Tumult Blossoms: Poems

Elyse Rachelle Arring

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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TUMULT BLOSSOMS:
POEMS

by

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Bachelor of Science
University of South Dakota
1998

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

Tumult Blossoms:
Poems

by

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Tumult Blossoms is a collection of original poetry that examines the formation of identity and the factors that determine it. Identity itself is treated as a fluid entity and explored in various guises, from that of the individual to that of a nation or species, with special emphasis placed on both migration and evolution. Within this exploration, close scrutiny is also granted to the relationship between human beings and their environment.
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stuck in bodies
we didn't ask for
Whirligig

Men work
below the window
with pickaxes, shovels,
& sweat in the midday heat;
the desert sucks moisture
from their pores, their dark hair
and eyes brand them.
A beetle lands
on the glass shining
like water, finds it hot
and hovers a blur
of wings treading sunlight.
Metal clangs
at dull intervals, & the sound
of earth migrating. It, too,
is dark and wants
to float on air, whirl
through the stratosphere,
cool itself in the ebb
of this terraqueous globe.
The Gospel According to...

Deborah

There's something beyond the body; I want to enter the wilderness of that beyond.

Each day I've been given is a test of what I can endure.

I can't stand to be inside my own skin.

I'll be delivered

I just need the next...

Sometimes the worms can drive you mad.

They won't let up.

I didn't ask to be given life

my mother didn't want it either

But here I am.

There's something beyond the body.

I've seen it. I'm sorry

I can't stay here with you.

I'm waiting for deliverance
My punishment from God

for being

born

is just to wait so long

to give pain

a name and call it life
Thomas

She wants to be a bird.
She told me so last summer
when we were climbing,
thought our hair had got caught
in the clouds.

Her arms spread out
she leaned far off the cliff
and I thought of her small body
plummeting.

But she hovered in a swan dive
perfectly in space, and the air
cradled her skin, a bright hammock.
A bird.

She wanted to surpass her body,
become weightless feather and hollow
bone that could sing itself larger
than a church.

She floated above the chasm,
cosmos swirled around her,
I couldn't move but to stare.
Jim

it wasn’t til years later I realized
most of the troops were either poor
black and white kids from the south,
black kids from the inner city,
or poor white trash like myself
who didn’t have the connections
to get out

one day I got a haircut
from the local barber who kept shop
that night the whole place was blazin
our ammunitions turned against us cuz
the barber was a sympathizer
and drew maps of our base

when dark mornin was quiet
I curled up and closed my eyes
thinkin’a the fields back home
and how they moved with the slightest breeze
hidin the crick where we caught trout
toads and crawdads under long days sunshine

an remember how I talked to you then
wisin I was back there and not always
knowin how I got to where I was anyway
what I did wrong
an why you and the devil was fightin
for our souls
an why you weren’t winnin

we were lambs first
but when the sun got low
and everything round turned red
all was shadow below and the sky
so beautiful we didn’t know anymore
who the wolves were
Marta

nearly perpendicular
to Earth's broad curve
I feel its tug
from each radius of our shared axis

I stand completely still
the slightest unbalance would tip
me into gravity
tell them

    Earth wants me
to lie my length down
next to it
to feel my curves
mold to its
from crown to toe like all the lovers

    its bulk would be
so weightless next to me
its gravity a whisper
stuck in bodies
we didn’t ask for

Our building squeaks with shoes
from the wet city, where
melancholy throws its laughter
from high walls.
Each day I find out more
how wrong I am in this life,
try to purge the sweat of someone
who calls from a body holy
with what it’s given. The skies
broaden; every muse wielding war.
The smell of dogs and plumbing saturate our empty flat; it's hard to stop thinking in plural.

I still keep your ring in my pocket, feel its weight on my thigh—some days I forget, collect a pile of phone numbers dangling matchbooks, before trivial things remind me—even the cockring lying in the parking lot, Jimi Hendrix secretly dying on the hi-fi decades later.

*But I loved you like a burning building,*  
*too blue and mercury to save.*

*I held you like rain water*  
*slipping back to earth.*

Marx called language *agitated layers of air,* but our words were sweet rocks that sank and fermented in boards beneath our feet—plurality was a bottleneck, jagged and sparkling with obscenity.

But he didn’t see the way the babies cry in their cubicles behind wire windows, that first or last gasp agitating all of our throats, the way we cry because the babies swallow our adulthood as we pray between jaded sheets.

*I needed you like a sinking rock*  
*needs algae to pull it under to its soft,*  
*obscure bed.*

He didn’t see us when we laughed and screamed, when in drunken belligerence you layered the air commanding  
*Get your ass back in bed and don’t hide*  
*my razorblades.*
The laughing woman says I believe in miracles, I see them every day—she Godmothers a thousand broken babies as they sputter out of dark wombs.

We paint with layers of light among buildings that are still beasts, or start to roll outside the window like moored vessels sending up white masts against the haze.

We talk to God in our sleep and bargain for an ark while pooling light falls from our fingers.

In the shower God is in our hair but we’re not quick enough, runs to the sewer to be filtered back into silt.

And it layers us, too, falling in the shallow canal informing sea with our salt— island goats watch our kayaks and sea pulls us away, scared children in the sun’s hottest mile.

The babies who survive grow to build God and worship art.

We pass a dumpster proclaiming Eat More Art, and know the God we’ve built of yielding light commands each labored stroke.
Our skins belie the same atoms as ore from pilfered earth, these same layers of matter that spill into mountain, sink into bone, rise

in a cave breathing dissolution so brilliantly young ladies believe they've been violated.

