
over the blackened sky.

I run along a path in this effusion of light.
Rabbits cross the trail,
coyotes howl through the dark;
my blood crashes into my heart
and tests the limits of arteries,
it radiates oxygen through veins

8.

The things that hurt before
still hurt today

9.

I can speak.
She and I sit knee to knee
inside a circle of the others, waiting,
watching. Damn therapy.
A counselor prompts me to begin.
(she cannot change)
I must speak.

Mom, when you drink, I feel ____
Formula cuts the pain
I speak.

10.

*and wisdom
to be raw
to be desert, cool and dry
the stark expansive mountains
purity of the body
the wet flesh
inside the cactus
and wisdom, dismantle all the spines*

11.

To know:
we have said the things
that were not said,
we have loved as well as feared,
and the things that happened
could still happen,
that I can change,
that we might never change.

Today I feel

12.

the difference

There are signs
I notice as we leave.
As we drove in, a wooden placard read:
"Expect a miracle."
As we exit, the reverse
says, "You are a miracle."
Between siblings,
we roll our eyes.

Car drives through sunset,
Sonoran desert, waxing moon breaks into sky.
God grant me.
The difference is between what we expect,
and what we recognize.

God grant me.
*The darkness is slipping away,
I am the light already shining.*

Park Dust

My sister washes our dog's organs,
plucks each red globe and oblong shape
from the slit-open cavity of the belly
until she's empty, only lung, then rubs
each piece clean with soft thumbs
and cloth, removing rust, sticky gunk,
shells of hardened blood, surfaces buffed
smooth and bright, and my brother
is here, too, collecting each in a silver
bowl of ice while I stroke the slip
of long ears, furred nose with slightest
heat of breath \\I am muted\\
as they palm each back to pulsing.
Anna begins to puzzle Luna's torso whole,
Dan handing her heart, spleen, guts—
they start to argue positions, connection
of which one where and all the tubes,
my hands become urgent on snout
between eyes which open to a brown
glazed profoundly recessed blue, blond
fold of brow cocking a question
as my siblings shout and stand, organs
in each of their hands \\I'm mutely,waving\\
they urgently begin packing the torso
back together, quick decisions then
sewing as the head on my knee slows
and stops moving, loses heat and I scream
 \\why did you have to\\ there's motions,
pushing against her body, mouths opening
they shoulder-sink \\tried to prolong
and killed instead\\ why didn't I –

Without Reservation

Our bowels evacuate themselves
when we die, muscles
we don't know we hold,
relax.

My grandmother went quietly
in the night, not to inconvenience anyone
with nursing home thoughts.
It's unacceptable
that this manner of death
should be a metaphor for her life.

Is it grotesque to think
of the grainy shit-smear on her pink
nightgown?

Perhaps that's how it should be,
closer to what we are

I was glad she was cremated.
We knew each other through plastic
slip covers, keeping clean
the white couch beneath, so that I feel ashamed
to think of her body—
not the public view,
veined hands, bulging knuckles book-ending loose rings—
but these places of excretion,
the area
where my mother emerged,
where the soul's hold lets go;
 here the family tree a long line
of perineal skin pried apart, internal emptying,
 so we enter
in the same feculent manner
 that marks our end.

Rubber Stamp

jade is the easiest stone to eat
you curl yourself inside amber
let the honey-rock tumble you
gutless self-fossilization

you unbent a safety-pin
tapped through the egg shell
on either side, and blew

the clotted yolk is lovely
could you leave nothing
but the container, could you
wash away the mottled sun
embarrassed:
by the drip of orange
running down the perfectly austere side
the puncture wounds it took
to empty
that you were not hollow from the start

Acuéstame

—after translating “*Voy a Dormir*,” *Alfonsina Storni*

we speak with the stick
of after-come on thighs,
voices clog, gel, shrink-in.
what is it between us
that makes him sleep
in the middle of a fight, close
eyes on tears as though
they were a chain of dew
stilling the breath.

we have again and again
the eruption of something small
and new between us, eruption
from the throat, rupture
of the chest—I want him
to fill me fat, open my hips
and graft himself inside,
balloon of love and kicking pin
of anger let out in a flood
between my thighs, flood he
slides himself into, ocean
swollen, body blind.

our mouths shape words
but accents flatten tongues,
nipples desist their erections.
his fingers notch my ribs,
paths of the back curving
to breast, thumbs me awake
to forget. the need rocks us
from below, lays us down
with its request.

