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Lucrative Blue

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LUCRATIVE BLUE

by

Jennifer Clare Touns

Bachelor of Arts
Texas A&M University
1996

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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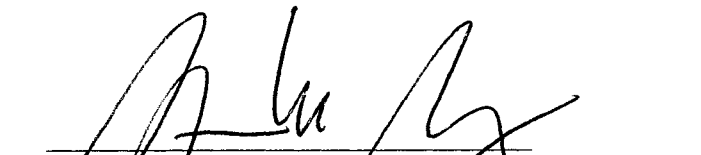
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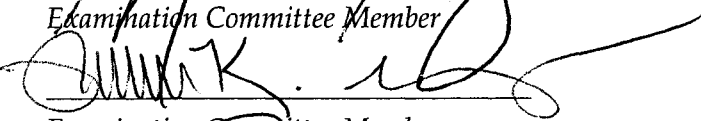
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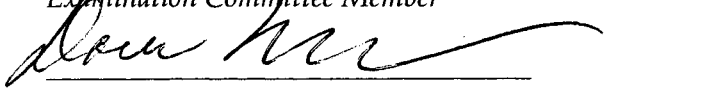
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Graduate College Faculty Representative



Thesis Approval
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The Thesis prepared by

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Examination Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

Lucrative Blue

by

Jennifer Clare Toups

Claudia Keelan, Examination Committee Chair
Associate Professor of English
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Lucrative Blue, a book-length collection of original poetry, explores themes such as questioning prevailing American ideologies, birth/motherhood, and accessing/confronting the inner self. The poems are influenced by Modern and Post-Modern conceptions of art and form; Gertrude Stein's concept of the continuous present and Charles Olson's concept of projective verse are particularly important. The collection attempts to pay close attention to the world surrounding the poems' speakers; the sounds of airplanes, dogs, and the images and sounds of construction frequently appear, as they were frequently present when the poems were created.

The collection is divided into three sections; the first entitled *Devour*, is largely political and takes a critical stance against many current American ideologies and choices. The second, entitled *Empire of Song*, contains poems that react to international travel to Italy and France. The third, entitled *Fathomless*, deals primarily with the inner self and emotional responses to the present.

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PREFACE

Company and The Present

Here. Now. This moment, standing in this patch of grass. The way the heart beats in it. The way the breath moves through it. The way the world moves, lives all around — the collective force of a single second in time. The tremendous awareness and humility required to be truly alive in it is one of the most difficult and freeing practices I ever have endeavored as a poet to learn and will have to continue to learn throughout my lifetime.

Gertrude Stein in “Composition as Explanation,” uses the example of war to illustrate the impossibility of using the past as a template for the present. She says, “That is because war is a thing that decides how it is to be when it is to be done”(513-4). Her point is that to plan, to premeditate, or to craft the trajectory of an experience based on the past, no matter how potentially brutal and inhumane the experience itself may turn out to be, is to transgress against the power of living and by association the power of an art that seeks in some way to let life live through it. The problem is that in life the desire to plan and carve out experience is mitigated many times by the impossibility of actually imposing that desire on the experience itself; however, in art, the poet or painter or sculptor is continually faced with a choice of allegiance; will s/he bow to a pre-meditated conception of the composition at hand or allow the power of the present moment itself to shape the expression?

One of the tangible ways that being alive in the present manifested itself in the poems of Lucrative Blue were the kinds of objects that began to enter. For example, the more I began to pay attention to the present moment and the things that were physically involved in that moment, the more often dogs, the sounds of airplanes and construction began to appear in my poetry. These are the real objects of my everyday life: I have two dogs; I live in Las Vegas, a city of dense and frequent air traffic, and I live in a new subdivision that is still under construction.

E.E. Cummings addresses this idea in his Six Non-Lectures as the difference between “doing” and “being.” In Non-Lecture Four, he quotes from his book The Enormous Room, “...We can never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing: the mystery which happens only and whenever we are faithful to ourselves... Life, for eternal us, is now...”(66). Part of being alive to the present is being aware of its ongoing entrance, or as Stein calls it “the continuous present,” which means that moment-to-moment the world changes, human beings change, objects change. Time, emotion, selfhood are not static. How else can a reader reconcile one poem that expresses an immense fear of becoming pregnant and another poem in the same collection that willingly celebrates pregnancy? To be alive to the present often means allowing seemingly contradictory ideas to live side-by-side — life itself is that complex, and art or rhetoric that says otherwise is often reductive.

There can also be a dark side to the present if artists become too invested in present ideologies, present conceptions of beauty, present ideas about what art must do and be. Again, in “Composition as Explanation,” Stein warns, “The only thing that is

different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything”(513). This particular comment directly refers to the way in which a society privileges certain kinds of art, and how other art works originally criticized as experimental or worse are accepted into the folds of popular opinion and heralded as classics. Both Milton’s Paradise Lost and Beethoven’s “Fifth” were branded by such fates. The poems of Lucrative Blue are not overly experimental in their form or content. Certainly the reader encounters unconventional spacing and juxtaposition, but the manner in which I feel the poems react to Stein’s astute observation is that they are fundamentally engaged with investigating and interrogating current American ideologies of consumption, achievement, greed, and self-aggrandizement.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in being an artist alive to the present is the ability to silence preconceived intention in order to allow the moment of creation its freedom and say. This is an immensely spiritual approach to art. I appreciate both the humor and honesty of Jack Spicer’s idea that poets must wait for the Martians to come — that they must wait for a force outside of their own intention to lead the poem. This approach is important because it demands that the poet be vulnerable/available to a myriad of possibilities. The ethical parameters of Spicer’s conception of poetry also demand that the poet remove ego from the creation process in order to let the world/the unknown/the other into the poem. The poem “Devour” is a pertinent example of my efforts to combat intention. As I began to write the poem, and Puck’s speech from “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” entered the page, I immediately became enraptured with the connection I made between the idea of a potion that makes one fall in love with the wrong person or thing and the struggles of the character Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s “Death of A

