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THRESHOLD

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

Corinna McClanahan Schroeder

May 2011

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ABSTRACT

The poems contained in this thesis were written and substantially revised over the last three years. Central to the thesis is an exploration of various thresholds or transitions, both literal and metaphorical. These transitions include the main speaker's journey from childhood to adulthood, from the American Midwest to the American South, and from singleness to marriage. This thesis also contains poems about the journeys of others, from the Irish *Papar* to a runaway teenager to Rapunzel, and these journeys echo the main speaker's journeys.

Collectively, many of these poems deal with notions of enclosure and escape, of protection and danger. Anchoritic impulses coexist with poems of travel across foreign landscapes. Place is an essential component of the thesis, and local environment—both natural and manmade—influences the mood and lyrical meditations of many of these poems. What is possible to be expressed on the island of Maui is different than what is possible to be expressed at an English train station.

The thesis is ordered in a loosely chronological fashion based on the main speaker's life. The first section explores fairy tales and nursery rhymes, adolescence, and the power of story; the second section contains poems of isolation and a need for meaning or feeling; the third section involves poems of excess; the fourth section explores the notion of home; the fifth section investigates the tension between new adulthood and memories of an increasingly distant past; and the sixth section takes up early marriage and its struggles.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deepest appreciation to my advisor, Professor Beth Ann Fennelly, and to my committee members, Dr. Ann Fisher-Wirth and Dr. Mary Hayes. I am also grateful to John and Renée Grisham for the three years of funding and tuition remission generously provided by the Grisham Fellowship.

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I

TO THE HEROINE

Keep your braid in the tower already.
Nobody believes you mistook
the prince's call for the witch.
A baritone's no cackle.

You think I don't know you?
I know the tangle of each morning,
my fingers thick in unrelenting curl.
I know the dull ache of bearing

a braid too long. Our gold hair glistens
in its death. You've never seen a man
except for him—so why the haste,
the *bring me scarves for a ladder and I'll leave?*

There are many square jaws, tapered
hips, taut hamstrings. This one,
though, he was creeping in the woods,
eavesdropping on your vocal scales,

waiting for the key—*Rapunzel, Rapunzel,*
let down your hair. What, you think
I haven't known wait? Every daughter
has a bedroom she'd like to escape,

but as much as this masonry
keeps you in, it keeps the risk away.
It's desert ahead. A shorn head.
Two spoonfuls in the center of you.

That's right, twins. And the prince—
he'll follow still, blind, thorn scars
across his lids. Bear out this interim
with all the other girls who smolder

under mother-roofs. For now,
be glad you're safe. Stash the scarves
he brought—you can lower yourself.
You'll learn there's worse than wait.

MOTHER GOOSE LEAVES THE CHILDREN HOME

It rains, it pours. Our old man snores.

We sneak upstairs, capsize
the chairs, and hide behind the bed skirt's
shade. We take stock of supplies:
one flashlight beam to disclose six eyes,

three wooden spoons for drums or food,
and a pile of pennies in the middle.
Brother keeps watch. Sister and I
guess heads or tails, fiddle
with the mattress fluff pushing through the riddle

of the crisscrossed frame above our heads.

We talk of Mr. Peter
who keeps his wife in a pumpkin shell.
Curled near the old heater,
Brother sleeps like the lotus eaters

in that story Mother read. Granddaddy
Long Legs hobbles by,
but Sister and I are not afraid.
Rain pitter-patters. "Why
was Mary quite contrary?" The sky

might be cold bathwater, dissolved soap.

"It's just a story," I say.
"What about the old woman who lives
with her kids in a shoe?" I splay
the flashlight beam, generate day

in our cave. Sister stares, and Brother
yawns. I bang my spoon.
When we lift the bed skirt later, we emerge
from the silver lining of the womb.
The window cradles a crescent moon.

SHELVER AT THE LOVELAND LIBRARY

On school nights, I pushed a cart through narrow rows,
reshelved what people returned, Dewey's decimals
guiding the wheel-spin. The county branch library hid
in an old strip mall—shops concrete, low-ceilinged—

on the town's main drag. Our neighbors: Hadder
Hardware, sunk by recession; a window-barred
jewelry repair; and Bonnie Lynn's Bakery.
Out back, the Little Miami's flood plain, dumpsters,
the loitering perfume of burnt sugar, stale cake.

Near-sighted old men came in to read the *Enquirer*,
the *Sun*, the *Times*. Their wives pecked at the rows
of books-on-tape. Children spun through the spinning
racks while their mothers pocketed romances

into paper bags. There were the yellers, unhappy
with fines. Those who couldn't find what
they wanted, those who didn't know what to find.
At night, the lonesome man who slunk through the aisles
like yolk on a skillet's shine. I didn't mind

my ordering work. I breathed the books, the older
the better. Oily, woody, spiced like mushrooms
or vanilla. When the librarians weren't looking,
I pulled stiff hardbacks from the top shelf, popped

their spines. On the inside cover's spread,
the brown spots of an avocado's inner fruit. Mold
bloomed no matter what we did. I haunted
that floor, so motionless that the lights cut out.
The millions of printed pages raised my hair,

and I waited in the opacity, glad of it. Each night,
I hung the "Closed" sign, then braced for the metal slam
of books falling from the drop box to the receiving bin.
Sometimes, I think, all night they tumbled in.

READING EDITH HAMILTON, 9TH GRADE

Girls splayed by boars

and bulls and swans.
A hoof jammed
into the tight of a back,
a beak fastening
around a neck.

Girls sealed inside laurels and reeds.
One girl, even, pulled
into a stranger's car

and the mother left behind,
poppies wilting.

That winter, between bells,
upperclassmen boys
jostled me in the halls.

Their smell sharpened
to musk.
Their shoulders spread,
eyes dark as dried blood.