We command matter layering our skulls to rejoin flesh, climbing as bodies wait to join one another in the immediacy of our unspoken—we wait to eat words in tentativeness of beginning, the obscenity of end.

Our caves a stark burden, a fire building flesh from years of waiting in the warbled city.

Our lives a burning cave from which we extract memory, blame, fruit in its waning.
a partnership

one man gesturing emphatically through his thick accent
to trees hulking over a lush green

the birds in the trees
a squeaky washing machine

the men chatter, question,
while the child teeters haphazardly on indecisive legs

the ball in the tree wanted transcendence,
a change in perspective

the child wanted it so.
What It Names Us

i.

When a man is no longer a man.
When I take his identity:  
  his boots, his sweaty ballcap or suede elbow patches, his haircut,  
& he reaches for his political arsenal & finds instead a groin crippled by shrapnel, reaches for his wife & finds I've stolen her as well, garters & all —how can he still be a man—  
& when I take his things (shrapnel & all) into the restroom marked LADIES & the security guard follows or when Sir becomes my second name (& embarrasses my father at the garage) & when I develop new names on escalators at the public fountain or under refuge of a juniper in the green red desert.

ii.

But I'm lying beneath brambled air craving your quiet, with trees whose buds play the clef of sky and burled branches, wanting back in.  
  The weight of air settles into my clothes, as into the wrinkled garment of mountain crawling up from desert, at whose base cactus flowers open.

Our friction defines us like the tangle of pansies, colors blurring in the periphery of who touches whom, and does it matter that the girl’s bare skin is scarred with sunlight, and what those dark passages name us in this world.
Tumult Blossoms

I dream words
    and the man downstairs
    dreams his own.
Mine shine on walls,
    crumple in trash cans,
    scrawl on trestles
    as morning lifts us.
His are a beacon
    calling a lover home.
The woman next door
    dreams her baby's words
    in the night hoping:
    she won't be afraid of dogs,
    she'll tell her abuelos
    that the days are young
    and to bum a bright star
    on the horizon for her return.
The girls across the courtyard
    are my family.
When we wake from our dreams
    Sunday afternoon
    we'll eat together boisterously,
    try not to think about the coming week.
Freeway unfurls
    to a 4th grade classroom,
    where the pupils don't read,
    speak the same language or have textbooks,
    won't know each other.
The mohawk, tattooed arms, and pierced face
    races in a red Camaro to school
    to study the science of politics
    in the city of sin.
Stern face rushes to hospital bedsides,
    old women crankily adore
    as their visitors' chairs collect dust.
The quietness of the house when everyone has left,
    even the man fixing our cars and lamps
    in exchange for a room with cluttered balcony
    facing the wash.
The morning news over,
    animals asleep in their respective plots
    and left again with only private words.
The man down the street
    dreams his next fix.
The boy in the yard dreams
    of airplanes and forgets
    what his mother's told him.
A woman in a car dreams a bigger house
    and of leaving,
    and as the light turns green
    her car is so quiet
    she sits a moment longer.
A young man in his quiet cell
    remembers crying babies
    and dreams himself holding them
    in a bathrobe in early sunlight.
The woman who paces the sidewalks all day
    kneels in the empty church
    in that same light
    and dreams herself another place.
Cockroach

stuck on his back
in the corner of my kitchen
somehow didn’t make it home

through the pried-away board under the sanctuary cabinets
blow gently toward him his legs and antennae wiggle slowly
dogs sniff at him yet he lies resignedly
debate about whether to toxify him with the spray I bought
surely if he didn’t die
he’d carry poison back to his family’s nest
couldn’t smash him lying so helplessly
another primal creature whose death could weight my soul
simply for dislike
should I be merciful
and swat his agonizing life to its end in linoleum
could I bear to flip over and set him free

is he a messenger for some queen
or a mother with babies lurking nearby
is he integral to his own society

or have comrades left him unable unwilling to help
maybe a suicide mission
exiled from his community for unspeakable pleasantries

certainly if there were more I would
scurrying out of drain pipes
or basking in the cereal boxes
when I see them dash across the floor
terrified by some emancipated elation
I quash their dreams, a frenzied god

why such debate over this humiliated wretch
I do my morning chores stepping gingerly around him
dishes coffee dogs to feed

squat and study his silhouette against white tile
a piece of crumpled tin foil lies nearby
glinting in the morning light
The Great Divide

Your voice used to surprise people.
I knew how it changed with climate
like the genus of trees, or the weight of air.

You longed to be an island
with the weight of a pebble.

We tumble, cackling and scolding
down the gully carved for us,
destinations elusive regardless of planning.

But tomorrow we could roll into ocean,
or be scooped up and dropped back on the mountaintop
still half air or ice.

Float. Icicle. Polish pebbles for posterity.
Shine under the current that pulls us
through ripening earth, through tarnished words.

