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RECKONING

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

WENDY BUFFINGTON

May 2012

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ABSTRACT

Reckoning is a collection of short lyrics following a narrative arc. The work attempts to explore moments of transition by probing the line between a beginning and an ending through poems which take as their subjects a persimmon transformed into a child's soft skull, a hen gripped in a dog's jaw, a parent tethered to a hospital bed, expired love. The balance between being and not being is marked by some invisible line which these poems try to bring into focus using a mix of traditional forms, prose poems and free verse. Sound and rhyme generate many of these poems acting like a pulse which moves the poem down the page and into space. They ask to be read aloud, offered into space for that brief moment of speech which gives them life.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, George and Iris Buffington. Blessings on your shining heads, beloved ones.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a debt I can never repay to my advisor, Beth Ann Fennelly, whose faith in my work means more to me than she will ever know. To my committee members, Drs. Ann Fisher-Wirth and Greg Schirmer, thank you for your thoughtful consideration of these poems. To the University of Mississippi Graduate School, I remain humbled by your support through a thesis fellowship in the spring of 2011 and an honors fellowship during my tenure here. I am very proud to be affiliated with this university and in particular, the English Department, led by Dr. Ivo Kamps, a strong supporter of the Master of Fine Arts program. I would like to thank Gary Short for his efforts on my behalf from my first visit to campus and Dr. Annette Trefzer for friendship and guidance.

I would also like to thank the writing program at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, and their Program for Experienced Learners for helping to get me here. Specifically, I am grateful to poets Helen Wallace and Greg Byrd for their instruction and to the Writers in Paradise Conference held at Eckerd College where I met Beth Ann Fennelly.

Lastly, to my family, friends and loves—you are the honey in my coffee.

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I. Earth's Thin Skin

Missing

The gold-lacquered Jesus on the pink plastic crucifix is missing from his post at the head of my bed. AWOL. Jesus. It is so unlike him.

But the Pepto-Bismol wall stands naked. A single nail pricks the drywall, call attention to what's missing, like a twelve-year-old's nipples standing alert in a chilled church basement—a pair of

interrogators, *Where are the breasts? Where are the breasts?* The bare wall calls just like that. So I search for Jesus in my mother's stone-walled tulip garden where green buds open to white

throats pierced with red, behind the pine board barn built by brother John, lost in Vietnam, Easter hens nesting in the barn's shadowed corners, roosters gone to the ax. No Jesus

in the kitchen at the chrome-legged table with my mother in her yellow-flowered house dress tapping out the morning in cigarette ash. I call out *Jesus! Jesus! Olly olly oxen free!* wait

for a reply, scan the silver sky for a sign. See nothing, but a mourning dove roosted in the live oak, one blue-ringed eye looking at me.

The Tornado

Miles of pine and scrub oak—splintered coats,
jagged necks—the standing dead

the tornado left. Downed lines snake mud.
On the ridge, a stick house bares bones

to the stars. Up Lizard Road, chewed
asphalt roofs, a bungalow's speared chimney

trace the storm's wind-honed edge where families
share a bed, nail plastic over holes.

Behind the place I live, I find a nest,
mouth down. Woven pine needles and dried grass,

an exoskeletal womb. It fits in my hand.
I take it home, place it in my room,

nest stripped of tree, bird, eggs—
seed it with feather and bone.

Persimmon

Child, skull like a persimmon,
you stalk my dreams.
Eyes, the membrane-coated seeds,
mouth, the wound
where fruit was torn from the tree,
you question me,

and your questions fall
like these silver-tipped leaves
spiraling to the ground.
I drop to my knees
to gather them round
the tree's empty arms.

Unbridled

The girls float by like smoke wearing their summer skin
smooth as new money, jangling bracelets, chewing gum.
They wrap wet lips around cigarettes, blow smoke rings
into the wind. Haunches high and tight. Wild horses on the run.
O! How beautiful they are! How beautiful they are, slim
hipped, heads high, a parade of thighs and tight skirts,
rum raisin lips parted for the bridle bit. How unprepared
for the bitter surprise of metal between teeth and tongue.

But who am I to say they wanted more? Who am I?
Stalled in the boredom of middle age,
lunch talk of cholesterol and IRA's. Gold Visa card tucked
in a Vera Bradley wallet behind a folded living will.
I haunt the halls of empty offices still,
though I spit the bit from this ruined mouth.

Marguerita's Waltz
(after Theodore Roethke)

Dos Equis stokes your breath
limed with gold tequila.
Kisses drape a neck
bared in blue surrender.

You slide across the dance floor
like metal slicing butter,
your blouse pinned at the shoulder,
a scarf draped on the other.

The last thing you remember
tastes of cigarettes,
a pressure at your center,
your head beside the tracks.

You wake among the songbirds,
the sour scent of beer,
with blood stains on your skirt,
crepe myrtle in your hair.

On Dubber's Hill, London, 1939
—*for my mother*

The streets of Croydon ring
with the beat of children's feet
slapping April rain
when air raid sirens scream,
and the children drop their marbles,
their coils of skipping rope,
run panicked from the playground
for houses on Coldharbour Road
where your mother palms a gas mask
to your brother's bassinet.