Salesman.” I wanted to make the two plays “talk” to each other; however, my intention became a miserable imposition on the poem. It wasn’t until I abandoned my idea and allowed the poem its own direction that any progress was made.

To share the full influencing powers behind the poems that came to be the contents of Lucrative Blue would require a novel-length sheath of paper and would in turn perhaps ruin the poems themselves. More than anything, these poems come from the haven of an educational experience — one that invited exposure, one that demanded change and experimentation. These poems are products of studying with talented and highly differing poets, of reading a multitude of diverse writers on many subjects from Williams to Marx to Einstein to Caryl Churchill, of travel to Italy and France, and of the million pieces of information and experience that melded with my background and history. This alone should be answer enough for the poems’ inconsistencies, for their different styles and knowledge. They are after all, the artifacts of a becoming, made historic by the act of writing, because as Cummings warns, “an artist, a man (woman), a failure, MUST PROCEED.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection is dedicated with love to Zach and Isaac. I would also like to express my gratitude to Claudia Keelan and Douglas Unger for their faithful support and instruction.

DEVOUR

WHAT THEY SAY

the house with the bigger lawn, more bedrooms, the home gym, home spa, home office

own a private world

a world: not for eating, not for cooking,

not for sitting passing an evening with neighbors

own a private world

teach the children, induct them: little toy shopping carts, little toy credit cards

On this street, in about a week, they will begin to build,
bundles of fresh cut wood, ready in stacks for scaffolds

I catch myself in this assumption: the land is waiting for change

I catch myself in this: I used to search for my unborn child's

features in other children

the ones I saw in grocery stores, at the park, on television

Life, too hectic for such unproductive

You'll know when you're ready

Don't waste time worrying now

Make sure you live for yourself, accomplish for yourself before

They say:

1. Take nice, cleansing breaths

2. Cultivate simple pleasures

It's a week since the poem began

Six miles to raise serotonin Last night, I dreamt

a man went on a shooting spree in this park where I run

Today, skateboards screech and rattle up makeshift ramps; bright-eyed mother

with two bright-eyed girls *faster, Mommy, faster down the hill*

DEVOUR

Word points this way -----

----- points that

to a field of strawberry leaves, the fruit
yet to bloom, already devoured

*If we shadows have offended, think but this,
and all is mended, that you have but slumb'ed here
while these visions did appear.*

Along the roadside,
great stretch of concrete,

anywhere, this nation,

highway mediums salted with color

rapid whiz of SUV,
after SUV, Bronco, Rodeo, Explorer,
Sport, Navigator, Tracker,
Wrangler, of SUV,
of SUV, Bravada, Expedition,
Pathfinder, of SUV,
of SUV,
Tahoe, Yukon, Land Cruiser

This weak and idle theme, no more yielding but a dream

rapid whiz of SUV
(but a dream),
of SUV
(but a dream),
of SUV
(but a dream),
of SUV
(but a dream, dream, dream)

one swerves, tumbles, careens
crackcrash, shatter of glass,
her white heels open the window

head still beside the gas splayed homecoming mum twisted on the grass

We will make amends ere long

Who knows what was known,
when what was known was known,
in what way it was known,
could they have known?

100 soles clap against marble flooring, hallowed halls,
 this nation
 suited herd
come to defend

This was my daughter, so beautiful, so young, before it rolled over
The men on the move
We swerved; it toppled, my wife
Their shoes slap against floor, move faster through the doors
 of prominent senators, congressional representatives
She was just running up to the store

At a car show in Detroit,
 a family: father, mother, newborn
 walk among colored steel, so large and shiny, so new
The mother tells a reporter,
 *These days all cars are built safely. It's just a matter
 of choosing*

*a dream,
but a dream, dream, dream*

Word points this way -----

----- points that

*That you have but slumb'ered, crackcrash, shatter of glass, no more yieldng, crackcrash,
shatter of glass, no more yielding, crackcrash shatter of glass, no more yieldng*

LUCRATIVE BLUE

Cup

one agile hand in water. Take
what you need, I would have said this
when you arrived cheekred and wind-lit
on your wild henchman

boots. But you wander with nonchalance,
deaf in amber plains, erecting cities
of intention, waste seeping from
your fingers that multiply each second,
their constant symphony rising
above residue that coos and settles

in crevices. My crimes are many. The shores
were placed too far apart, I know. An inconvenient
barrier between the lucrative blue. I could not
feed you either, corn should yellow with punctual
stalks and the cows. They should have fattened
within the week.

I've blamed you, asked for earthquakes,
to lessen your weight. But when I swell
with your wasting, don't you feel me
tremble with the loss of what I've called my own?
The mess of it now, your numbers,
your need.