You know that one day tomorrow will be too far.
An island in a pond, a pond on a volcano, you’ll sit
round and placid. Dammed and silent and cold as January.
Because I am a word
    connoting a library of concepts, please

do not mistake me for a mountain.
    Each day I wake as water

fumbling over awkward stones;
    glance over the frowning rim of coffee and there

hanging on the wall an image
    I recognize as your framed and

jilted life. The verb to print: skin
    knit tightly by skin, imaginary wound

littered on a page, breathing the gridded
    magnitude of a life too common and complex for

neat type of a book to capture. Staccato
    overture scrawled red, yellow, green, layers inked on

parchment, pressed in the rolling
    question of a crank. Etched chaos

relieving the plate, fabrics gathering
    self-pity in their layers, while inks like

tanager and bee-eater press themselves as sky
    upon the page. And the sentiment—bold

vulgar stain that could not summon
    words for It matters,

xanthous puss bubbling up between
    yielded scrape—instead finds

zenith in a life ever less spoken.
She Said It Looked Like An Egg

The flames must have been beautiful:
  - oranges,
  - reds,
  - blue-blacks weathering the night,
charring the bookcase where they'd lit candles
waiting for Mother.

  But when she arrived, she curled up in the smoke

  turning to scratches in their throats,
  dissipating in the atmosphere, disappearing
as Father had into the extraneous tropic of Florida
with his new wife and children.

Sister listened to idiots babble near the tracks, felt herself toppling forward
off the edge of the world past their aunt's farm:

  Brother was so small.

The older cousins enjoyed their innocence,
dragging them through endless fields and pastures empty,
golden,
horrible with garish sunlight.

Took her to the edge,
butt of a shotgun at their heels.

  Her child-eyes wide took in everything
  that dared breathe in the vast nothing,

but couldn't close fast enough
to capture the image of the dog's soft head
still intact, before they pulled the trigger.

In the rolling green of northern Minnesota,
above the slight Scandinavian lilt that still creeps out at times,
she said

  *It looked like an egg.*
August

Women hobble past in uncomfortable shoes.
Her sneakers hover
pointing toward the dusty slate of desert.
They both squint into afternoon

haze blurring the horizon. She adjusts
her brakes at either hip and proclaims, "Indians
used to dance until it rained." He turns
from her side, stepping out into the sky, and lifts

his tongue to it, waiting.
blue promise
America Lies Sleeping

Where I was a child
the sky was crisp
and bluer than my eyes.

The bleached skull
of prairie bison
wears deadly blackened horns.

The sky that holds us
also owns us
while we measure our space in it.

At the end of each eon
the universe ceases
to exist because Brahma closes his eyes.

A coyote lurks
near the freeway exit and watches you
each day for a year.
Blue Promise

I don't know when my family came to America.

Ellis Island wasn't what it is now, liberty towering for the likes of my grandmother to collect trinkets.

To dream of standing under it in awe, count spires of her crown and get lost in blue-green wake of a ferry or deep folds of the lady's skirts.

When they set out with wagons. Oxen domesticated millennia prior. The cities had already begun.

Chicago would reign as midwest queen, extolling her virtues of fish, steel, farm, lumber, traincar, rearing the margins of a young nation, a matriarchal Margaret I molding her offspring to govern a united land.

They brought that spirit into the stillness. Driving for sunset until it felt right; the expansive blue promise of Dakota.

The cold is a different one with no longhouse, no town square.

Four sod houses on a creek would comprise the new Norwegian settlement. Three children, few livestock, squabbling or smoking or terribly dear grownups scanning an endless horizon, no wind in the grass or trees in the stillness or even a bird to perch in it.

And no wonder that ruins of Leif Ericson's Vinland, land of grapes and iron, found nine centuries late in New Foundland, whose banks house long-migrating codfish with red marbled head and black barbelled jaw, still inhabited by fishermen, tundra ice, tree rock.

The Viking would be first to sail
from the east after Beringia submerged,
in hulking lapstrake ships, farmer-become-warrior,
sailor, soldier, another patronymic oral history
whose language would cultivate and reckon,
whose gods battled giants.

This northeasternmost tip of an immense continent
would follow me to Vegas and its glittering,
trash-strewn desert more than a thousand years later.

That history should plague me in this dark age of immediacy.

And a letter to a grandmother
who should be dancing under liberty on her next, ninetieth, birthday
should lead me all these places, having only set out
to make a poem she would be proud of:

*I don't understand you kids and your poems these days, they don't rhyme.*

On the farm, above the swift red dells,
in the settlements grown to picketfence towns,
in the home because your legs don't work so well anymore,
in the climate only northern blood can bear, prayers so often do.
Korčula, Yugoslavia, 1989

at the edge of beach lay a wall skirting water.
we fished from salvaged sticks and twine,
with a shiny lure from market, off the rocks,
catching nothing, my cousin was eleven; but I
was thirteen and not astounded
by the women's bronze breasts on the sand.

we drank warm coca-cola and drifted,
with dazzled foreign tongues, into the pull
of the adriatic, among islands that teemed
with someone's hungry goats.
bread lines were short, and sometimes
there was milk, even eggplant or other exotics.

sun settled each night into the vast world at my feet,
and somewhere there's a photo I remember
of my mother settling in it too from the same rocks.

but what I meant to tell was the afternoon
that was so startling I fell off the wall
into the canal, my clothes and skin
wet among scattering fish and clawed scavengers.
Driving Home

Initially mistook
the black cow for a bull,
then wondered why she was
alone in a field, under fledgling
October dawn so near the road,
its black rubber remnants
and ruddy crimson stains.

Alone on the road
I am also mistaken
for a bull, watching her
wondering if she's happy
and why I didn't become
a mathematician.
The corn stalks have dark
shriveled heads like a thousand blackbirds
teetering, gossiping and hungry,
balanced weightless; feather and hollow
bone. How easily I could crush
those bones between callous tips
of finger and thumb and how many
times it's (undoubtedly) been done.