Then you burrow into the shelter
your father dug in the yard,
rest your cheek on a mattress
sour with piss and lager,
and lie beside your father,
cries silenced with a kiss.
The earth around you trembles
as buzz bombs raze the ground,
and in your dreams the evergreens
blaze red against the Downs.

Bound

My father called you Marilyn,
though that's not your name, and he loved it
when you wore that backless white cotton dress
now saved in the back of your dresser's bottom drawer.

It reminded him of the first few good years
after the war, when he could almost forgive
what came before because of you—
blonde bombshell in 1945,

your platinum-chromed hair streamed behind your head
as you fled London and the buzz bombs fell
and sirens screamed, a death knell for some,
but not for you—milk-skinned siren who knelt beside a sailor

drunk on gin and fear, your red-rimmed mouth
an inch from his ear, and he worshipped you
with eyes the clear October blue
of the hospital gown you wear in room 722

where your body lies tethered to this earth
by tubes lit with sun like filament
of the dew-wet spider web spun beyond this room,
and you, the light-filled dew drop, tremble in air.

The Bammo Mammo

Breast pressed flat,
impressed, depressed,

*Do you take hormone replacements?
No. Do you take American Express?*

Rolled like dough—Whoa!
A hard-boiled egg? You don't say.

Sonogram, candygram:
Hope you're feeling better,

and she is, though her sweater
falls flat on the left, cleavage

uncleaved, bra unfilled, an empty
sleeve, bereft of the breast that lived

in its pocket, a flap of skin,
a souvenir like a lock of hair

from the dead saved in a locket,
instead of that big girl, Tilt-A-Whirl,

one-eyed wonder, O! googley-eyed monster
who used to live there—

But she doesn't miss her much so far,
she has her stare tattooed

across the puckered scar.

Moving into a Dead Woman's House

Jane never invited me for rose hip tea
brewed from the hearts hanging
in her back yard. She never offered me
a corn muffin hot from her oven
smeared with wild blueberry jelly
picked from the shelf of her dirt-floored cellar.
She never shared what life was like
as a light keeper's wife on St. Croix Island,
tips from *Living Well on a Shoestring*,
nor how to piece a wedding ring quilt.
Jane never spoke to me in life. But we meet

in these rooms where her cookbooks
crowd a small shelf, and her sweet pea seeds
wait to be planted. Her craft room blooms
with Styrofoam balls and rainbowed fabric,
romance novels puddled in a corner.
Above the kitchen sink, a homemade card
proclaims from its cover, *Jesus loves you!*
Inside: *Everyone else thinks you're an asshole.*
Jane, I've saved your lucky charms,
and if we meet on some other side,
I'll bring your *No friggin' in the riggin'* sign.

The Party

Invite a fiend,

said the automated voice on the phone's other
end,

and I thought, Why not?

Hello, Em? Are you free Thursday?
How 'bout a colonoscopy?

We can spend Wednesday evening in our pjs with old episodes of *Friends*,
tossing back shots of Go Lightly
spiked with gin.
See of Rachel and Sara will join in. I'll call Dottie.

It will be a blast.
We'll wear party hats
and meditate on passages of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*,
and when our sphincter muscles cramp
and our rosebudded assholes weep no more burning tears,

we'll sleep,
then celebrate our reprieve
with a box of chocolate éclairs and a mimosa toast
to the effervescent years.

At the Bingo Hall Minutes After My Father's Diagnosis

We plant our packed sandwiches close
to the red-lit board and whirring
box of plastic balls. Blue-tinged smoke
tongues the ceiling. Burgers spit grease
on the grill. My mother sputters off for specials—
triangle game, coverall, maybe
the stamp game—casts me a fish-eyed glare,
neon Dabbo dobber knuckled in her fist.
I whisper to him, *Don't leave me with her.*

He fans out his cards as the caller
drops the balls for early birds. They flutter
in their cage—red, yellow, green, white, blue—
like a flock of parrots, and as we wait
to see which will be caught, he turns, *Kid, it's you.*

Waking to the Taste of Morphine

You stood in the kitchen. Light blanched the watchband now abandoned in my desk drawer, stashed among paperclips in the far back corner. You were preparing for a trip—Ocala—seeking the sun's white kiss along your temple, your blue-roped wrist. You'd already been cut: thoracic lining cemented to lungs to keep out the blood, round one, in a fight you wouldn't win. On the radio, Warren Zevon. In the air, bacon. You wore your garden shoes, the black canvas tops lipped with soil, evidence you trudged your plot, mulched gardenias in June, pruned the pink hibiscus after February's freeze. Those shoes rest on a shelf above my desk drawer and have stopped waiting for your familiar weight to fill them. I thought I had, too. But last night beneath the kitchen's fluorescent light, your morphine kiss lingered on my lips—Ulysses returned from the war.