But, you are here
with your growing womb
searching for that stream claimed
so long ago, let's linger here,
take off your bones.

NIGHTS AFTER/NIGHTS OF SLEEPLESSNESS

Soup bowl clatters
 onto the table, tinny spoon parting broth

*In peace I will both lie down and sleep
 for thou alone, O Lord dost make me
 to dwell in safety*

I want this promise for myself tonight

how long to lie in wait

covet the slumber of strangers

thwickthwack of dog door

re-enterable world

In peace I will lie down

Barter system: fears for sleep
 I'll trade my hoards; dream your dreams if it will A vase
 on the high kitchen shelf, made of glimmering bronze tiles
 holds a cylindrical shadow
 more pervasive — the refrigerator's constant hum

Control masks uncontrol, but you can control the uncontrol with abundant
 controlling thought

the worst that can happen is you'll build the wrong house
 for your soul

itchy itchity tick of clock, tip of tongue
 84 degrees in the kitchen, a thermometer with stars on each end
 and stars in the soup, must mean

I'll watch myself *not* sleep from the inside

Squeals of children down the street, clock tick, air conditioner claps on —
 a fan flipped open, fluttered against a face

There are the facts: an elevated heartrate, 100 beats per minute, timed 16 times —
 enough to alter the world

One side of the sand:

Those who sleep / Those who

51, 52, 53 hairs

should split ends be counted separately?

where to begin with the stars?

teeth tight at the neck of the spoon,

In peace I will lie down

This will end differently than I planned

promised promise land

CITY STORIES

August night curses with neon,
the pinks and greens, pulsing reds point
to some transient savior, a corner pub,

the almighty coffee shop. People across the city
are haphazardly wrapped in the finest
recycled paper products. Plastic sip tops secured

over faces, thin slits of eyes that gaze out at the landscape —
a majestic metal and concrete blend that blurs and flies up
through the holes. Suddenly, the city is folding in on itself.

Freeways crashing into beltways, suburbs toppling
into low-income neighborhoods, and you notice
not the explosions, wreckage or even unintelligible

screams. You see immediately arms and legs, detached,
reaching, pulling, hanging from street lights,
curled around the Galleria — empty and flailing.

Creation lost within creation, appendages moving
without thought or blood. Their little ice-cream stained
hands are impatient. They want me to turn the page.
We do and see the next miraculous city pop up.

ICEMAN

When the mountains sit back on the haunches
of their centuries and welcome desert cold,

I am on a journey through suburban landscape,
devouring concrete, flying up manicured heights.

Robins, dart around my squeaking tennis shoes,
and hours collapse on the question of the body.

Last week, two hikers unearthed a mummy
in the Italian Alps. A man preserved in icy ridges

some 5,000 years ago. Archaeologists labor
over his pouch, arrows, a bronze hatchet. Pick

and sample his body, a telling: teeth and bones
worn beyond carbon-dated age, fragments of grain

pulled from his gut hint of a home, reveal his autumn
journey, but will not open the woman he loved,

children released from his arms into fur. The look
of fear on his skull grows lips, a tentative jaw

while I lie among medical machines that shock muscles
and look through skin for my body's hidden script,

and I am thinking that I want this life, want to live it
with my husband, unborn children. Cars speed up

the plummeting slope. The sensation of quadriceps
balling to burn spells out its temporary life.

And the robins glide their perpetual race with air.

THINGS THAT BETRAY US

Eyes, brilliant
tunnelblind to blossoming, unpetal,
hungry for the comfortable stem. Newborn
mouths surrender sound, clamor into silence
or tongue-tired words. Parched hands,
masters of choosing, swim in rose
water releasing the residue of survival.
Art, vulnerable heart-fire opinion unpaints
until the most intricate frames
are left blazing

THOREAU, WHO LAMENTED THE FRONT YARD

Tonight I want no streets to walk in,
 nothing of the made
 luminosity of street lamps
 or strangle of a crowd pulsing
 toward desire no flesh can answer —

Open this autumn sky
 and let me glide out past arches
 of rock, out past land and steel

artifice, into a field, held together
 with the moon's glaze. Take me here:
 to press my feet into the blades,

let me bend to pick night's
 mushrooms, surely the morning
 can spare them. Let me sit beneath
 an oak and break open earth
 with my hands. How could I know

it would feel this way? Like a soul
 newly departed. No, take me back.
 I was wrong. Set me down
 on a freeway, to ride in the wind-whirl of cars

racing the curvature of coastal highway,
 a lip of concrete held above wave
 and rock. Living is ultimately the privilege.
 Cities of self-preservation do not ponder chance

wild flowers blooming. They think
 in pruned hedgerows
 and deliberate geraniums.