IV.

Dudar

"everything you loved passes, is forgotten..."

—Jose Asuncion Silva, "A Una Pessimista"

It's not so passive, this leeching
of you
from my pores

I held you tight
against my throat
before,

hoping to push you through skin
so as to swallow

I asked you

to flatten my lungs
with your body on top of mine
then lift me

thrill of being

a single weight

what's forgotten

are not
the things I loved

but

the desire
for them

doubt extracts

shadows from the blood
attachment to

a future

this is not a story

that ends

NOTES

“‘The Battle of the Sexes,’ Belmont, 1975”: was widely researched. Many of the details were specifically drawn from the articles “Ruffian breaks her leg in racing's 'Battle of the Sexes'” by Jason Zinoman, which appeared in the UK’s *The Observer*, on Saturday 6 January 2007 and “Ruffian remembered” by Randy Moss, which was published by ESPN.com on June 5, 2007. Video of the race is available online.

“Claims Race” is in honor of my father and his father, who lived together and raced horses throughout my dad’s adolescence at River Downs Race Track in Cincinnati, Ohio. This poem is largely based on oral family history.

“The Nomads” is inspired by the year I lived in west Africa, specifically by the Festival au Desert I attended in January 2004, long before the current war in Mali would have made such travel impossible.

“Fatima” takes place in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. Fatima was the closest daughter of the prophet Muhammad, a figure widely venerated by Muslims today.

“Braided”: *abruni* is the Twi word for *white-person* or *foreigner* (they are nearly synonymous ideas in Ghana); women never reveal their lower backs in public in Ghana, as it is thought to be the most sexual part of a woman’s body, much as Americans would never (well, almost never) expose breasts in public.

“North Becomes South” uses a quote from the travel writer, Rolf Potts, that was overheard at a writer’s conference panel. The quote does not exist in print.

*“At the Berkeley Marina” references “Ella se siente...” by Alaide Foppa, a Guatemalan poet who was kidnapped and disappeared by the Army of Guatemala in 1980. Her poems have not yet been published in English.

“Cross Road Blues” references events of the 1927 flood of the Mississippi River, and the national attention it brought to race relations at the time. Research for the poem comes from *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* by John M. Barry and William Alexander Percy’s autobiography *Lanterns On The Levee - Recollections Of A Planter's Son*.

“Cross Road Blues”, “Good Teaching”, “After Lunch” and “School Uniform” all use 4th grade Mississippi State Standards from the Language Arts, Math and Social Studies frameworks as epigraphs. These poems are based on experiences I had while teaching with Teach for America for two years in Greenville, Mississippi.

“Scrub Oak”: The full quote referenced throughout the poem is:

“...what was the use of my having come from Oakland it was not natural to have come from there yes write about it if I like or anything if I like but not there, there is no there there.” *Everybody's Biography*, Gertrude Stein, 1937.

“Indonesia Burning” is an elegy in memory of Whitney Davidson, who taught with Teach for America in the south delta region of Mississippi from 2008-2010. The poem is also in memory of Shona McEntyre, though not narratively. Both friends passed away in May 2010.

*“Te Dejo” is in response to “Con tu Retrato” by Delmira Agustini, of Uruguay. Agustini, a feminist, is largely considered one of the greatest Latin American poets of the 20th century. Her selected poems are available in English.

*“Del Resuelo del Desierto” is in response to “La Extranjera,” by Gabriela Mistral, a Chilean poet and the first Latina American to win the Nobel Prize in literature, in 1945. Many of her books appear in translation.

“The Program” structurally utilizes The Serenity Prayer throughout its sections, as well as a loose translation of biblical verse 1 John 2:8 in the final lines.

*“Acuéstame” is in response to “Voy a Dormir” by Alfonsina Storni. This was the last poem of the beloved Argentine poet, who walked into the sea the day this poem was published. Several of her books are available in English.

*“Dudar” is written in response to Jose Asuncion Silva’s poem "A Una Pessimista.” Works by the Colombian poet are largely available in Spanish.

*I wrote each of these poems in response to translations I did of the Spanish poems specified in the epigraphs. The responses are sometimes very direct, and sometimes only loosely attached to the original, translated poems by language or idea.