Late Summer in Maine

It's Dog Bowl Delight on Friday night
at the Polar Treat Ice Cream Palace.
There's Alice with the good son, Margaret
with her new hip—it's a tailgate picnic

beneath the streetlight's blue hum. A boy kicks
stones to the bug zapper's rhythm. The Trott
twins tongue cones—mint chocolate chip, bubblegum.
Girls work the window their last summer home

before college in Portland or Bangor.
I order vanilla, a double dip,
low-carb butter pecan for my mother,
child-size. We sit in our car. Stars shimmer

like frost, the last days of August growing thin,
ice cream dripping down our chins.

Eclipse, c. 1970

The summer my mother went swimming
she burst onto the beach in a suit of blue flowers
blooming across ripe breasts, milk-white buttocks,
a flip of skirt swinging as she strode to the water,
extended one tender foot to test its coolness.
Small waves lapped pale feet. Sun licked her shoulders
as she tucked a bob of honey hair beneath a rubber
swimming cap, a bouquet of latex petals fluttering,
the snap of elastic as she adjusted her suit.

It was the year of the total solar eclipse
our neighborhood watched through Polaroid filters
of dark green glass an eighth of an inch thick doled
out by my father's friend. He worked for Polaroid.
The warning, *Don't look with your naked eye.*
You'll go blind! passed down the line. But it
thrilled us to peek as moon rolled between earth
and sun, a crescent of white light lingering
before day turned to night.

Watching Butterflies at Dusk
—for my mother, losing her sight

Swallowtail, you wing the veil
of Shenandoah's
blue-ridged shadows,

spark the dark
with your stuttering heart
flared across

dusk's fog-licked meadow.
Paused,
between earth's thin skin

and blue-black heaven,
you brush the valley's rim
with gold dust scales,

rise against the wind
though wings fail.

The Nest

A nest of white feathers
and raw flesh lay pinned
beneath the dog's paw—

the hen. Last week, wings
full-fledged, she stuttered
to the top of the henhouse,

sifted over the fence,
then high-stepped down
rust-colored gravel

as dusk fell. I tried to guide her
back to plywood and wire,
but she flew into the pine woods,

a bright patch moving
through weak light—
dissolving into night.

The Hotdog King of Tarpon Springs: Ode to a Cat
—*for Curley*

He arrived with his burnt umber coat seventeen years ago, offered no history, just a faint ginger mustache, nostrils crusted with yard dust, and staked his claim in an arch of urine to 334 East Orange Street. His mystery, like mine, lives zipped inside his spine-ridged suit, shoots like electricity through arteries and veins, the waterways of our dark countries where we both wear our scars—his ripped velvet ear, my chipped front tooth—our bodies flags of truce or surrender. There will be no victory. On Tarpon Ave. I found a ginger cat, its face disappeared in asphalt. I bent in the street to study its stripes. Wept with relief.

In this most recent home, our eighth, spread across four states, he pitches thin bones against September's white eye, nests nose to tail and waits.

The Firmament

As Venus greets the night's embrace
above the Earth's circumference,
Father, I think of you. I see your face

in silhouette against a white-washed fence
where hours with brush blurred to days
as the world turned on its axis,

in the army of graying husbands
clutching grocery lists,
fingering peaches, pressing melons,
double-checking their receipts,

in the sweet clover scent of fresh-cut grass
edged straight, a steam-pressed crease,
a wheelchair's pulse pushing past
the gathering winter geese.

Night Watch

Pills on the nightstand guard your sleep,
the vaporizer hums and weeps,
and your teeth sleep beside you
in their blue plastic pool.

Outside, stars constellate my head,
your eyes, Mother, in a blackout room—
as I trip down the street
carrying my debt, your Windsong perfume.

Night Swim on the Pithlachascotee

A mowed grass path winds behind the farmhouse porch, the swing, and the bicycle with split wooden rims. Voices flutter a curtain, and somewhere, a cigar. *Father? I'm coming.* A cough, and the sound of running water, and the girl's running, too, past the mailbox at the end of the coral pink street, past the wax myrtles waving beyond Old 19 where she carried a fish pole, trout dripping from a cotton string— she peeled back the trout's freckled skin,

scooped out its innards with her thumb—*Father, are you waiting at the table? I smell your cigar. How far is it?* Asphalt bites her feet. She veers towards the river, steps them in water stained like tea, then slips beneath the banana-leafed canopy to glide below the surface with wide eyes, minnows lipping the jelly of her thighs, and as she opens her mouth, river runs across her tongue as it did the trout's, and she's breathing—*Father, can you see me?*

II. Bloomed

Snapshot, 2004

A cream colored wedding gown,
Uncle George beside me,
we walk down Forget-Me-Not Lane,

his short-sleeved gabardine
matches the blue blooms carpeting
the lane in spring. But it's August,

and the flowers are gone.
The Dennys River can't be seen
in this photo, but it sings

to four wild flower girls
who dump rose petals,
don the baskets like hats,

while you and I dance in the grass
to Greensleeves, sea lavender
bridal bouquet clutched tight in my fist.