COMMUNITY

*It is the century of the solitary lion,
year of the hibernating bear.*

A man with swollen walnut eyes,
carries fast food to #63, grease seeping,
weakening the bag, tearing

The woman,
her Pontiac a world of newspapers,
Styrofoam, fliers touting weekend
yoga, two-bedroom houses for sale

Both creep, shadows of limbs and feet,
into cave apartments, where no light was left on;
pluck nourishment from junk mail,
telemarketers, borrow sugar from sitcoms

The man,
the woman bathe in split skins of mangos,
sip Ginseng tea in khakis, wake
suffocating in the shelter of night

*It is the century of the hard, green plum,
Year of the orphaned pear.*

In the untouched palm,
days collect beneath the pressure of inked crosses,
seeds in top soil yield a colorless harvest,
rotting on too many plates

STATE OF THE UNION

Quite frankly, we'd all rather be laughing
 than balancing great barges of recycled
 evil. We are clean people,
 our refuse is, at its worst,

forgettable. How tragic,
 that we can no longer drape ocean
 around our bodies and dignify escape
 in cool, undulating terms. How

can I make myself daily
 new for you – a mystical land of haze and tree
 cover still unknown? In the lecture hall, the sweated couple
 discovers each other's ears, the way whispering

erases All this time, I thought I was accumulating
 the world, its shapes, its amber moods and idiosyncrasies, believing
 I could swallow the entire massive and breathe new

rivers and mountains, inquisitive starlings for university
 lawns. All this time, a going in, a taking
 from, believing

consumption had the power
 to create.

ENLIGHTENMENT

If I follow you to the end of a sentence and sit cross-legged on the kitchen table. Because you want sex. I'll have to ask you in all seriousness, with batting eyelashes, exactly what it is that you want.

You will laugh. Because you know. I know. Of course. But this is America. The 21st century, and we are married. There is more to it! As a young boy in the cane fields you must have learned to exploit for gain.

Perhaps you want to pleasure me into preparing a steak dinner, mashed potatoes with gravy, some corn, hot buttered biscuits, and already we will have delved into excess. It is the place they planned for us to end up.

THE SOUTHLAND

i. in the bayous

Deep viscous coverings swallow
whole-mouthed wall of green
birth unspeakable envy
not a river stream only shallow
etchings yesterday's plebeian roadways
any water quenches thirst.

ii. iced tea

Let me offer you
deep scent my soul sipped
edged to your expectation stories
ground wood into wood the porch
what I know sir let me refill
your glass

iii. the death of the bungalow

dream of the callused palm held
steadfast wood kneeling into brick
holding laughter roots ripping up
sidewalks eleven decades we will remember
place a placard when you are taken
six stories up.

LEAVING LAS VEGAS

Tonight you'll safekeep everything:
neon of Vegas skyline, shadows
and drunkenness,

the contour of any question. Rain is falling
— rare reprieve— it drapes
and blurs this Strip of too many lights—
incandescence made tangible— and you

want to flow into liquidified color,
to moon and slip and become less
of self. But isn't love habitation —
willingness to house your soul

in bone and flesh and disappointment?
Many modern thinkers say the self
is ethereal, to know it is a glimpse
as much wrong as right—matter spiraling

in the vicinity of other matter spiraling —
but in this moment, nothing is more knowable
than destruction—the last beer, the last
bar, the last time anyone walks away, haven given,

haven taken nothing, and many such journeyers
reach this destination: you are in some room,
some alley, on the floorboard of some cab, everywhere
this city allows you to hide. All that you are

is this profile, etched against the black,
your head, your deflated shoulders,
the body of the bottle, held in your hand,
and I think you must be Orpheus

and his fatal glance back and back and back
and his beautiful music swirling
in the Hebron, and the gin erupting in your throat.

FAITH WITH DOG AND BIRDS: SEVEN ENUMERATIONS

I.

On the street this morning
 the neighbors' garbage
 sprawled sidewalk,
 thin iridescence
 of desert sun, a bulldog
 pours out his heart,
When I consider how my light is spent...

II.

The tangible is easiest,
 what fits in an out-stretched
 hand. After four hours
 of shoveling, testify
 there is nothing but rock
 between the backyard and the center
 of the earth. *When I consider...*

III.

The world is burning or breathing
 — a dog is certain —
 behind some other fence.
 It is not mystery or ignorance,
 that spreads her paws, perks
 her ears. There is time
 to sit on a tattered lawn chair
 beneath the sun

IV.

From the circumference
 of the street, chirping sparrows
 volley their song. Only scrawny
 saplings tied to poles thicker
 than their trunks, still the sparrows
 sing, so rarely bodies are seen

V.

When Neruda wrote *we make
 the only permanent tenderness,*

he was writing love
sonnets to his wife. The earth
falls away when birds move
across sky in formation — swirling,
diving, back, around, folding in
on each other — plunging

VI.

It is true — flesh
on flesh tenderly. There was
an ocean in the original,
but there is no ocean
here among the bare mountains,
Joshua trees, and sun-scorched
heat — worship is only
what I have, only what I can offer presently

VII.

They come down again —
the birds — sparrows, bluejays, robin red-breasts,
land on street lamps, tiled rooftops,
yards of rock. The world is built,
and built and built —
and still they come back down

MARATHON

Breath

begins

with a gunshot, visible

as it moves in
and out
of bodies
in silver bursts.

yes, the path

can be delineated, mapped
out with street names
and water stations:

day breaks into every

gradation of pink
newness, and the mountains

hold color just
long enough, self
becomes something
a body
could sweat
through. Constant rhythm

of hands smacking
against hips, ten
thousand feet slapping
against concrete: every
stride is the birth
of a new syllable. History
on this road
remembers

words

in motion.