Trucks pass.
I notice one girl's glazed
eyeball and yellow-tagged ear poking
through the metal vents between glints
of blue sunlight. Should I
have been a soldier? People's bones
aren't so fragile, but they chatter
in the same rows on telephone wires.
Now's the time grasses turn
straw and rust, and beasts call to each other
over flat rows to where green survives.
12-year Journey Around the Sun

I.

One year ends and another begins with no one
I know having seen God. But God is in the burning
building. Loved-ones bend like reeds
or reshape their particles into new
versions of themselves. My lover assembles
a new campstove on the living room floor.

Each of us has seen God. Our incognizant globe
turns one year further into a new century, turns past
our expectations to a new realm
of sweet ruin. The wind pulls sandstone
from a crumbling seabed. My body steps one day,
one decade closer to my own grave, struggling
not to squint past it to the universe’s
red future. But even as I document, the stolid sun
changes its name to a new day and we twirl
around it in rays peeling
off layers 'til Jupiter’s above again, the first
in two centuries. Rivers freeze over
their trout populations, and no matter how fast
you hold things (say the pocket watch
your father left, strung by gold
to memory), they drop from the hand and splinter.
This seems a dark celebration. It is a chain
of light tethering us to change, whose propulsion
has brought us to the very spot
we now stand, admiring crags in
frosted sunlight, the harboring reefs raised
from water, compressed by the nurturing
weight of air and heavy history of fossil. Broken
the clock whose tick invites
the moon, the sun, the one tock which spells
a new year, and wonder who they were that first discovered
time, first documented the pirouette of Earth, the orbit

of a moon, their onward-churning dance around the sun
—as if all planets and their moons were partners
in a ballroom waltz, fathers twirling small daughters

in circles 'round the cavernous hall, training them
for later years of courting—how it felt to be a father of time
in the shroud of history. We are guests in time

and bow to it as to a king, unquestioning, while it bends
to a legend. Even the atheist, the tyrannosaur
dug from this sediment, and the fuming

volcanoes on moons of Jupiter, are chronicled
by the life and death of one man who might have been
savior. Years add on themselves,

numbers so plain
for the weight they proffer, and I'm sometimes thankful
for my failing sight. The blur between streetlight

& starlight, between moon & river, I watch
the edges of things go soft and forget
the shine of the watch I bore

that wore them. The world cries in the shower again,
because it's inadequate; but somewhere
a great light is shining, and a child learns revolution.
II.

He gazed from the base of what tidalite mountain,
and measured the distance of stars against the faint brow of it, pressing
against a mostly black sky.

One day love would make me want to forget,
reconcile the rift between science
and the afterlife, believe in mutability of the soul throughout ages.

October, the year
of our lord 1992, the Catholic Church of Rome would pardon the heretic,
and still the moon was hauling in the neap tide,
and time was sweeping
round the sun in such convincing rays.
The same Rome that appointed Jupiter god of the sky.
III. St-Germain l'Auxerrois

It's not famous. Another stone building on another streetcorner in Paris, walking distance from our small room and an accidental discovery. 10 franc for a candle to light before one of the many saints,

and while my own sentiment may be insignificant, the weight of the many candles together muffled any sound the visitors made.

It wasn't my prayer or the somber figure before me, but the tangibility of the tranquil mass of spirits crowding the air.

Its saints standing on the heads and backs of monsters, myths, or laymen, tattered skirts draping, or their own heads in their hands.

Windows rising like flaming stars, or sunflower crops, friars stuck to the wailing spires, saviors with hollow mouths through whose brain one can see the blue sky. Unworldly stained glass, and, for some reason, a monkey playing a bagpipe.

When Monet painted it after centuries' devastation, revolution, fodder storage and printing works,

its yellow bled into the sky and its trees leaned away, fondling the air, stretching toward the edge of canvas and the chimney-pipe rooftops of Paris.
migration

she went to africa to fall in love
'cross the kenyan desert in pursuit
of chanting silhouettes in an orange sky
and the sand was so fine and smooth
(like i remember the sensation of skin)
she said
    there are things worth having
    but they come at a price
    i want to be one of them
he told her that the trick when one flies
    is never to land

(i've heard you're coming back soon
it's ten degrees and getting colder
i've learned the trick is to keep one's head
in a book and never come down
i gave up the desert for love
she said
    i can breathe again
    when i'm in your arms
i've migrated to the hills to escape
    the bitter prairie chill)
Toward the 93-Million Mile Star

We pick the sun up where we left it yesterday,
Earth revolving toward tomorrow.
Two million years ago
they date the first inkling of man, defined:
one who works with tools,
buried with them in mud for our posterity.
Generations later a few wise souls traverse the Bering Strait,
are buried with their tools, weapons, undisturbed
for now among scoured buffalo skulls.
The Badlands' paleoremnants, hidden in brilliant striations.
We stop there for a picture at sunrise.

Before you knew me, you didn't know
the joy of barreling down a gravel road to nowhere,
to wherever it took us alongside towering cornstalks,
windows down and dust flying.
One spring day we ended up in Iowa
for no better reason but the sunshine,
summer we followed it into the west
and waited for it to catch up and burn the prairie golden.