The Blossoming

Will the apple tree blossom we planted in spring
in fertile ground by the barn among daffodils?
Will the fruit compare to the blossoming

buds if we handle it gently, don't bruise the skin
with fingers too eager to press flesh to lips?
Will the apple tree blossom we planted in spring

if night brings rain, sun warms morning,
we prune back the branches the windstorms kill?
Will the fruit compare to the blossoming

boughs draped in bouquets of white lined with pink
fluttering in the breeze like the blouse of a girl?
Will the apple tree blossom we planted in spring

if we shelter weak branches from winter's bleak wind
and warm the cold ground above roots with a quilt?
Will its fruit compare to the blossoming

limbs? When our harvest is thin, our hunger obscene
in its need to be quenched and our emptiness filled,
will the apple tree blossom we planted in spring?
Can any fruit compare to the blossoming?

Saturday Morning, October

An egg yolk floats in the fry pan, broken,
the burning ocher of marigolds.

Outside, paper sky flies blue and cloudless.
A sand hill crane calls its mate.

At the farmers' market, the season's last tomatoes
beckon, sun-washed, lush, just-picked.

I choose one, press teeth to skin. Fruit erupts
on my tongue, drips down my chin. I fill my basket,

mound the tomatoes in a bowl on our kitchen table,
wonder how long they can last.

The Fall

Crouched at the window, our elbows touch. You stretch an arm towards the arbor and I see it—a barn owl perched atop the wire spider bought at the town fair where we bought our wedding rings. It is early, the morning paper not yet tossed to the sidewalk, and I am grateful to sit beside you in the yellow bungalow we patched and painted, every brushstroke yours or mine—the worn wood floor, the key lime kitchen walls. Your hair, fragrant from the shower, falls down your back, and I inhale your pine scent, rest my palm on your thigh. Its steel reminds me of our bicycle trip, how you strained against the climbs through the north Georgia hills, how I followed you through Alabama and Mississippi, crossing into Louisiana past dozens of dead owls. *Do you remember the dead owls?* I ask, but before you can answer, the barn owl blinks, and I am inside its black eyes falling into a well where no light reveals the walls or water so I can't tell how fast I am falling or how close I am to bottom. All I see are Louisiana's dead owls corpsed along the shoulder beside pine splinters and corn husks torn from the bellies of semis blowing by, the breeze teasing their feathers like the owls could rise from the pavement and fly.

Kerosene

O! How I love the smell of kerosene,
its promise of heat and blue-licked flame

working its wick around my thighs
and all the places in between,

and you with your match standing by
waiting to strike when the wind's just right—

Elegy for My Shoes

How am I to let you go, you who know my feet so well,
shaped your form to my sharp points, odd bends,
though in spots the effort wore you thin,
in spots the wear nearly tearing you in two?

How am I to let you go? You carried me through Mexico,
lay beside me in the desert beneath a sky heaving stars.
No clouds. No moon, just your leathery scent, my sweat's
perfume, a white light's fierce blaze before dying.

In the morning, we walked on. Crossed the canyon
into Batopilas, knelt to pray at the Satevo mission.
I tossed galletas to barefoot children.
Will I remember all this without you—

the aroma of corn tortillas baking in the square,
the chatter of peddlers selling timeshares on the beach,
the buttery flesh of fresh papaya cleaved open
by a machete, its musky taste upon my tongue?

Mediterranean Fruit Fly

They dropped
malathion on us from the sky
from planes, the paper—*keep your children*
inside—
but we didn't always know
in time and
got caught— m e running in heels
down cement steps of the second story
parking lot, you bent
over plants at the ranch, wrapping balled sabal palm roots
in burlap,
and the men tarring roofs,
the Mexicans
laddered in groves,
the children
whose parents didn't read, we were all caught
in fields and yards and strip mall parking lots.
And didn't the breeze
carry the malathion over
Keystone Lake?
And what
about
the bees and orange blossom honey?
They said it was
safe, yet it killed the flies and they warned us to stay
inside— What scale can measure the weight
of what was saved with what
died?

Cut

You thank me now for leaving,
though in grief's new despair
you hacked off your hair with a dull knife,
left it on my pillow, *Dear wife*,

I leave you—two feet of hair
grown over twenty years,
nuthatch brown on one end,
dandelion white on the other,

the braided spectrum of our lives together,
the years we traded one another
measured in inches of white and brown,
buried out back in hard ground.

Still

The ink-stained maple desk sits unused
on the yellow sun porch in spring's bright air
with its empty chair and ringside views
of the pie plate birdfeeder you made me.
Sparrows and mourning doves still stop there
beneath the century old cedar tree,
where silver blue berries dot the lawn
like pearls from a strand come unstrung,
and light slips through the canopy,
and the shadows tremble with birdsong.

On Finding a Photograph of Us

You held the camera at arm's length,
and we pressed our heads together,
looked the lens in its mirrored eye
and smiled like we'd go on forever
though the wind's razor teeth
bit our cheeks and it was winter.
I wore your blue fleece pullover
and our breath rose like sea smoke.
The gray scarf your mother knit
curled around your throat, and we

clambered like crabs on the rocks.
We stalked the shore for beach glass,
pawed through muck and brine,
you found a water-worn glass heart
tangled in fishing line. I found a shard
from a platter by Limoges. At home,
we spread our catch on the table—
a Blue Willow tea cup handle, the purple lip
of an old wine bottle, even
a sepia-toned photograph of a happy couple,
their captured laughter burning through time.