And that ache
in the pit of me.

In the parking lot,
every day at 2:55, engine rev
and muffler breath,
tires peeling out.

I stood on the sidewalk,
coat zipped high.

YOU TELL ME OF THE WINTERS IN LARAMIE

And it's the lot out behind the funeral home
that catches me, those boyhood afternoons
you and your brother spent there at the cusp
of a frozen bluebell field where piles
of plowed snow hulked. David with his pick
and you with your shovel hollowing caves
in the mounds. Breath whorled blue on the air
before vanishing, the snow packed tight
from mooncap knees. Your father at work
on a sermon for Zion Lutheran, your mother's
tumor still unformed, you worked wordlessly,
as you do now, each chamber just large enough
to crawl into. Snow groaned all around.
At dusk, the sky taut as a wound's dressing,
you and David slipped back across the street
to fill buckets at the kitchen sink. Your loads
splashed into that day's cave, you were ready
for sleep, knowing water's nature—how
it would freeze overnight and solidify the snow.
Boys build forts which they keep long after
their forts' demise. Yours, husband, a glinting
chamber that could hold your body till spring.

OHIO DRIVERS ED

Follow the serpentine river roads
toward the Little Miami's lip. Pass
through the sycamores, their molting
whitewashed limbs. These are curves
I can still ride harder than a man's hips,
roads my parents never knew I drove.
Feel that wind, saturated, undercut
with vespertine chill. Let it frizz
your hair. Turn up the Smashing
Pumpkins or the Cowboy Junkies.
That's river musk on your teeth. See
how the lightning bugs burn their bulbs
just ahead? In the rearview, bats unstash
your wake. Now the humming bridge
in your fingertips and thighs. Learn
that darkening vein underneath, how
how it pushes and pushes toward
main stem waters. The truss will bear
your weight ten thousand times.

II

GATHERING

listening to Andrei Ivanovich play Chopin's "Sonata No. 2 in B-Flat Minor"

Before the boy vanishes, before
he even slips his feet into the skates,

the crust of pond ice fissures.
A low sound, like the slow rip of denim.

Before thunder roils overhead, all
kettle crash and doom—the storm

already come, already half-gone—
a woman at a sink of soapy water

wipes her brow to a distant rumble.
Feel how the energy pulses, far-off,

gathering, how knots of crocuses hum
before their petals fan into January corollas.

How a mouse on its hind legs twitches
its nose at the oats laid out, its reflection

in the shine of the spring-loaded bar.
How in foreplay, before the foregone,

fingers climb the knobs of a naked spine,
and in the opening bars

of Chopin's *marche funèbre*, a foot presses
the *una corda* pedal, the piano's steel strings

tight-lipped and trembling—

JESUIT ANATOMY FOR FRESHMAN NURSING MAJORS

Xavier University

In lab, the others girls and I picked plastic-wrapped cats from the stack. Mine was stiff and clean-shaven, wet as defrosted meat. I named him Boots for the fur tufts left

on his feet and placed him belly-up on the tray. The formaldehyde stung my eyes as I scissored his breastplate, pulled his ribs apart, and pinned his skin to flanks. He was cold beneath

my latex gloves, his eyes marbled glass. Our heavy Book of Hours offered diagrams for each system—I recognized nothing, the body unfathomable broken apart. That night,

at campus Mass, I waited while the others ate the host and drank the wine. My fingers smelled like the skin's underside. I spent every Tuesday afternoon that fall trying to name

Boots' parts: first, the yellow adipose tissue like cottage cheese, the tarsus and sacrum bones, caudal tail vertebrae like a bracelet chain. Then, the gray muscle—teres major

and linea alba, tagged and mislabeled. I hated those slow surgeries with a blunt scalpel, the instructor pacing like a censor, the girls all chatter, and me in the back row

prodding Boots' delicate body. I stayed after-hours to finish alone. Downstairs, med students worked through the thin-veined night in the cadaver morgue. By Thanksgiving,

we'd covered the ribbed straw of trachea, deflated balloons of small intestines, the tough brown fruit of liver. Our final: subclavian arteries infused with red dye, the Superior Vena Cava

colored blue. The vascular lines required a steady hand, but the fine, white nerves called for a saint's persistence, slow breath: brachial plexus underneath the pecs, phrenic

of the diaphragm, sciatic which descends the thigh. The nerves like gossamer, and still, each one a bundle of something smaller. I couldn't dig deep enough. God, I tried. Last lab,

I tucked Boots into his disposal bag and trailed after the girls.
In my pocket, the tight square of a university transfer form—
above us, the stars like a rash across the winter sky.

PRAYER FOR TUNDRA LAND

After the Pápar, Irish monks who supposedly set sail from the west coast of Ireland and settled on the shores of Iceland as early as the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. Upon the arrival of the Norwegians, they set out again to maintain their isolation, eventually coming across Greenland.

Comfort us in gale lash.

In Your wisdom, wider than star pitch,
You've led warriors to this grizzle coast.

Far as we've come from Scotia,
You've deemed it not far enough. Your will
be done. Father, forgive us
our passage fears. Remember us—holy
men, Your anchoritic servants
who would forsake this settled world
of coin purse and battle axe.

Remember, Father, our first launch,
the nights we rowed bloody-palmed,
our beards stiff with frozen spray,
to find rock lonely enough for prayer.

The black waves lifted our Carrachs
and sucked them back into the terror
of the troughs. Our will strained
like the boats' wicker ribs. Father,
remember the many brothers who died
for love of You, snared by the waters
we take to. Thick swell of Your judgment
hand, vastness of horizon,
unfathomable depth of grace. Deliver us.