HIKING TRAIL AT EAGLE CREEK, COLUMBIA RIVER GORGE

sunlight filters down —
the whole lexicon of green

pine and oak
rise

to the horizon, draped in moss

hour of worship

white trilis blossoms along the wood chip trail

my presence, the intrusion

river's thundering

spills

from the mountain's cleft

continual throne

MIGRATION

pool rife with black streaks
 their slick bodies in motion

for more than 30 days —
 when the new ones arrived —
 the aged penguins, who had spent
 19 years sunning themselves
 on the rocks beside the water —
 entered only for a dip,
 a few laps, a splattering exit,
 flop, back on the rock, with a deep-throated
 squawk, that always brought oohs and aahs
 out of the figures, wide-eyed
 behind metal bars

Now perpetual motion — nose-to-nose,
 nose-to-nose, answering
 a call bubbled up from
 deep

No matter that their bodies divide
 the same water again and again
 that people, news reporters chuckle,
 shake their heads
 No matter how often the caravan
 must pass this same rock

community —
 their bodies force
 water
 into a slender
 swirling center

that collective power enough to alter their hours

AMERICAN CEMETERY
St. Laurent above Omaha Beach

there was a late arrival

NO! NO! The guard thrusts up his watch
 taps at its face, hands slice air

a hole,
 past guard and entrance;
We've come all this way; there's no way I'm leaving without seeing it.
He should understand, we're Americans!
 rolled barbed wire vibrates
It doesn't give us the right to break the law.
 against fence metal as we slide through

below the bluff,
 ocean pulling up to land and back
 bell tower

BONG

BONG

BONG

9,400 white crosses and Stars of David
 erect in immaculate
 lawn

Face of a soldier, younger than almost everyone we know,
 the one from the museum in Caen?
 war footage — before the beaches were stormed,
 dark-haired and hollow-cheeked
 winks,
 into the camera

the scratch on my left shoulder spots with blood;
 we scan for guards

Walk among sacrifice:
try to keep my shoes from squeaking
Get off the grass
inherentinheritinheritance
beginning of a modern "American" world

9,400 graves

on the beach, my feet dug deep,
in sand

Along the water's edge, families pedaling
beach cars with large
aqua sails (flight and gravity one)

a lifting of gulls into air

the sand is so cool,
so cool and seemingly infinite

EMPIRE OF SONG

LATE NIGHT IN TRIESTE

port city built
before the birth of Rome

empire of song
against half a moon —
voice without accent
alongside guitar
strum, *Take your time,*
hurry up

more than 50 cats
crouch among crumbling pillars

morning will come
as slowly
or as quickly as always

this stone has occupied
this space for 700 years;
in time, climbing ivy
will infiltrate
the castle wall

young Italians sing
the rock songs of America
Here we are now,
entertain us
earlier we watched bats fly across a park
I have both pen and tongue

a man walks by carrying damp flowers
wrapped in paper (there is a vase with water, some table of love, a grave, a union, amends

ROMAN FORUM

Three poppies, one Doric column,
 once a world
remnants of basilicas, the law court, temple
of vestal virgins, something like wheat grass, Chinese
families posing for photographs

three more columns holding
 a triangle of stone
counting seems the only thing
to do with ruins, remains

through the distant rumble of a lawnmower
there is a silence beneath the Arch
of Titus, gateway to the empire's civic center,
it is a silence that could not be maintained
before the brushstrokes of Renaissance masters

All around the lawns of Palatine Hill,
 the pungency of the fresh cut grass,
 spilled perfume of decapitated flowers

PIAZZA DELLA PASSERA
 (passera- sparrow)

it is useless to desire a permanent
 sun, sparrows that refuse
 to appear

a pigeon is flying straight toward me,
 wings fanned to full expanse

you are a thousand miles from this square

the throngs of tourists
 gone
 there is quiet,
 framed by chatter and thin splats
 of rain

a man wheels supplies into a restaurant;
 from this bench, a glimpse of another
 street, to the right another still

there is that and a few notes
 of birdsong but past

the arms of the square

AT SACRÈ-COEUR

How quickly,
 silence is unlearned

after absence

I soon return,
 take up stitching
 with words

at your ear,
 I am weeks past,
reconstructing,

leaving,

 the seconds,
 minutes,
 our hands intertwining,
 the moment of making new

CONCERTO GREGORIANO, CHIESA DI SAN ROCCO

Where painting flourishes
covers even the ceilings

bells announce
the hour over
and over

drown out the man introducing
the music

the crowd settling

a monk in sandals keeps rhythm,
against a pew

men and women —singers, chanters, worshipers
circle the altar

walls of the church volley
clicks of shoes

song *does* rise, expand,
populate space

Everywhere, frescoes of the Virgin and
Christ, angels in flight, the cross

*Ego sum panis vivus,
qui de caelo...*

Voice is its own sanctuary

oceanic

there is no blood
on it

Mouth and soul and tongue

pour music
into every expanse

no walls
or stationary throne

BOBOLI GARDENS

I dream a human being
into existence
hold the weight
of its new body with ease

below this vista, the city is still
here, clatter of a café, shoes crunching down leaf-covered steps,
songs of picnicking girls, a waiter on a cell phone

garden trails of greenery and birdsong,
a bee drinking from a wild yellow bud

soon, the city will surround,
an entrance — the body teetering into
water or sleep

memorize the rapid flutter
of a single white butterfly
passing over field
of weed and flower

both take breath
the moment and its waiting

FATHOMLESS

FATHOMLESS

word not large i love you already

before breath,

before.

but you say intensely

it feels like we've just met

nothing contained

by memory, by my tricky little brain

lips against lips. I never thought my body, all I know of yours, I never thought. The house won't silence, the dogs down the street, sparrows flying against desert sun. There is sound leaving my tongue:

be born,
be born.