I save maps out of the National Geographic, drawing earth's life
out before me. Killer whales near the Bering Strait
devouring the few otters because seals and lions are gone.
I eat sushi (remembering your distaste for anything exotic)
raised on a farm in China, where once were mangroves,
where Homo erectus first trekked from a fork in the road
at Georgia's double-speared peninsula in Black and Caspian seas.
Antarctica's shores are populating, and swiftly melding into the Weddell Sea.
The country I visited as a child, rippling into the Adriatic,
no longer exists, nor Georgia's peninsulas.

Now I call you in Iowa
and want to tell you
that the buildings here are layered
with some odd history
I can't read. Somehow
the road led here. The Strip
is a light show that burns all night,
but I'm only a hundred miles or two
from the sunset you remember.
The one that distracted us
driving north from Phoenix
so we missed the turn to the Grand Canyon.
I still haven't seen it.

We keep migrating in hopes the sun will be brighter.
The city has yet to civilize me. The truck is still full of dust
and it remembers all the wrong turns down the blue highways.
I guess you still haven't seen the ocean.
It's just past the Joshuas and vineyards,
and the yawning crop of redwoods. Past the farms and raving city
and you'll smell it. It's full of history and restless.
It won't try to civilize us.
It will give us two suns every afternoon;
we can chase them until they become one
great fiery star on the horizon, half air, half water,
transversing worlds. We'll sink our feet in it, enjamed
between earth and sky.
From the Stuccoed Townhouse Balcony

I read about the ocean, and imagine my balcony an anchored island
in a dark current—the burdening lights of vessels blink past, too loud,
and I remember my tiny island floats, undetectably, above the air force base:

the outcropped twinkling of box-edged government buildings
blur under the tarnished tide, glowing like a sunken nest
of polished pearls. Our particles fly to furnish gaps

left by the absence of one another—two ambulances and a firetruck today,
at different times, rush to lade draining space, attempt to stop the ancient particles
from changing into a new shape—what is tragedy, but evolution?

In the dark valley, between mountains of fossilized sand, multitudinous neon
settles in the quiet tides of air; courtyard doors sleep regarding the pious offering of lights
below their paved altar. The famished forms of streets and lamps curl-
up in the oyster shell of watery light.
Atoms transpose my skin, this fluid vessel, temporary, anchored

with beasts and sleeping forms above the yowling city.
Migration

Elizabeth Bishop taught her cat to read. Or tried. Words like *Meow* and *Milk*. She'd water the seed of his brain with flashcards; but would land off-target: to her chagrin, he'd mutter *Skunk Hour* or *petals on a wet, black bough*. So she'd map out lessons in geography. Studying a northern map, from its murky bowl of a brain, the cat, "Minnow," would fish a dripping phrase like *the hour badly spent*. She packed trunks with harmless words and suitcases with catnip, and two orphans fled south to land where new vocabulary floated from salty lips of water.

Where chapped peninsulas of shore kissed that water she awoke and wondered if they'd followed the wrong map; the thick, glossy pages of National Geographic charted land so subtle in its lens. Sunk in twilight sand while the cat batted fireflies, she burned postcards, watching cinders of words float away on particles of oxygen, and hydrogen. This hour of truth in bitter sand seemed like every demandingly timid hour ever lived by a woman treading into age. Water crawled up to lick her toes and curled into itself gurgling words just audible to the coy map of wrinkles embedded in her soles. Watching the prowling cat and restless water, she wanted to root herself in anchored land.

But loneliness withered parched roots, and this unruly land wasn't far south enough. She imagined each terse hour a day, when a sip of bourbon or poem wasn't enough. The cat orphaned, her view of the equator inverted through Atlantic water, plotting longitudes and searching for the inherited map to her future. She examined all the splendid new words sliding off tongues of unwitting conspirators, hunting for words that meant her life, that meant the thick green shelter of this land could be her haven. But she forgot no map is permanent; forgot that love might last a lifetime, or an hour. And when her lover flew south across the pale and infinite water, she missed her blessed poetry-quoting cat.

Gathering her words about her, in the frightening hour waiting for hovering pebbles to land rings in stagnant water, she stood with trunks, postcards, a weathered map, a nameless cat.
quietude
Wait,
the brim
of spring has
reached our edges,
toppling headlong through
the leaves she left behind;
when she arrives our eyes will hold
her vivid to the sky like stained glass refracting.
bluebird

Across the desert a bird so blue I thought the sky had fallen on its wings. The city sighs in the distance where we've forgotten her. He'll live here only so long; he's gone already leaving me my quiet, my alway. He's risen out of himself like morning. I thought the sky had fallen. So blue, and the vapor was dust. The dust. It was pure and red on the ground. He had risen out of it, pure sky. The city settles in the distance, leaving me my alway. I followed him as far as the quietness would let me, but only to capture that second, and not know what to do with it. I threw it on a car hood with bright words to stay its transience. Lost my momentum. Across the desert a bird so blue, I thought the city had risen out of itself and forgotten us. She quieted. And we were left just the two of us in dust, red, blue, the sky, I've forgotten you almost already. One day we'll rise, out of ourselves, and the quiet world will open, become music, and won't need any more paper, ink, car hoods. All will become vapor, dust, ash. We'll rise blue out of ourselves.
The Swimmer

*Andante: 12/8 time*

Plunging, fingers outstretched, pointed toes trailing, head & eyes glazed with water, toward what imperfect symmetry of wings extending, up & out, angel swooning the depths; each end a bold cross mirrored —glide, contract, span— she'll reach it, and turn:
touch it, and turn;
under the surface, watching sky, some days instead she is a bird;
al the while the rhythmic chaos & breath, chaos & breath craning for air,
arching up from the surface;
ripples glint across her like scales, morning sun shafts the water charting the seismograph of her flight beneath.