HAIBUN FOR THE GRANTHAM STATION PLATFORM

That summer, island-strange and out of sync, I mapped myself—heather-heavy moorland to the north, the Fens just east. I sat at the station on clouded afternoons, the metal bench cold beneath the corrugated overhang. My fingers clenched their cardboard coffee cup. The clock's numbers flipped their white legs on their board, East Coast trains squealing in from King's Cross. Nottingham lay down the latticework of track to the right, Peterborough left, and every hour, another train ambled east on the Poacher Line.

When the numbers ripened and the air grew unsteady, I stepped out into a sky netted with cable, the world just lines curving out of sight. The hum become a whir became a roar, and at the lip of yellow paint, as near to the platform edge as I could stand, I let that express train bullet by.

Its wind opened my throat,
a ravishing, and day-old papers
fluttered in its wake.

THE HERMIT OF INIS GLUAIRE FINDS A SWAN PLUME

After the Irish legend "The Children of Lir"

They settled to the island's swatch of lake,
the milky drapes of their wings tucked back,
and called him Mo Cháemmóg, *beloved*. He learned
of their nine hundred years of plumage and beak
brought on by a stepmother's curse, and still
they could speak, not fully one creature or the other.
Three seas, three hundred years awash at each
and still a Prince of Connacht had to marry
a Princess of Mumhan to unknot their swan shapes.
Lir's children, they came to wait. Whole days,
they sang, the ancient hulls of their bodies gliding
the etched lake, their voices like wet bog wind
or strings of rain or salmon slipping up the Moy.
He couldn't say which. At dusk, they hooked
the staffs of their necks around his wrist.
He rubbed his thumbs against their black moon
cheeks—there was room enough to live.
When he learned the wedding had been arranged,
he summoned the swan children to shore, ready
to see them to see them back to what they'd been—
children of a god gone under the hills. Quick
as afternoon storms gather and break, molted feathers
skimmed the lake, but on the pebbled beach
lay bodies with ashen tufts of hair, arboreal ribs
under spotted grey skin, knotted feet.
What was avian now bore the ache of centuries.

My children, he called to them. But they were ready.

Our torment is nearly ended. They told him to dig,
and they sang, their voices cracked leaves,

breaking schist. He bowed in sorrow to their grave,

and when he looked up, they'd turned children
again—blonde and radiant. A momentary vision.

Then they were gone, the ancient human ones

returned and dead. He washed the loose bags
of their bodies and wrapped them in corpse clothes.

Over the grave, he spread branches of wild broom.

Now he ruffles a stray feather against his wrist
and smoothes its barbs. The silence of the hermitage rings.

INKED

I went alone, bared the hourglass of my back
to big Richard whose fingers spelled T-H-I-S

I-S I-T when he fisted his hands together.
“Won’t hurt,” he grunted, and I wanted to say,

“Richard, I’m here for hurt.” He pressed the gun
to me, its needles thrusting in and out faster

than I could separate, faster than being fucked.
Henna-colored ink pulsed under my skin,

and I felt the shape take form, the circle spiral in.
I was wet with it—with that much feeling.

Sweat under my breasts, on the back
of my neck. My body gave itself to needles.

My vision blistered with light. Then it was over.
At home, I peeled the dressing away to stare

at the welt. How strange that we have to remind
the body of what it can do, of what it can say.

AT SKEGNESS

Day-tripper, I followed the crowd down Lumley Road
past fish-and-chip stalls and postcard stands.

Shop awnings extended against rain, and still, the thrill
of holiday. Where the smell of grease ceded to salt breeze,

the pavement slumped in sand, but no horizon focused
through the spill of North Sea fog—only carnival songs

to scratch the brume. I trudged thirty opaque meters,
then the ocean swirled like a ghost at my feet. Boreal spray

on my neck, my braid wet, the most northerly water
I'd ever seen. No one followed me out. I stood

and breathed. What is it about the ocean—the waves' lap
and retreat, their low moon-pulled hum? I'd always believed

we learn ourselves in what we see. And this—a largeness
hidden from me. Back at the station, I waited coldly

for the Midlands train. My body swayed as if rocked by—no,
there's the lie. My rocking body was not moved by, was nothing like,

the soft violence that churns the sea. Nothing called to me.

III

MATING RITUALS OF THE BIOLUMINESCENT

Near the Malay village of Kampung Kuantan, male fireflies coruscate in synchrony, thousands of *kelip-kelip* clustered on each mangrove, blinking three abdominal blinks per second

to summon a mate. They pulse in unison, constellating a bend of the Selangor as tourists in the twilight reach their fingers from boat railings to catch the low green glow.

~

June through September, for three days after a full moon, female Bermuda glow worms rise from the sandy bottoms and gather in the island's shallows. At fifty-six minutes

past sunset, they swim circles, spitting out their eggs in emerald clouds. The large-eyed males arrive, flashing and flashing, ejecting their sperm into the sea.

~

Before we married, when I studied Keats and Yeats and he studied stage light, I drove to his apartment, the sky ready to rip into storm, curled birch leaves eddying against my car. He stood in his door,

the frame of his narrow body framed, the world gone dark, a strobe light beating white behind him, and I swear he looked like lightning then, his fevered flicker drawing me up, drawing me in.

ON NOT KISSING WHITNEY

We lived in the attic of a frat house behind
a peeling red door, behind the scratched
initials of all the boys who'd lived there
all the years before. Our lofted beds floated

like boats. Our bodies lulled to sleep
under a raftered sky. At night, the ones
who'd stayed for summer poured us cups
of warm beer. They came to smell

the shampoo scent, to see our underwear
dangling from the beams. Red lace cups,
webbed fishnets, and the garters
that we didn't know how to wear hung

like underwater stalactites wanting to be
touched. When the boys left, we snuck
to the quad, smoked the dorm keeper's
Virginia Slims—wands, long and thin.