Looking at My Shoes I See

Horses. A matched pair of roans. They gallop
down a red gravel road evenings skipping stones.

The house where my feet live—leather roof, walls
of manmade materials, poured rubber sole.

The cow whose hide I wrap my feet inside.
The sweetness of sun-licked grass chewed as cud,
the coppery taste of blood.

Smalls hands from Thailand, China, Vietnam, fluttering
like moths. They stitched these shoes with molecules
of sweat and tea. Their mystery walks this ground with me.

Winnie, on Holmes Street. She worked
the Downeast factories, stitched more shoes in one day
than some could sew all week.

Brick-faced mills. They haunt New England river towns,
hulking dust-filled shells, doors nailed shut.

The town cobbler seated behind a plate glass storefront,
his name painted in red and black letters,
boots and ladies' heels stacked in a corner.

Landfills. Cast-off shoes. No cobbler.

The sponge-tipped polish applicator my mother used
to whiten the scuffs on her waitress shoes the years
she worked the Woolworth's counter. Darkness bleeding through.

My father's slippers, hollow in this room,
his short-sleeved shirts—yellow, pink, light blue—hung
in the bedroom, the space I slip my arms through.

The Road That Left Us Here

You rode ahead, caught a tailwind,
a blur of sunburned chrome and sinew,
turned once and waved
before disappearing in the redwoods,

a blur of sunburned chrome and sinew,
and I followed you till the Pacific Coast Highway
disappeared into the redwoods
where shadows swallowed the road.

I followed you up the Pacific Coast Highway
hugging the hard edge between ocean and sky
till shadows swallowed the road,
and we camped in a crevice of a cliff as the tide rose,

tucked in the hard edge between ocean and sky.
While moonlight glowed on white foam,
we watched from our crevice as the tide rose,
waited for the pale pink light of morning's

molten glow on white foam.
You turned to me once at the road's bend,
in the pale pink light of morning,
then rode ahead, caught a tailwind.

III. Something Shining

Dark Heart

You sit at the kitchen table a stranger to your garden's harvest—the baskets of basil and mint, Early Girl tomatoes and chives. You are meat. And throb beneath the late afternoon heat emitting your blood scent while all that's green flourishes around you, blooms fragrant. What was her name, the dark-haired girl who sought comfort from your boyfriend, got you instead? You could not have known as you picked up the phone the tenuous connection holding your *hello* to her ear, nor the fear which choked off his name in her throat. That midnight wound unhealed, she could not speak it to you. Hum of breath through the mouthpiece whisked your ear. *Hello?* you repeated, then hung up. How difficult it must have been to prop shotgun butt against sheetrock wall, train the steel-mouthed bite of the muzzle to her stomach's pillow, flex her ankle to toe the trigger.

O heart, you cannot hide when heat lightning flashes its electric blue smile against the skeleton pines and God's cosmic x ray takes a look inside. So take this flashlight and roam the dim streets that line your city. Try to find someone home behind the shuttered windows sheltering compassion and pity. And if you stop at St. Margaret's Church where a girl you new made First Communion in 1968, kneel before the confessional grate. Seek absolution from the priest, not for your part in the dark-haired girl's suicide, tell the priest the truth—you barely spare a thought for it, and this is your only regret: You wish something drove you as fierce as the pain which shot through the dark-haired girl's veins, bloomed red across the carpet.

Blue Bayou Boyfriend

Will you be my boyfriend, you
with the rose tattoo, glued to YouTube
and Nick at Nite and Nickelodeon?
Can I climb across your vinyl seat, squeeze my skin
in your 1963 aquamarine Ford Galaxy and catch a ride
to Hoboken, make my engine hum again, and hope
you keep me out of I.C.U. with your answer
to this midnight rendezvous request,
R.S.V.P. Federal Express—*yes, yes, yes?*

Can I sit on your knee, ride you like a pony,
leg bone pressed against thigh bone,
while you roar the Ford past Omaha Road and crank
the radio as far as it will go? Do we dare run the toll
or care who finds our underwear on the side of the road?

Take me anywhere where gasoline perfumes the air
and speak to me in tongues, pink and slippery, like a dog's,
like this dog, like you,
like all the fat ass Cadillac Coupe de Ville barflies
on Fruitville Road I used to know, but they don't know jack
about tongues, not like we do, me & you

drinking Narragansetts in the park,
half-dressed on the hood of your car,
backs on metal, eyes on the stars,
passing a Cuban cigar between us like we were human,

never lurked like rats at the all-night Laundromat
sweeping the floor for quarters,
stealing blankets from dryers
and sleeping out back—
while the voice of Linda Ronstadt
broke night like glass.