It is and is not you
unknown

your possibility

body/soul

without fingers
without toes

every so often, airplanes thunder
across sky, dogs yap, howl, hammer heads
pummel planks of wood the skeletons of new

construction fly up

in each successive plot

houses
will fill land,
accumulate:

will be,

furniture, patio covers, potted plants

what gifts possible

in a birth

determination, endurance
 eye color, slant of a cheek bone,
 my amassing of fear

A worker leans into a post (it will be a bedroom)

pounds an adjacent post
 steady, casual power,
 of each swing
 his arm
 vibrating
 at impact:
 man, hammer, wood

love

word not

large (enough)

There is a great quantity of air, and I want so badly to smell the slightest hint of lavender blooming, to feel the world outgrown itself at each successive moment, movement, all I know of breath, the memory of the weight of your body, the memory of mine,

presence of your new weight
 almost perceptible,
 won't fill,
 won't fit

flimsy arms

the sky, petal-crushed
 and trembling, holds

ROSES

the ones my father grew

tidy bushes in raised beds

pink lady

morning glow

fire and ice

(red flourishing the edge of white)

Vases

bought with pocket change

the row of antique stores on Heights

(we rarely went otherwise)

so deep inside the city

Day's blooming and instruction

the bucket swung from his hand

all the blossoms bunched, and conspiring

shears spread open

around their stems

Today and years later

just the gardener

bending to nurse a bud

a handful
of petals the park full of
barking dogs laughter whistles of the referees

distorted circle of the deepest red

inside of everything

THE DIAGNOSIS

Her hands sift through a bucket of new peas,
juices of the unwrapping cake and color her skin.

I always wanted to fill the biggest bowl, to pack her freezer
with preserves that could speak to winter's refusals.

This was before I knew we pack belief in a can, store it
for certain, quenchable hunger.

Her hands hold the hook, spear the silver
minnow that slips from my eight-year old fingers.

Hands that know unmarked depths of the coveted catch,
that school and glisten in this lake gutted and filled in 1945.

It was my ocean then,
even with the tendrils of moss that clog and stall the propeller,

leave us floating for hours with only a thermos, crackers
and spine of shore. Even with the stumps,

skeletons of trees that threaten to gash,
bleed our boat, crack the oar.

Hands shaking and uncertain. Hands that will forget
dirt they've turned, and harvests they've reaped. Hands

that will forget recipes, children, grandchildren, board games,
her wedding night, 50 years of her husband's weight pulling

her into him in sleep. My grandmother's fingers that will forget
how to curl, to hold. Her mind will forget breath and blood; her body

will seep back to bone. All I want is to scoop the lake, the peas
onto my quivering tongue, to hold them perfect and round, full of life and water.

POOL

Remember somersaulting in public pools?
Your head pushing
into the silent orb and the moment

when your body began to rise,
sunlight,
just before

cacophony: laughter and gossip,
reprimands, the tinny twack of boards
releasing divers into contortions. And you

were back under
again
turning

in the theory of it all. With one
breath and the body's inclination toward
sky.

WHAT CAME
for my grandmother

that one

that one in there

he's

well, you know

that one

I, its been, I used to, you must

down there, in there, that one

I'm trying, ah now

once I used to, I could have

if

you

could

I, and that one

him, the one

in there

yes

that one, he's

mine

WRITING THE BODY

In a circle a man and woman dance with their baby. Sometimes our hands speak inaccurately.

The way fire can only sneak its smoldering into stone.
If the demeanor of the past were kept like grand paintings
and tapestries, we would house it here
in afternoon light, among wheat grass and daisies,
and the click of shoes on stone.

Outside oaks spread leaves into opulence. Sometimes the torso
is marred and inarticulate.

The way sound can gloss over everything, too harsh,
too beautiful. You hear silence best between notes
of music. That's what it must mean:
to be exalted, held between a clamoring finale
and the entry into the next movement.

A thousand sparrows lift into air. Sometimes our limbs
are mute on the obsessions of the soul.

The way language reaches the edge of accuracy.
Rilke wrote, *we are absorbed in blossom,
grape leaf, fruit, who speak more than the language
of a year*. Go now by constellation and fill your pockets
with letters, with chaff, and the grip of a handshake.

BLOOD & TROPHIES

I. Breath

I met a child today in his second year wobbling
through the flash of park wilderness. Birdcall and their flitting

from branch to gone take his eyes from grass
to sky, which offers nothing in fistfuls. As a young girl

in the Sycamore, it was the book without pictures that said,
the future must serve the wind and its conflicted intentions.

II. Fish & Bread

Low moan of conch shell or maybe it is only
moon that bring us to the pier, where the boys

heave the night's catch from a wooden raft; 20
or 50 pounds of shine and lifelessness folding

into weathered slats. The tallest one whips a rock
or shell from his pocket; my body does not comprehend

sustenance but the quick flesh of a story that rides ravenous
into their mouths.