During minimum wage days, we cleaned
the cobweb silence of dormitory rooms
so we didn't have to move back home.
She scrubbed pockmarked desks bolted

to concrete walls, wife-beater clinging
to her treble clef tattoo. I mopped
tiled squares, my tie-dye sticky by afternoon.
In each room, two naked mattresses. Above

facing bureaus, two mirrors reflecting infinitely.
Lazy light fell through the windows,
and we slipped our hands into the dust-clotted
rays as if our skin would let them pass.

On break, the wood-slatted bench singed
our clean-shaven thighs, and crab grass, over-
grown, scratched the skin of our ankle bones.
We slicked our blonde hair with lemon juice

until our crowns blazed phosphorescent.
She talked sex, bawdy as any man I knew,
and I didn't miss home in that lull that felt
like years when we were wordless, kissing

cigarettes, terrified of how the lonesome space
loosed us to wander like trespassers—
or prisoners. And all the while, the crepe petals
of peonies atrophied in the fevered air.

INDIANA, WHILE IT LASTED

That week's boy in the passenger seat, she drove them out of town at dusk. Past the fluorescent lights of truck stops, their twitching signs. Whole fields of gold tassels undulated in the wind, an accordion of small birds. That's how things were. A tractor path between cloying rows of corn. The boy's hand drumming his thigh until, the car stopped, they thumbed for zippers and straps. The metal buckle dug its jaw into her knee, and she touched his skinny shoulders, the sparse hair that traced from navel down. Ketchup packets littered the floorboards, the gas station sodas seeping through their paper cups. Mosquitoes bit the undersides of their arms. Still the sun threw purple light up from the west. A late summer then of hands and tongues and thirst. Their eyes watered in the pollen-heavy air. She drove them home, her shaking hands steady on the steering wheel.

RITUAL WITH SEVEN SELVES

The washer fills like a well, and she casts them in again, delicates zipped into netted bags, buttons threaded through their loops. Cold waters purl and rise, bubbles frothing like spells. The safety latch long broken, she watches her selves slosh, each one rising up, then drowning again. Red dress, red dress of a goose-bumped night and an endless goblet of wine that made her spill all her best lines like scarves from the jester's sleeve. Dark hands reach up from the well's underside. Float of sweater, its noose of a neck that held her head in place, her heavy tongue. Her mouth was a broken bell that day. Cloak worn against the rain when she went walking in the woods, the trees wet-barked and no pebbles dropped to lead her home. Jeans, too, mud-cuffed and stretched beyond shape. Backless top in which she swallowed mushrooms with milk. Mermaids filled the sink, their scales coarse as salt, and wolves came to the door and knocked. Flash of diaphanous legs amid the many haggard sleeves—stockings ripped by the charcoal cat she keeps. Nightgown, last, of turbulent dreams, of a poisoned Red Delicious and spindles that spin a girl to sleep. She leans her head and breathes. Let the waters ravage each seam. Let every sock be a step in reverse, every stripe the sure hand of a clock. Let the basket spin to oblivion, the water's last drop flung free, the well run clean.

MAIDENS IN THE QUEEN'S COURT OF IMMORTALITY

We ate everything. Spreads of star apples, kumquats, blood oranges,
West African miracle fruit. Ruffle-necked waiters served us yak cheese

and truffle-stuffed Brie. On the table, lobster tails and escargot
in bone china, a dozen wedding cakes whose tiers fell like kingdoms.

We rioted, parading the captured bride-and-grooms as if revolution
were at hand, then brandished the sous chef's knives to guillotine

their heads. Dancers arrived in harem pants, coin bras, with finger cymbals.
Their hips wheeled, stomachs undulating like boa constrictors swallowing

endless meals, to the quiver of the oud-player's chords. We stuffed
the dancers' purses, pocketed secrets in their honeycombed ears,

but still hungry, we had to bring in other naked bodies to lay stiff
while we chop-sticked sushi off their leaf-lined skin. The jewelers came

when the human-plates were cleared and sold us after-dinner rubies.
Diamond chandeliers dripped from the ceiling's ribs. Women plaited

our jasmine-scented hair, painted our nails "Pearl Sin." Our lips rouged,
feather boas twisted around our necks, we handwrote betrayal plays

for the night staff to perform. Sipping L'esprit de Courvoisier and French
champagne, we were bored as jade so we paid boys to row us in gondolas

until their palms ached. One by one, the stars burnt out, and the boats
grew holes. The mirrors held wrinkled faces, and we still weren't full.

LAST NIGHT IN EVANSVILLE

She drives to the lip of the Ohio. The mud-eaten boat ramp
hides half a mile down in the birches' half-sloughed skin.

She's lived with this town for three years, has clutched
the bank of the river like these southside doublewides.

America's family town, the billboards say. They forget
the meth lab that blows up once a year or the men

who supper on cases of Milwaukee's Best—like the one
who took her out that first summer. Twenty, burnt-out.

Couldn't figure out why she moved *here* for school. City
of Whirlpool refrigerator-makers, city of signs that promise

a pack of Wildhorse cigarettes for \$2.79, city of the shit-
out-of-luck. Another mosquito summer, and the swing set

she and her friends pulled from the water one stoned night
still straddles the bank. She listens to its hinges scrape together,

scratches rust-red flecks from the frame, the chains holding
the seat like anchor chains. Even here, in the calm of cricket

psalm, she used to wish herself away. Now her friends
have already moved away, and she never thought

she wouldn't want to leave. A barge moans by—
she waits for the small, delayed waves to lap at her feet,

the water displaced, then calmed and pushed downstream.