You Are the Kenworth

I am the road
snake-curved and black.
I crawl these hills past
red dirt fields

and shotgun shacks.
You are the Kenworth
climbing my back,
you grind your gears, moan,

You be Angie Dickinson,
I'll be Burt Bacharach.
We'll go to Mexico
and Rio and Halifax,

eat smoked salmon on a stick,
cross the North Atlantic
in a skiff—one big enough
for all your 18 wheels. O!

Romeo, Romeo,
my 18-wheeling Romeo,
this stretch of road is lonely,
the roadside shrines the only

company I keep.
The Virgin Marys
and the crosses,
the measure of our losses,

mark the miles to go
before we sleep,
and promises
we did not keep.

The Dog

Corn-silk fur flat against its skin,
shimmering in the wind, its length
stretched along Highway 334,
stride wide, black toenails tracing pavement,
pink tongue hanging
from the corner of its mouth
like the promise of a kiss—

like my promise to you in hot wet breath
against the stubble of your neck, teeth
dragged against the garden of your skin,
tongue taking you in, tasting your sweat,
and your promise to me at our kitchen table
drinking tea, and in our bed,
your weight pressed against what's left of me—

did you see it as you drove north to Ohio,
your son and guitar packed in the jeep,
cracked windshield catching
the Mississippi light, throwing it back
refracted and broken
like the dog with its blood-soaked throat
and the gravel in its teeth—did you see it?

The Day I Could Have Drowned
—*in memory of Sally Grace*

Red hair sparks the bay too far out to see the face but shouts pitch the surface like skipped stones, *I can't touch! I can't touch!* So I knife the waves. Sun blazing shoulders, I am Poseidon astride a dolphin, trident raised like a saber. I am the dolphin. I am the ocean. I am this red-haired child's savior riding the tide towards a voice thirty meters from the beach where we meet as an island and start to sink.

Fingers clamp my windpipe. Thighs vise my waist. I strain beneath the child's panicked weight, meet my limit in this boy's face: maybe eleven, with strawberry-kissed skin, freckled nose, a snot-slicked lip, a Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn, whose boy breath warms my ear, and heartbeat taps my back where he's strapped like a bomb—*ticktickticktick*—I swipe at the eyes, try to jab my fingers in those jelly donut sockets, but he's scaling my neck, climbing for my head, so I

twist towards his belly, mouth wide to bite his tender child testicles. He smells like coconut and piss behind the brass zipper of his cut-off jeans, but before I strike, I see Sally paddling towards us with the Dollar General float. O! Green vinyl island! I claw and kick through water, spit the ocean from my throat, nostrils flared, sipping air, eyes on home.

Rip Tide

Still, when I saw you flailing
I offered my body as a place of rest. Weak
from treading water, we buoyed each other,
leaned our weight together to ease our load
and for a while we floated.

Do you remember how warm the sun felt
reflecting off our faces
when we first glimpsed shore
thought we could make it?

What I See from Here

A dot marks the map
on the mitten state—*Sand Lake*.

Like a fortune teller's globe,
the dot holds a road

which leads to a house
and a downstairs room

where you lie awake,
and the scent of sliced apples

spices October
as stars fall away.

Come November, early snow
blows over the yard,

seals autumn's late garden,
and the moon breaks hard

through the clouds.
Below the basement window,

you pick up your guitar,
strike a minor key,

the notes float home to me
a thousand miles away,

a face in the crowd,
the cat at your feet.

Animal Nature

Walk your dog, you say, so I do, beyond
the red clay pit and cattle pond
where we skinny-dipped last autumn,
your moon-white ass bright against the mud bottom.

The dog sees it first, beside yellow pine—
a gopher tortoise, checkered spine shining.
Then I see there are two, joined at tail end,
think of you with new love in Michigan—

(I hear she plays the accordion.
I used to love the accordion.)
I am lost in polka music reverie
when the dog takes a yellow belly in her teeth—

and all the king's horses and all the king's men,
can't put the tortoise together again.

Today I Found Your Christmas Photo, 1967

Eyes closed. Your left index finger points
to a spot between your cheek and ear as if
you're not sure you dare share your Christmas hope
with the dark-eyed Santa whose gloved palm
cradles your waist. It's the palm of a big man,
and you are a small boy—six. Your face
abloom, hair the red gold of wheat blazed
with low-slung sun, you burn with the light
of the embossed brass buttons of your blue
wool blazer—three down the center, two
at the cuff. Your boy-skin shimmers. Fine
freckles coat your nose like pollen
on a lily. Though I can't see them here,
I know your eyes are the color of asters.
I have always loved your cheeks, like wedges
cut from a wheel of fine cheese, and I ache
to brush my fingertips across your face in sleep,
smooth your silvered temples with my thumb.

*

*This is who I used to be, you said—boy
made of river water and the carbon
of diamonds, boy who snatched a catfish
from mud, raised its muscled belly to the sun,
collected owl pellets and arrowheads
in the ranging fields of Warsaw, Kentucky,
soared in PF Flyers, shooting star
of the Rotary-sponsored Little League
empire. You thought that boy was dead.
Whatever wounds and regrets have weighed
your step, bent you at the neck, what I have
always seen is that copper-fired light.
It shoots from your hair, now streaked with white,
your fingertips, calloused by guitar strings,
the pulsing center of your chest
where a scarred heart hums in its bone-pitched tent.
You were the light spooling Boyden Lake
a July afternoon in Maine, the gold
lipping the rock at East Quoddy Head,
the salt and the sweetness in our bed.*

*

I trace the image of your face, feel
something like faith send out its first hair root
and know even though love
breaks, something shining rises in its wake.