*Lento: waltz*

Closes her eyes and it guides her through languid motions she's known for many lives— above,
their reflection wavering, & an orchestra of trees rend & bow in hot wind—
its flesh quavering in her cupped hand.
Ritual, and a Man Counting Citrus

I arrive at your door, content substitute
for your ideal—with daisies, or a lime, plucked
from an angry man's garden along the way.

The calculus of us
an applied mastery of yearly practice
we eventually get right.

We sleep when we can, with hopes to be woken—by another
side of the same sun, or the cranky alarm that draws us
into one another's dreams—to try again while there's time.

And the man counting seeds
might scowl again as we pass, might frown
at the progression of each season.

Maybe,
he is forlorn because his perfections
need no practice.
$8.00 Heaven

She decorated my white-trash balcony
with Christmas lights, carefully tap tap
tapping slight nails and clear-headed tacks

into the variegated stucco, while I calculated
students' grades at the kitchen table
in the front room to a faint, thumping

accompaniment from behind the bedroom.
When she finished and beamed
at me to witness her handiwork,

I sat in a room full of white fireflies,
setting our small world ablaze
with their blinking, rising above us,

sparkling off the eight-dollar chrome
of folding-chairs and populating the small
dusty windows in the French doors with light.

We reveled in our youth and poverty.
Today, sun is shining through spiderplants,
where a small, scarlet Buddha protects them

from ants, and shadows flit on the maple leaves
reaching nearly into the balcony, shielding
me from desert wind, an unusually cool May.

I read letters a man wrote
to his dying wife as he attempted
to maintain her flower garden. The spiderplants

glide on the wind to touch me. A stray nail
glints in shadows of spiders on the floor;
the lights are quiet but the sun is warm.
SoA chirp and a quick buzz; 
for a moment all is still, 
even the human heart. 

He floats on wind, blurs with maple leaves; 
comes back two, three times, then six, 
tail paddling the air, wings invisible. 

Announces himself each time 
with a small, squeaking caw. Stops, 
and watches from a branch when the man 
downstairs belches and starts his truck. 

His wings are still and bright; I am still. 

When all is quiet, he approaches again, 
suspends magically on wavering sunlight 
through the leaves, shows me his cream-grey 
underbelly, shoots a long tongue out at the air. 

Each visit alighting the same 
small branch, just long enough to note 
the green-blue on his minute body, his red throat. 

No one will believe this 
of vast import to the nation; 
leaves darken, sky turns plum 
and apricot on the ridges behind them.

Whisper the Still Evening In

Soft chirp and a quick buzz; 
for a moment all is still, 
even the human heart. 

He floats on wind, blurs with maple leaves; 
comes back two, three times, then six, 
tail paddling the air, wings invisible. 

Announces himself each time 
with a small, squeaking caw. Stops, 
and watches from a branch when the man 
downstairs belches and starts his truck. 

His wings are still and bright; I am still. 

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Each visit alighting the same 
small branch, just long enough to note 
the green-blue on his minute body, his red throat. 

No one will believe this 
of vast import to the nation; 
leaves darken, sky turns plum 
and apricot on the ridges behind them.

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Inconsolable Fact:

That the immensity
beyond our green home frightens;
that the flattened nation lies

upon my table, spangled dully;
that the roar of blood and awful
cadence of a heart convinces one of madness.

Change my answer, it is malleable.

Above the small print
and the avenue's exchange, it means
this place: snow's sparkling hurts

your head; lungs burn to reconcile
doubt; time shifts
allow to pass years left unsaid;

blue shadow of the morning crawling
drifts; and always covering
the silent words a roar of footprints
stifles birds.
25 yrs

Listen. It takes so long to put a sentence together. What I mean is that... It takes so long. How to find the right ones, will you follow? It's been so quiet here so long.
God’s Eye is on the Sparrow

A dozen people in a basement
joined hands, lit candles,
drank coffee and gossiped
when off-key hymns finished.

I ate flesh, drank blood.

Was anointed in memory
of a generation with no family tree.
Like generations before
they become fossils,
boring themselves under silt and mud;
death carried from shore to shore like sand.

Anointed to save us, too.

You told me all the insomniac nights
you went to the room next door
and planned your own death
while I lay sleeping.
I woke nights wondering if you’d still be
next to me in the morning.

A different death, the same result.

In woods I prayed,
where the passerine congregation
sang on spindly legs, wind whistling
through their hollow bones,
held vigil at dusk, each alighting
his own aging limb, settling
into silent haze, peacefully awaiting.
salvage
Ghazal Snapshots of Vegas

Smooth Operators Beauty Salon: bars cross windows and door; suspect that business comes from word-of-mouth.

Disheveled man in winter wind, thin brown jacket, heavy head, slumps beside an overturned shopping cart.

The text of the busstop, our second thousandth year, borrowing terse verbs from the mouth of the common man.

A young woman pedals through plunging traffic, face a blatant canvas, Jesus in her wire basket.

Rusted wreck of truck sunken between desert slopes, hidden art, bed a fleshy haven for dry trinkets.
The Long Now

i.

Combine:

1) a box that opens;

2) half a world of loneliness;

3) landscapes that represent the passage of time;

4) the words that mean we are complex and infinite beings in a finite space (I know why the caged...).

ii.

Trapping you in a body you didn't ask for; sculpting the landscape around you into fossil, into wrinkle; decades' growth and ruin; hundred years' cacti.