ON THE LAST DAY OF OUR WILD YEAR

December light is the light of the underworld,
each beam a thread to be pulled.
You drive 57 which uppercuts Illinois's jaw
as I watch salt streaks smear by, thrilled
with the notion of January—Janus,
god of the doorway. We'll be good this year.
The Mississippi slides like steel wool
beneath us, the bridge buzzing our velocity.
One threshold crossed, I thumb your thigh.

When I wake, you are braking to the shoulder.
"Speed trap," you say, "they're pulling me over."
They run your license—photo of the down-cheeked
boy you were. I drag a cigarette when two officers
pull you from the car, tell you *warrant*,
extradition. Best magic trick, they take you from me.
I don't have the key. Those quarter sacks
of weed you slung have caught up with us,
and the old state wants you back.
Our champagne chills in the trunk.

I trail the patrol car to Ullin, eyes trained
on your vague backseat form.
At the Pulaski County jail, they take your pocketknife,
your pewter keys, the socks I washed.
The lady behind the window tells me no one's
getting out till after the first. Outside, I call
your mother who'll be dead within four months.
She swallows my news, announces
her tumor into the phone. You don't know.
I shake, snagged breaths rising with the wind.

In the only hotel nearby, I watch shadows linger
and pass in the inch-gap between my locked door
and the linoleum. *I need him back*, I mouth
to the girl the mirror holds—who's not my other
half. Thin and sallow-faced, her eyes black discs.
We were greedy, we're sorry. Daylight dissolves
in the cup of night. I fall asleep before the clock
reads twelve. When I wake to a muted TV,
January's there, two-faced, knowing everything.

IV

TO BEGIN, THE VOLCANO AND ITS PLUME

Ash, thick as loam, storms

over Iceland. Crushed rock and glass,
it accumulates on car hoods,

lonely fields, hoofs.
Abrasive, not the flakes that flit
through wood smoke, this ash
will hold a current,

though it's iron-rich,
of strange benefit to the sea.

Seal your sheep barns to keep the lambs' lungs
clean. Board your wells
with sturdy wood.

*

Across the Atlantic, branny pollen
sets loose
from the bristled cords
of pine catkins. Yellow
transport grain sieved through sunlight,

made worse this year in Mississippi
due to long winter, lack

of March rain. Walk through it
to record your step.
This winged pollen's harmless, but beware
what looses itself from juniper cone tips,
the anthers of the pecan flower.

*

See how the earth gives of itself—and the body
the witness who receives.

A rupture
in the crust, magma rushing up.

Ashfall's hushed reign.

Roots ascending
into stalks and trunks,

the stamens' rise from flowers and cones,
handfuls of seed held to the wind

—this history of surfacing.

THE ROAD HOME FROM HANA

Stay too late at Hana Bay. Let the black sand sink
your pink feet and palms. Watch the man you love
dive again and again into those cold waves. Squat happy
over the public toilet's grime, twist up your salt hair.
You have only a fan's folds worth of days like this. Let him
drive you further south, then west in the afternoon's peak,
following the coast and the prism-glint of the Pacific,
until you realize the loop you planned to take
back to the Kahului motel is a dead end. Road closed
due to fallen rock, an earthquake two years back.
Turn that rented convertible around. Go ahead
and witness dusk's rise—cow bleat, stinkvine twist,
the slick rocks' deepened sheen. This is the first time
you've worn a man's ring and been in strangeness
with him. You love him more than you've loved anything.
Past Hana, it's hairpins again, hibiscus and the aerial roots
of Hala trees. Each needled waterfall darkens further
into blackout lush—you're learning a path reversed isn't
the same pleasure. Suddenly, it's water rush and strange
bird scream. Gone are the songs of the honeycreepers.
As rain begins to spit and goosebumps your shoulders,
loose your hand from his so that he can steady the wheel.
Ride that wet, zigzag road. Let the locals come up fast
and loud and pass you in their 4x4s. You are two headlights
traversing an island spine on the planet's loneliest chain.
When Kahului's lights break your vision and the FM signals
spit reggae again, see how he reaches. His fingers lace to fit.

OUR FIRST MISSISSIPPI SUMMER

and I drink iced tea under the centripetal swoosh
of the living room ceiling fan. You draft scenery

at our desk, calculating the necessary incline
of Antonio and Alonso's doomed ship,

Caliban's cross-sectioned hut. I fan the pages
of a paperback, listening to you hum Euclid's theories

and Prospero's spells. The hours have ballooned,
distending like bodies in water, for weeks. Lunations

have passed, you've designed other realities, I've taught
sweaty freshman the art of exposition. I don't know

what day it is. Words congeal like sunned frog-mud
in my mouth. Summer—strange hiatus, the South's

fertile coma. Every morning, a dawn that I have already
witnessed submerges your body in a syrup of light,

the pieces of your groin laid out like fruit in a bowl.
I mop the floor to feel the wet yarns lug

my toes. This is what the river feels when they drag
its bottom. I want to be pregnant, swollen as these fields.

Each unconscious afternoon, you draw me to you.
I put down a book whose ending I've predicted, drowning

in your fingers' slide down my river-spine. Again and again,
you are my Ferdinand, my first man, in an endless July.

GROCERY SONG FOR A RUNAWAY

The clerk opens the glass door to expose
the bulletin board. Lost faces pinned

to its cork. I watch her check the posters' dates,
then tug. The old ones fall. She fastens others

in their place. Now, Valentine Johnson hangs
upper-left, strawberry hair feathering

her schoolgirl face. Missing from Colorado
since November. Barely seventeen. God knows

I didn't have the pluck to run away those nights
I unlatched the screen from my window's frame.

Little suburban me, I was content to lie
on the porch's damp roof, that much closer

to the edge. When the north wind bit my skin,
I slunk to bed. I had no reason to leave.

So much of what we do at seventeen
is to witness the result. Val, may the haloes

of pit stops constellate your path to some warm
and lulling place. May you have had your reasons.