III. Barriers

South Pacific breeze coupled with reluctant sun. We are naked
molding sand into semblances: a carriage, a moat, a castle

for the child king. A pigeon is sent as the structures of private
intention link on an unmarked shore. Crimson sky brings tides,

untroubled dancers that tuck form back into an endless page,
into beautiful destruction, and we no longer wait at the horizon for wings.

IV. More than Anything

I pray you will journey past survival, past leaves to the succulent
trunk. The name tree does not mean anything to you yet.

We are lounging on a quilt anchored with toys that ask
for the names of things, sounds of animals. Covered,

dripping with mud you come. We haven't even eaten yet,
and nothing, nothing can take the earth from your limbs.

BRILLIANT LABOR

How to say what is here. In this moment,
 with two honey-shined horns fighting
 for sky. You want to stretch a vowel-filled word

like melancholy into the texture of a downtown
 street or make its presence on your tongue, on your lips,
 obey the world this bar makes at midnight

on a Saturday when you are some age
 larger than any reality,¹⁶ and still believe
 you can capture time spent in another person's fingertips

with a word. The bass is an instructive instrument:
 heartbeat, a stream pulsing to river. His arm
 must have rested in the small of your back. You wore

something shimmering, strappy, awkward heels.
 Find that long, rectangular room,
 the weathered door at one end and the brilliant labor

of the band at the other, an undiscovered planet
 that changed everything. It's a dry cleaners now.
 A belt sweeps work clothes across the mirage

of the counter. What to call a bar: made world,
 people pouring on different versions of themselves.
 To find self, you went to the dance floor: linoleum,

a flushed-cheeked boy and the range of music
 said *try, try, you flimsy little thing, to know me.*
 It's not clear now, but the gesture was risky,

your hand reaching across the galaxy to the new stubble bristling his face.

MARRIAGE, THE FOURTH YEAR

What we accomplish
with our hands
in this life. People say *build*

a life. I've broken open
a Chrysanthemum bud — raw scent
covers my fingers —

All around us, earth moves
the hum of the bulldozer,

the dog climbing the stairs,
your hands on my body.

I wouldn't wait for any other flowering.

AUDITION

The body raises
a song of itself,

arched in sinews
Snap. And the toe
tips on
the leg, believing

in this bawdy rhythm not born
of blood,
but learned in the crash
of flesh, against

the resonance
of floor. This moment.

Stop. And then, yes, now
into Smash, Clack, the arms
are flight.

The torso left
to the outcry of sweep and wail
against the air that cannot...
Stop. Hold everything
against the will of movement,

against what is known of the body:
desire, momentum,
and the limit of skin.

TUTORIAL IN LAS VEGAS

The afternoon I tried to write about death,
 passed with a flute-thin man in khakis.
 Said he won the world cup, the downhill.
 "It was Tahoe." The 60s; he was 24.

Today, he pulls a bag from a weathered shoulder,
 crosses the right leg with effort, scatters my notes.
 It's a conversation I don't want to start.

Morality, the ever-after, the grave...
 He wants to talk about Beethoven's *Fidelio*,
 prisoners emerging from the bowels of the castle
 gasping silver breath.

This man, driven from California by the earthquake of '94,
 sings in the glee club on campus, spends whole days in the stacks,
 mourns great voices: Ellington, Fitzgerald, Cole.

He tells me about a piano bar at the Desert Inn.
 For years, a man called Fingers played a locals Happy Hour,
 Andrew Llyod Webber songs to smooth wrinkles from uniforms, slide cognac,
 with Hughes, doing god knows what, pacing the top floor.

The whole casino closed this year;
 on The Strip, "they're building bigger toys."
 Employees sold nametags for \$200, \$300 bucks
 to tourists gate checking the end of an era.

The babbling of the garden's pond feeds his stories,
 buildings painted back in L.A. after burning out on the mental ward.
 At some point, under the vine-terrace, he taught a quadriplegic to swim,
 floating vertical with one agile wrist, freed in water from the chair.

My friend can play everything's gone to hell: politics,
 people, Broadway – they're all miked models now.
 He's got a holiday concert in Arizona, the whole choir,
 a hired soprano doing *Ave Maria*.

So, maybe the boy with the buoys in his crotch never swam
 a lap. Maybe this man read a lousy magazine in the Dallas airport,
 instead of riding chance in a limousine
 to volley with a tennis pro.

He is singing to me in a deep baritone
his whole body alive, thin arms cupped skiman's stance at his chest.
His cheeks, open, restrain, and I am not afraid of death.
The waning of the afternoon finds faith for the million people we are,

I see the deep etchings of his tracks in broken snow.

FINGER-PAINTING THEOLOGY

A door closed
 or open, surface
 that holds back

There are the tell-tale pools of
 and you are frightened
 by shadow and the possibility

of shadow — where might the self
 project? There are the lures.
 Delicate morsels

that invite you back. And your eyes grow
 large at what cost?
And the things of the earth...

At the doorstep every learned thing
 fails. And you knock
 with your mass and your nose and fragility.

Before you knew the door existed (did you
 always know?), the fields bloomed
 their quantifiable depths. *And the things of the earth*

shall grow... You say you have
 your plenty: your fingers muddied
 as you paint a path between worlds.

But this door with its particular grain
 and tilt. This openness.
And the things of the earth

shall grow strangely... And the world
 of a single word strangles
 until you sputter and gasp over glory.