I give you limited space in which to save the world.

Belly full of landscapes I've worn, buried in glass with the notion of a bird's warble; face the hollow shell of what a world might be; feet sunken into the ground to become something new.

My hands have long become obsolete, like the face that's imagined, concave.

Shine copper, tarnish like a penny; bring your tides, bed, stellar bodies. Chronicle your life and death by a legend.

I give you borrowed words for your joy, loneliness, comfort, infinitude, and imprisonment.

iii.

A face like a map: charting where it's been, what it knows; a cartography of bone, muscle, elastic skin; eye like a sunflower; but only a fraction of the whole.

A gridded basin like an earth, inconstant in meridian and texture, rolling its question through its own grime, decay, and scribbled earnest.

A life opens like a shadow, growing to the arid limits of its own cage, throwing barbs against its own skin; stretching toward stalwart light.
A second face, hollow, like a world mad: lonely in its isolation, saddened by its multitudes.

A torso like a capsule, holding time in its gut with these temporary elements, mending the whole together 'til its rended and replaced, outdone by its own genius.
Blue Highways

rattling across the curvature of plain that defines
dakota, rich only when studied with a quiet eye
and contemplative demeanor: factories dissipating

in the rearview, sparse ranch buildings
sinking into themselves at bloated intervals, invisible
gullies and creeks stoic,

stockpiled with mammals and reptiles (some still living,
some long dead), rainbow trout, mislaid weapons
boasting dried remnants of scalp and hide.

ya know they found that t-rex out here a few years ago.
yep. squint past glass
at the bleached grass of buffalo gap leaning away
toward a broad continent.
in some museum in chicago. rancher that owned the land
and the lady that found it, both lost custody in the suit.

watch the land ramble out on all sides,
disappear into a blur of horizon, the void of the prairie
as frightening to some as introspection.
What's important to the nation
is no import (to me?)
WRIGHT
squished in a corner
MICRO-
openended
FILM (typewriter type) Halsey, Harlan Page. 1839?-1898.
3 x 5 its small creamy decadence distracts me from a pacing lecture on John Ashbery, the
speaker's coat is black and his face boyish
(hand scripted in pen, a careful, feminine hand)
2H-4 (type) Annie Wallace: or, The exile of Penang.
my own boyish face has only become more pointed & stretched since the days I thumbed
through these on wooden stools, shuffling in their long wooden drawers w/ muddled
brass fixtures, the light was always nicest in the afternoon, gray, before the fluorescents
clicked on
A tale. By Harlan P. Halsey. New York,
the tale doesn't end there, it's only the beginning, it's yet to reach its penultimate
(because even it isn't final) lower cover and may never—the child spent entire afternoons
devouring, and maybe Penang itself would eventually emerge
Miller & Holman, 1857.
my version of America is a quiet one, a history that repeats itself, or never changes, not
the public private sector but the days like birds and their trees perching in rich clay or in a
pale sky
304 p. (Wright American fiction, v. II.
but the lecture always ends too soon & there's so much to say—our fictions remind us
we're not lone, hatching them evenings after the brutal news on the radio—the brown air
of people distracts me and I lose my words
1851-1875, no. 1074, Research Publications
those days alone in the sky, the child an unassuming exile in the world's margins with
rough ladders of pine for lookouts on a canyon packed w/ green spires under which you
cannot see the floor of needles, brown two-pronged & brittle—(and the sky reached
Penang, which you cannot see either w/ its tide clear as air)—(how old was I?)
Microfilm, Reel H-4)
a girl in the lecture passes me her poem about blue women (maybe they too are lost in the
sky?)—this tenure has almost ended and what have I learned?—it's been revised;
everything is revised, continually. ours is the oldest language, its music constantly
revised & rare if ever mastered
I. Title.
I may be blue yet

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Songs for the Folk Radio

The folk know what they want

That edge between the night when darkness means the end of work. The smell of rain hanging on air, the promise of a break and a harvest. Gone away and found on the mountainside; change who went across and the sea stood still. Silently close their lives grow to a nail bent in a post, or something not theirs. Mine may not be the kingdom of God, but what is mine grows in the tended earth, good for folk to sink into and watch it as rays trickle into their toil, of generations.

The hurt eyes. And of my thinking into the tended earth. Global anything. More. Community can't respond with care, behind the ears. The clean hurt eyes.

Wanna know the night. Lights changing, stations blindness. Saturday moving in. Bloodstream, here you been all along. Come crying loud your doubt. For crying out loud, let it feel. Now go. Babylon's ears, the red blue. Back home, if in want never doubt your own head. Go. But repeats. And it's through.

City shuts buffalo out. The old me: sing, listen, stare. When windfall breaks and beauty joked, law bored me. And sing me lullaby; the rock fall; clip and getting colonized. Stay.

Smell taste brilliant. Step. Whatever want to gonna. What I see for let be, through shame, time wants everything. Nothing sacred. We as, no. No, as stepping shades and; yeah.

In real clean on Saturday, cold city confesses angel. Way life is when sunsets in western working. Ride; wrangle; die. I. I stars the sky.

Some woman coming. She, your three. How remain, this the name we sounds same, is fickle. Her, the will you living where only the I'm tired will slide over her. So shamed.

Never off ground. Flown. Those who have flight.

Kids know. Can guess. Hard is love, fall round the block. Christmas and I love, walked me. Hide. Chevy driving, get even with minds.