May they hold up on the blackest nights.

ENTER

In the back of a *National Geographic*, a black and white 30s reprint. A Japanese *ama* dives off a small boat, body caught mid-throw. Head and shoulders and breasts submerged, and around her, the water holds itself open like a hole. The *ama*'s torso is bare, one hand reaching back for her basket's rope, her small feet blurred.

~

I watch the first winter storm I've seen in two years through my parents' bay window. The boy next door wears a red cap and throws clumps of snow. His dog chases, snapping at them. A cardinal threads through the maples' branches, which are heavy and white, a latticework above the yard. The snow falls and falls, insulating us all.

~

In electron microscope photographs, snowflakes are as gray as the wreckage the ocean keeps on its floor. The flakes, at 300 micrometers, look metal. Sunk and corroded in another world. Bumps cluster on their angular arms like sea incrustations.

~

On the drive up from Mississippi to my parents' house in the Ohio River Valley, the snow swirled and swarmed around the car, and I was happy to be enveloped. I thought to myself, *I belong to this weather, to the oblivion of silent flakes and the melancholy of frosted windows. I was born to it.* At the gas station, the wind shocked my cheeks with its thousand needles. My fingers ached filling up the tank.

~

My husband lived in Laramie, Wyoming, as a boy. He dug forts in the piles of plowed snow, whole rooms.

First, in such a venture, he tells me, there is the digging, there is the clearing-away which is creation. Once the carved-out space is deep enough, the body must enter, must trust the emptiness in order to tunnel further.

~

I sit inside. My father bends to scoop snow from the drive, the noise of his shovel on the concrete swallowed in the thickening white. The Great Lakes north of here freeze in wintertime. In the news today, a picture of an Erie lighthouse encased in ice. Its shapes—the outbuilding, the tower, the narrowed lantern room up top—sealed beneath prickled sheets. Something from a fairytale, my mother said. All that trapped light spinning inside, I thought.

~

Some eighty years ago, on the Pacific's cold floor, shellfish and seaweed and abalone. Between free-dives, the *ama* breathed her *isoboue*, her sea whistle. High-pitched, not a recovery but a preparation. Then she slipped under, back inside.

~

On the trip north, the road went white on the Cumberland Parkway, and I was alone, flashers on in the left lane. *Break gently, turn off cruise, be steady on bridges, on empty roads*—like this one. Body rigid in the seat, my hands clammy at ten and two, I was an outsider in winter, the world blurred.

~

My father's pond has frozen over, his goldfish somewhere beneath the brittle crust, slow and heavy, tangled amid the iris roots and hardening mud.

The goldfish—world's oldest ornamental fish. In the T'ang Dynasty, Buddhist monks raised them at monasteries. Even then, in the winters of another millennium, the goldfish hunkered at the pond bottoms like orange slugs, stilled.

Winter enters the coldblooded. They have no choice in their submission.

~

Winter like the underworld—the light too thin to be called day. Still, it shirks across the lawn, slipping off, darkness close behind like a tide, the sky thick with nimbostratus clouds. Suddenly, in the bay window, there is only myself, reflected. I flip a switch: the snow swarms wetly in the porch light.

~

That night, in my sister's childhood bedroom, I find the December 1985 issue of *National Geographic*. Inside, the first photographs of RMS *Titanic*: a circular, sediment-covered reciprocating engine; the starboard propeller half sunk in seafloor silt; the bow railing grown over in rusticles so delicate they turn to dust if bumped.

The storm hangs on. Flakes fall like wrecks through the limbs of trees. I cannot sleep.

~

In one dream, whole underworlds of water. I move between the many realms, legs scissoring the cold liquid. Muscle memory or instinct. A polar bear swims overhead, thick white stumps of legs and underbelly. Light nimbuses down. I inhale, inhale again. Do not drown.

~

Bears don't technically hibernate. Call it denning or winter lethargy, the American black bear can go 100 days without eating or drinking, without urinating or defecating. Rolled up in its den, head between forepaws, a black bear can take whole minutes to wake once disturbed. Imagine the dreams of a hundred nights' sleep.

~

Come the typhoon rains of late June, *ama* still travel to Hegura Island, the sea cloudier and warmer now and the ear-shells of abalone depleting. The *ama* wear wetsuits and, on good days, dive for up to four hours, ropes hooked to their belts. They tug when they're ready, and the boatman helps pull them to air.

~

The boy is back, red-capped, with his dog. His yard spirals with footsteps, though the snow is falling, wiping his tracks away. Before the boy lived in his house, an older couple did. On childhood snow days, my siblings and I would watch the man—Neil, born in Wisconsin—clump across the yard to fill his finch and woodpecker feeders in jeans, a light sweater. Ohio winters were nothing to him.

My father goes out again to shovel the drive. I stay inside, my breath lacing the window.

~

In the news, three new crew members who've just arrived at the International Space Station. They now orbit the earth at 18,000 miles per hour. From the Station's kaleidoscopic glass eye, the earth spins below like a milky mood ring. Windows are blacked out for sleep, and the sun rises sixteen times a day.

~

I lay my toothbrush on the counter, finger the bottles of shampoo my mother has set out for me. I shared these two sinks with my siblings—now they belong to the “guest bathroom.” My husband is back home—home is Mississippi.

In my parents' house, I find myself standing in doorways, pulled in both directions.

~

Five decades ago, *ama* voted against using air tanks. They do not use them today, concerned with overharvesting. Proud, too, I think, of their held breath, their ability to thread in and out of two realms.

~

Imagine, after six months in space, returning to earth. Reentry, one ground technician says, is one of the most complicated activities NASA carries out. Plasma gas burning as hot as the sun envelops the shuttle, a flashing tangerine cloud tinged green at the sides.