CORNER STAND

Crystal powder diffuses. Cubes clank.
 The first two quarters in her sweaty palm. To capture
 desire for the cool offering in paper cups is the only proof
 she needs for God. Where the hell do I put the left

foot? Do you promise you won't let me fall?
 There is no way to doubt this was ocean once –
 waves still glimmer in the rock. *The history of science*
has made order ruler over the arbitrary; even uncertainty
is certain. Just as the girl knows the woman

in the red car will stop. At six or seven, halter top
 and scabs, she has enough hope for the entire
 tower of cups. But late in your twenties, saddled
 in a crack of sheer rock, prayers — rational, self-reliant,
 clamor against clenched hands and feet, mortality born

in each frantic move. In the field next to the stand,
 a lawnmower moves by itself in longer
 and longer circles, beheading buttercups and black-eyed
 Susans, paintbrushes, and the sun goes down before
 anyone is willing to buy the sweeter endings

of the day's pitcher. Maybe tomorrow she'll serve
 a deep red fruit punch. Something that stains the tongue.

GATE A-11

Wheels seconds from tarmac, search
 past tree canopies, engine roar, miles
 and miles of suburbs: a room, predominantly blue, a rocking chair

Waiting chairs, leather upholstery cracked
 open to dirtied yellow foam
 no one knows I'm here **SOUTHWEST AIRLINES FLIGHT 1291 TO LAS VEGAS
 WITH STOP IN SAN ANTONIO IS DEPARTING FROM GATE A-8**

Two-year-old girl with a carton of chocolate
 milk flies past,
 both eyes turned in
 to the liquid flowing
 through her straw
Dee-Dee, Dee-Deeeeee, come on

birth is never undone,
 even now, this moment,
 as salt erupts on my tongue,
 is distinct,
 separate from

HOUSTON'S HOBBY AIRPORT IS A NON-SMOKING/Bloody hell! The mother
FACILITY. PLEASE DO NOT LEAVE YOUR BAGGAGE UNATTENDED/
 smiles, runs to catch
 the chocolate milk
 girl, who tired
 of her chair

Once, I put my feet into the street. Triola Street. The street outside the blue room.
PLEASE DO NOT LEAVE YOUR BAGGAGE UNATTENDED

Those *good, leather high-tops*. Pure and simple,
 it's defiance. The feet in the street. Of course, I'm two. I need to know.

Again, the mother/ It was a story that was re-told: Christmas gatherings, Easter picnics,
 our rehearsal dinner/ is up and after the girl

It had been forbidden, but I pitterpattered those hightops at the very, very edge of street,
 and slipped in one

Donovan Marie! Sweet-heart, come sit with me. Dee-Dee, Dee-Dee I swear
 the girl heads for the snack bar
 three gates down,

both run
faster, exhilarated
I think I was slapped on the hand. The story always ends, *she never, ever did it again.*

They return, red-cheeked,
mother carrying girl
sideways against her hip —
she flaps, and flies, and squeals

wrapped up in her mother's lap, finally still
I wish like hell I could remember
how I intended it,
the gesture

POSITIVE

react

— to any meaning

(word, embrace, passing of a hand
through hair)

the world alters
 perceptibly
 or the verge of perceptible

feel the shape
 of future
 inside

then the judgment —
 did you feel correctly —
 shed the right kind of tears?

joy, meaning,
 many-sided beasts

I cried the wrong tears
regretted the tinge
which bred
explosive fear

Later,
 two hands
 my belly —

 and the room breaking with light

TESTIMONY

Today, clean carpet
and news
that someone took a desert tortoise
from the museum on campus

Outside,
a jackhammer pummels
rips open, tears concrete
to make over again

A book says my uterus has grown to the size of a large grapefruit
I hold one its full weight in my hand

the hammer silences, planes careen through air

Two nights ago,
the carpet covered
in potting soil, ivy leaves
mangled, scattered
paw prints circling couch and chair

All weekend workers searched
for fragments of the Columbia
in east Texas, Hemphill,
where all weekend
my grandmother didn't recognize
her daughter

Those with information of the tortoise's
whereabouts should call
the museum
or police

INSTEAD OF SILENCE

grapes explode beneath
 force of teeth
 in her mouth
 in the morning
 when she is more tired than usual

a book from the library
 one she knows a friend has had before
 the poems grow larger
 with the thoughts
 of another reader penciled
 in margins

her dogs race around the couch —
 their claws catching
 in carpet – grunts and growls
 that grow to barks (she never knows
 if their play becomes something else)

she thinks of the child inside
 — no bigger than a pea today —
 doing the work
 of becoming
 inside the quiet openness
 of her womb (a mysterious space
 even to herself)

with grapes, milk, coffee
 two eggs,
 in their separate bowls,
 cups, all churning
 together, inside

a neighbor slams a car door
 pulsing bass for 30 seconds
 three blasts of a horn
 the dogs, exhausted from play (they never hurt
 each other)
 crunch and rifle through their bowls

two airplanes
churning and tunneling air
above the house

yesterday, she wanted to tell Thoreau
he had to walk back out of those woods
— on occasion —
into the cities/towns with their messy
relations – commerce, politics,
happiness, greed

utopia — no place — thrives
best in a mind

and a lifetime of quietness
almost sufficient to know yourself

but already,
she was sharing her body
with another

soon movement,
its legs pushing into her ribs
a great wailing birth

her ears grew full
at the prospect

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