Last Lines

I want to believe
that macaroni-and-cheese-flannel-pjs-sleepy-time line:
even though love / breaks, something shining rises in its wake.
Who's peddling those wares?

That macaroni-and-cheese-flannel-pjs-sleepy-time line:
Something good will come of this.
Who's peddling those wares?
This is guerilla warfare, sister.

Something good will come of this,
that's what I tell my therapist, but what I mean is,
this is guerilla warfare, sister,
grab an ice pick and a gas mask.

That's what I tell my therapist, but what I mean is,
I am Houdini in chains, sinking,
without an ice pick or a gas mask,
and a vise racks my lungs.

I am Houdini in chains, sinking.
Air escapes my mouth in a pearl string.
A vise racks my lungs.
I try to breathe, but there's no oxygen,

and air escapes my mouth in a pearl string.
I see light spear the water's green face,
try to breathe, but there's no oxygen.
Then arms reach towards me through a white storm

and light spears the water's green face.
I think, I'm not forsaken, I'm saved!
as arms reach towards me in a white storm
and my body's lifted from the ocean floor—

I'm not forsaken, I'm saved—
even though love breaks, something shining rises in its wake,
lifts me from the ocean floor—
I want to believe.

Reckoning

A bird beyond my window serenades
last light, song flashing like a pocketknife
glinting in the sun, the muzzle of a gun
exploding in the night. Quiet undone.

It bursts inside this room to find
me stationed in a chair, and I wonder
what the songbird knows to trill to empty
air—no listener to please, none to applaud.

When was I so content? When were you?
Perhaps in childhood's milk-sweet days where you
and I had not yet met—distanced
by forty years and half this continent.

In Old Maids' Field atop a rock, girls perched
like lizards in the sun, read *Tiger Beat*
and *Seventeen*, imagined who they would
become, and I was one of them. And you?

What joy did you unspool beneath the leaves
of silver-blue Kentucky? Beneath the eaves,
your boyhood bed cupped you in its quilted
grip. An iron grate spit white-blue flame

which looked so like the flaming tongue you knelt
beneath your savior's arms stretched wide above
your bed and offered up your testament.
Lost love, does faith sustain you yet?

The yellow pines grown black with rain surround
this house like evening's teeth, and I, inside
this plywood cage, imprisoned in this skin,
stretch my neck to sing. Stretch my neck to sing.

Late

I'm in the parking lot before yoga, where women lie on mats, stretch the long bones of thighs to the hum of chants, feel air push through torsos like a first responder's breath during CPR, and these days are like that for me—coming back after a death. Each day, another passing: the grad student killed cycling; loves—large and small; the mole the dog plucked from grass, tossed like a bone (of which it had many, a complicated assembly connecting pink pointed snout, wing-like front feet, bones like poles pitching the body's flesh tent into space), and until the dog interrupted whatever the mole was doing during its mole day, wasn't it carrying on just like me, blindly flipping dirt out of its way as it moved forward, like my arriving in this parking lot for yoga to pass sixty minutes in company, maybe spend the post-yoga evening with friends drinking licorice tea, grabbing at anything which takes me out of the mental Habitrail that has come to rule my life. And as I say these words—*my life*—outside Snackbar (where yes, I still see you, lost love, behind the mike on a Wednesday night playing to an empty room but hitting every note hard like a ball struck full force by a steel bat), my eyes fall on the tag of a red pickup truck—*MYILIFE*—and I think of the grad student, and the love I refused to offer you, and the mole whose dying gasp I witnessed in the sun-flecked October grass, the familiar strained twisting of the neck as that last breath rushed past the lungs' gripped fist, and I open the car door, wonder what I have been waiting for.

Winter Meditation

—*for Kevin and Masako*

Birdsong drifts
from the magnolia canopy
though the birds are invisible.

A lonely bicycle
leans against red brick,
its goose neck handle resisting
gravity.

In the lavender distance,
smoke splinters the sky,
a saw blade screams
through ripped wood.
Trees bloom shadows.

A bell tolls, a man spits.
Branches are swinging
though there is nothing
to cause the swinging.

Reflecting Pools

Oxford, Mississippi, April 2011

The room blooms with Friskies Classic Paté
and citrus-kissed piss, the mattress
adrift on the floor equidistant
between the litter box and cat dish.
On the wall, the guitar I still can't play,
hangs by its Mexican strap, a gift
our last Christmas. Dust coats
the metal strings, the neck, the bentwood
body. Its hollowed center waits
to send out notes like boats skimming
water or a husband's voice rising from the pillow,
the case fragrant with balsam.
The pillow's here, too, wrenched seams
leaking evergreen and cotton.