But what if, after those months of watching the earth turn and turn below, a person couldn't readjust to his city's gridded streets, to his slippers padding the drive to fetch the paper?

~

Outside, snow and the boy and his dog, the boy's cheeks so chapped I can see their flush from where I sit. I want to let winter swallow me like that. I want, before I leave, to throw my body down and swipe angels in the snow. To build a hard-packed cave of ice, to tunnel inside. To let my body shiver inward from its edges, the flakes falling just beyond the entrance, packing me in.

~

No matter how many minutes the best *ama* stays underwater, the lungs eventually rebel. She must follow her rope. Home is one side of the door, one side of the sea.

v

DREAM IN WHICH THE PAST RETURNS AS OBJECTS

My apparently-red door is stuck. I shoulder in,
cobwebs ripping as the door parts
from frame. Dry lips sigh the same.

Up here, no windows. Just sour chill.
Oh, wonder of rooms we don't know
we keep. Under dust, a Raggedy Ann,

the pink JC Penney quilt I may or may not
have moaned against. A tin cup of foreign
coins whose faces have been rubbed off.

Illegible postcards from post-wall Berlin,
ceramic seraphim, a pair of flowered
underwear. Open on the bed:

an illustrated Grimm's. Farmers spray
their oranges with protective ice
to save them from frost. Here,

all I forgot. The computer's still on.
I jiggle the mouse—the tower clacks.
On the monitor, IMs from ex-boyfriends.

Each reads, *Come over or else*. Taped
to the wall, the old pictures—but I ripped
them down and burned their gloss.

In one snapshot, my waist in an arm cinch,
a pimply boy who smirks into the camera's
dilated eye. My husband arrives to pace.

I tell him we have to work fast. If we put
the fragments together, meaning will be made.
That's the oldest lie. The unremembered keeps us safe.

STORM WATCHING

Sirens break the susurrous hour along its seam.
3:30 a.m. and my husband's still grinding

his teeth, still grinding out his whiskey sleep.
The one-tone scream sluices our box fan's

hummingbird wing. It's probably just
impending thunder, some cumulus crowd

along the Arkansas border, but I slip
from bed. In the living room, the cable's out.

The crepe myrtles thrash, their branches
Medusa braids beyond the shades.

The wind picks at the door's lock. I step outside
as if I can lick a finger and catch the storm's

direction. My parents used to pluck me
from tangled sheets, carry my siblings and me

to cellar cover. We lived on the border of the plains,
and sometimes prairie fury carried far enough east

to make them worry. Just another sleep-over
for me. I could sleep through anything.

Now a thumbnail moon loiters overhead, lightning
in the west. The white strobes rend the night

to pieces, and in the salt-tinged whip of wind,
an armada of clouds is rolling in—plum-bruised

hulls, billowing masts. We're under attack.
The county sirens panic-ring. I gape

at the god-force that might undo us, gripping
the balcony rail, when the cloud mass swerves north

toward Holly Springs. I unclench and try
to think of sleep—but the nights of storms

stretch ahead of me, not the dreamer anymore
but the woken, the watcher, the guard.

THE NEW POETRY INSTRUCTOR

Yesterday, she asked for a poem about a first-time experience, unaware so many'd pick the same. Her blouse like plastic wrap against her back, she backpedals now, sirening the dangers of the sentimental and cliché—but she's just more June drone. The students will write what they want, their cogs stuck on keeping two wheels upright, how it felt to raise the dirt and part mosquitoes in their wake. Each poem ends the same: the sudden down-hard and the knee like a peeled grape. And even as she speaks, the instructor remembers— McCoy Park's two diamonds, all umber dust in summer. The ground root-choked near second base, her father's hand gripping the seat, her body bumping along in the after-dinner heat. Then release, velocity coating her cheeks. How after she tumbled left, the pedal spiked her calf. How she'd like it back—her father already running, help just behind.

YEARS LATER, I SEE MY OLD SELF STUMBLING DOWN THE STREET

Her perfume's a scent I haven't worn in years—
McCormick's Vodka from the plastic jug.
Stiletto-shake and curls straight, her hips
like knobs beneath her cocktail dress, she shouts
to her gaggle that she wants to dance. She laughs
her throatiest laugh. The darkness holds her
like she holds her cigarette—ready to drop it
for the next.

Darling, watch the cherry. Keep
your clutch on your wrist. Don't let a stranger pour
your drinks. But you're me. You'll shoot them fast,
your thumb a mixing spoon, your eyes half-moons.
You'll will these nights to come even as you tip
your punch-red mouth towards the toilet's bowl,
no one to smooth your ruffles back in place.

MEMORY OF CAPRI, OUR EARLY TWENTIES

Let's play rich, my sister whispers. We skip
the bus stop queue, drunk on salt wind
and altitude, our day at sea. I press
our only 50 Euro bill into a man's open
palm. The convertible door unlatches.

He hands us into the backseat. My sister
and I have always taken our leaves lavishly.
There's more fun to be had if you pretend
that everyone's gawking. So we ride
back down to the harbor past crowds

of myrtle and lemon trees, the island
falling rock-face quick from Anacapri
into the Tyrrhenian Sea. We brace, throats
full of wind, for each hairpin's turn,
our bodies' slide left then right.

Stucco villas tumble with us down the cliff,
and off-shore, the limestone Faraglioni
reach out like fingers of a god gone down.
Our coral bracelets shine for us like all the vain
believe. Blissing on royal-blue horizon

and citrus scent, we don't notice when
the driver slows. Descent complete.
We're let out of the car like out of sleep.
The crowd, cacophonous, sun-bleached,
reabsorbs us as another tourist ferry docks.