Late radio across in night. Nest blankets rest; drumbeat the raining the all way to Texas, through rain and Arkansas first.

Need hammer but to thread the needle seen miles before a storm. Bright sail, as artist say, to far shore and torn blue.

Drinkin it's mad. Got me ambition, a condition. Before the come'ere find flying and look. Life night, and anything makes it home; everybody.
In daylight what we can, hearts raw, clean, away. Water like fearless jumped in with feet uncontrolled. So we’re on a hill, ancient, standing strong. Fast it cannot matter; hard thrown clear away of it here.

She away; autumn, competition shiny. The how dancing her, with cool I know.

That edge between the night and tended earth. The promise of rain and generations.
Don't Forget Where You Came From

your father told you. Amber grass blurs
on either side of a rust-on-white Toyota.
A mass mammoth grave is excavated nearby.

The radio is broken, hawks patrol the stream
hiding to the south for small, thirsty rodents.
It's a windy November, happy that the sun

and heater are both still on duty. Remember
how the two of you struggled with the aluminum
sheets that would reinforce the roof,

you on a wobbly ladder and him on the roof itself.
How the roof actually wanted to take off in the wind
like a section of airplane wing. How you held

the roof and the aluminum to it more for fear
of flying away yourself than to keep the thing
on there until he could nail it down.
She Doesn't Read Poetry Because of Brooks & Warren

Because they didn't teach her that it's the small soft fingers of a child struggling to twist together a shoelace that makes a poem. Or that reading the skyline of one's birth place

recalls the sound of wind in wheatfields and the coolness of redbrown clay in a palm scooped from the banks of the river. Later, sun will bake whatever trifle you've sculpted to boast

'til the Missouri reclains it. You'll teach your dog to swim there, in a cove beside the grunting current; ford between the shoals in drought; college girls will drink cheap jugs of wine there above the harvest

and sing hymns they won't remember a few years later. They won't know each other anymore, but will retain the silhouette of the "we" they were that night dipping themselves in the boundary between two states. They won't think about what came before them: homesteaders armed with two oxen, a shotgun, the family trunk richly stained between its creaking hinges; their fields rended by rolling thunderheads of locust; fathers lost 'til springtime trying to fetch the minister or save the herd from blizzard, appearing again peacefully leaned against a soggy haystack after the thaw, eyes fixed on the flat horizon; the maddening silence of the first year on prairie void of trees, birds, or landmark to occupy the eyes. They won't think of what is to come, in this place they'll all leave, morphed by a century's toil in dirt: how the trees that stretched, despite impinging winter, to shield their houses would be lapped up by bulldozers, roots splayed across the grass still gripping tendrils of soil: houses

—that replaced homes erected of earth, sod bricks and sapling thatches—windows long boarded up against looters, behind chain-link, beyond the chipped curb of a busy intersection, gutted

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and disassembled to expand the airport. They'll find
the voice in their throat are not their own, but belong
to their mothers, grandmothers, and the night
they spent singing an offering to the river itself.

She doesn't read poetry. Because to live
a life is not always to revel in its patterns,
the immigrant's dream breathtaking
and devastating. The child tying his shoe

on the opposite sidewalk is mesmerized by the glint
of bright machinery folding and lurching
in hot summer, and he has my father's face.
I want to tell her this.
You can count on him being there every morning. A cap tipped in his hand, eyes magnified by thick too-big glasses, gray hair & stubble slightly wild. If he can see you through the glasses he won’t look. Today someone has made him a very neatly printed placard gridded out on cardboard:

| HOMELESS   |
| DONATION   |
| WILL HELP  |

and on his head’s a stocking cap. The cassette deck scrolls out No Woman, No Cry and the guitar solo is infecting, climbing resonant & clear through a lexicon of mastery, years of practice to reach two flawless minutes. Up the street, rows of houses are gutted to make elbow room for the airport. At night, passersby witness the warm eerie glow of an incinerator. On a rare clear day the mountains are so beautiful you’re tempted to linger here & watch shadows move across them endlessly.

We carry things sometime for years before we put them on paper. But first, the houses are gone except a few standing chimneys, one painted coral, next to the red crane. Mesmerized by the red against bad paint peeling on the truck hood, & the desert’s pale dust nestled around it; and all the while I thought of how we missed Giverny because of my friend’s Parisian love affairs & the moon’s eclipse last night for our choice of hemispheres. The things I carry will emerge when I forget, and I’ll skirt the nurse’s question, not telling her that the feathers & turquoise are decorative, but the bear claw carries me somehow as well—we’re partners. Just as in English word & world are accidental twins.
poetry, an exercise against loss

to comfort in the arms of water
to lie in the hammock
    of another's skin
to trap my mother's face
    in the sunlight of streetfront windows
to wear-out one's boots a season too early
to bundle trees and rivers in a knapsack
    and claim its weight one's baggage
to trace contours of flesh
    as academic
to learn to lie and mistrust truth
to kiss without being radical
to diffuse into letters
    and fire
    thread and glass
    bone
    rock
    steel.
rust

like iron,
a body rusts
in places neglected
stains our hands
wanting to sand
back to shine
Repair

The next morning I mended the coffee table, on my knees fixing the broken leg with the drill my father gave me for Christmas, a trip to the hardware store to replace broken panels of glass—I couldn't afford them smoked and beveled like before—the stop I'm scared and I'll show you scared still fresh.

The letter I should have written years ago;

Dear S—

I'm sorry I was so tired for so long.
VITA

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