Big Bend National Park, Texas, 1993

We sleep beneath the cottonwoods
guarding the Rio Grande, rise
before the sun throws its rose gold
over ocotillo and prickly pear,
watch the first dawn-dusted thrush
toss back its feathered cap to sing,
peeling the thin white pith
separating night from morning.
We rinse dishes in the river,
hike to the lookout above the bluff.
*If we could have seen this far
could we have changed our course,
turned left at the disemboweled Ford,
right at the field of day lilies?*

April 2011

Each day I walk this lily-faced field,
throw a stick for the dog he doesn't know.
Our gray-tailed cat is gone. Driving to town
I glimpse my hair in the rearview mirror.
It glints the winter gray of batteries,
the aluminum of the bass boat
he hauled to Anclote those Octobers
with his father. There's a lake here, but
I have no boat. The geese wing to some field
I can't see, V slicing sky past the pines,
distance dimming their calls like the lime dress
I wore to his Uncle Ray's wedding.
Ray's dead eleven years, and our fathers,
too. The dress hangs hollow and sun-bleached.



Mexico, 1993

Undressed bones, hollowed and sun-bleached,
line Terlingua Road. We buy beer
for the goat—*mayor*—the sign says.
Tomorrow we'll cross to Ojinaga.
He leads me down a gravel road. It turns
to wash-out. We push our bikes through grass,
haul gear ten miles to camp. I swear
I will not follow him again down unmapped
paths—but walk sixty miles of switchbacks
to Copper Canyon's Batopilas.
At the bottom, a rope bridge swings between
the cliff's green face and town.
Eyes on his back, I don't look down,
crawl across the gorge's gaping mouth.

April 2011

Sirens warn the storm's gaping mouth
is raking Lafayette County.
The chickens take cover neck to breast.
The dog scoots beneath the desk.
I am my own audience, clapping
one hand, clutching the cat with the other,
as the wind snaps trees in half. Come night,
an owl's hoot sifts through the pine woods
and the moon throws its shine on the lake.
An ache strikes my blue-veined neck,
notes stuck, grief's silent movie—
husband in the breakfast nook at dawn
with the *St. Pete Times* spooning steel-cut oats,
me listening from bed, the stove's white hiss.

The Redwoods, 1993

I hear him pump the stove's white gas,
touch match to core, the rush of flame,
then steady hum. Water hauled
to the campsite boils in the pan,
drains over coffee grounds. He waits
for me to crawl from the tent, hands me
my plastic cup, a bowl of boiled oats—
his skin warm and pink from the shower.
A pale moon winks off in the east.
Our breath snakes the air. He takes
my photo—blue coat zipped to my throat,
hat pulled past ears. I'm smiling,
cheeks still red from the prick of his beard.
Yellow broom blooms full at the water.

April 2011

My heart is full of water,
weighed down like a boat with a leaky hull.
Winter is over and the dogwoods
spit pink and white petals. They sift down
the blacktopped roads like trails leading
home, but they lead nowhere.
Like these poems. After all I left to get here—
the house we built, friends, my mother, him—
for this? An empty room abloom
with Friskies Classic Paté and piss. A wedding
photo face down in a drawer. True,
the story's more complicated than this—
boredom, betrayal, a river's broken promise.
I catch my face in the mirror: it's me I miss.



VITA

Education

Non-degree seeker, Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, FL, January to May 2007
Program for Experienced Learners, Creative Writing

JD with honors, University of Florida College of Law, Gainesville, FL, May 1988

BA, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, 1985
Fine Arts, Cinematography

Experience

Instructor, 2010-2012, University of Mississippi
Courses: Beginning Poetry Workshop, English 317; Introduction to Creative Writing, English 211; Freshman Composition, Writing 101 and Writing 102; Applied Writing, English 250

Teaching Assistant, 2008-2009, University of Mississippi
Courses: World Literature Before 1650; Modern British Literature, Romanticism to Post-Modernism

Assistant Editor, *Yalobusha Review*, University of Mississippi, 2008-2010

Grants and Fellowships

Dissertation Fellowship, University of Mississippi, \$5,000, Fall 2011
Honors Fellowship, University of Mississippi, \$1,500, 2009-2011

Honors and Awards

University of Mississippi Bondurant Prize in Poetry, Spring 2012
Finalist, Peter Meinke Chapbook Prize, Yellowjacket Press, 2011, *United*
Finalist, Yellowjacket Press Chapbook Contest 2010, *Untied*
Progress Energy Art Gallery Poetry Contest Prize, 2009
Eckerd College, Mason Daly Poetry Prize, 2008
Writers In Paradise Poetry Prize, 2007

Publications

My work appears in *Eckerd Review*, *Puckerbrush Review* and in the anthology by InkSpotter Publishing, *Wait! Wait! I Have to Take off My Bra*.

Service

Founder and host of community open mike reading series, Fall into Poetry! (known during the spring as... Spring into Poetry!) Bozarts Art Gallery, Water Valley, MS, Spring 2009-Spring 2012

Vox Press Education Outreach Committee member, Oxford MS, April 2012
Organized and cohosted a poetry reading for elementary, middle and high school students in celebration of National Poetry Month.