PORTRAIT OF TWO SISTERS IN A ROMAN SUMMER

June was full-term, pulsing around us,
as we crossed the bridge to the Tiber's east bank.

The river sidled against its stone walls.
Waves rose like angel tongues to lick back

at the heat. Our burnt feet moved
before us. We'd been traveling two weeks—

first England, now Italy. More time
than we'd had in years. We'd turned again

into sisters who shared a room. We linked arms
in crowded stations. Our steps synchronized.

Ears steeped in Romance language, words
ran dry, any remaining speech hunkered down

near the bone's cool marrow. Then we spotted
the fountain downhill from the main *via*.

A basin with a sitting ledge, a few jets
spraying mist. We went to it, yanked

our sandals off, and plunged our feet
to the marbled bottom. The turquoise water

fizzed. Chlorine balmed the air. There,
our painted toenails were shells, our feet

pale fish—flickering and refracted
in the speechlessness of sisterhood.

VI

LAKE OUACHITA, LATE SUMMER

You swim to the next cove, the only act
of leaving you can take here in the water's
flow. Kicking away, you shred the lake
into heavy white spray. I clutch an orange raft,
poor swimmer, and float. I half know
to follow you after a fight, half know to let you

go. The rented pontoon, tied to a sapling,
grinds its metal base against the pebbled shore.
Islands litter the waterscape, hilltops before
they dammed the river. Never cut, the forest
is still rooted below. The guidebook says
striped bass, bream, and freshwater jellyfish slip

through the canopy. I'm good at thinking
of these other things—the drone of motorboats,
the whir and zip of brooch-sized dragonflies.
It's mating season for them. After that
comes death. We are weeks from our first anniversary,
weeks from moving into a house we'll hate,

weeks from all the other weeks we can't
anticipate. You return in the form of a head
bobbing up through the water's glare. Near me
again, you keep your jaw clenched, and I take
your hand, but not too quick. In spite of myself,
I want to kiss your shoulders, already over-pink.

Every day we learn how hard a marriage is.
I balance my foot on the stub-end of a drowned tree
that stretches its blanched trunk who knows how far down,
and you take hold of my raft. We don't speak.
There's a metaphor here, perhaps, but we're still
too awe-struck at what we've done to know.

THE STAGE CARPENTER'S WIFE

First the thin and waxy blueprints unscrolled across the kitchen table. Compass, ruler, drafting pencil. Then sawdust in the seams of his clothes for weeks. In his knuckle-groves, she finds paint spatter. The smell of wood stain where she kisses his neck. She is learning the cycles of a season.

On Monday, he tore down two months' work. The smoking oven that swallowed the witch, the Doric columns, the house that spun into Oz—now scrap metal and plaster and loose wood. Last show's lead left town for the next circuit. Another pretty girl will show up soon with an affinity for hot can lights and the watchers beyond the proscenium arch. Yes, this wife is learning her husband's work. In his pockets, she finds nails ripped out by the same hand that drove them in. Already, he's sketching a golden-scaled dragon, a door that will lead to a dead-end.

LAMMERGEYER

Darling, you're tired of the egg whites of my rolled eyes.
I'm tired of your pout—so let's leave these shapes.

Why not try mountain passes of thirteen thousand feet,
Himalayan cold, a home range? These vultures spend

their days on air, solitary or in pairs, ten feet of wing
apiece. We could forsake our bed of sprung coils

for a high cliff's hollow, a nest of dried skin, dung,
and wool. They're quiet birds, too, but come winter,

their whistles pulse the snow. They dance to mate,
they death-spiral. Let's lock talons. Let's fall that way.

SNOW

She would know, she tells herself. If something were to happen—were to have happened—she would feel it, would have already felt it. All afternoon, he was only across town stocking amber bottles on dusty shelves, the men coming in, released early from their shifts, and stomping their boots on the mat. Now he is long off work. But there would have been a sign, some jolt in the current of her nerves, no matter how far away. His body is a knowledge she's learned. The tiny pocks underneath the beard, his index finger and palm just long enough to encircle her wrist. His narrow hips and his chest, next to her in bed, a slab of wood. Outside, snow falls like confetti, but she is not trapped in a child's snow globe. She would have heard a wreck coming in her body. And still—she would have felt it—he does not—she would know—come home.

ANOTHER DRIVE WHERE YOU TAKE ME INTO THE DARK

We leave Kahului after fish tacos, your hand loose
on the wheel, the other across my thigh. I wield the map

as the sugarcane cedes to the rolling rise of grass swales
and Cook pines. The tropics cool, Upcountry reached

in the lull between afternoon and twilight. Silence
is the pleasure of our matching breaths. When Haleakalā's

switchbacks begin, our stomachs crimp with altitude,
each turn's gain of view. We were told to reach

the volcano's summit by sunset, but we're unhurried.
At each observation point, we stop to stare past

the outlying island to the Pacific's rim. A love of edges
lingers us. Wind drags its teeth through our hair.

At seven thousand feet, the scrub brush takes over, the air
too thin for trees. Already, the clouds are below. We're rising

into otherworld as evening's watercolors fade. You, love,
have delivered me distances, have always brought me home.

Here we are again—squinting through the dark on the road
of highest elevation achieved most quickly. Up top, the smack

of regret—we should've come earlier, won't be able to see
the crater or its cindercones. We stop anyway and find

the silverswords, already bloomed, planted in the parking lot.
The rosettes of wilted, silver-haired leaves glint in our flashlight's beam.

We see no crater moonscape, just deeper blackness below.
Blind, disoriented, we stand above one third of the atmosphere.

In ancient times, only priests could summit, something sacred held
in feeling that small. Nearby, the cold bubbles of observatories

look out into the sky's murky swirl. When we begin the descent,
I fall asleep. You're left alone to drive us out of wildness—and do.

VITA

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