

For Mum and Dad

Acknowledgments

“Electrocardiogram” is a translation of Blanca Castellón’s poem “Electrocardiograma.”

"First Dissection" won first place in *Cellar Door's* Fall 2015 poetry contest.

Some of these poems were previously published as follows:

Cellar Door: “The First Dissection,” “Minerals Cracked Open and Gleaming,” “Bitter Matte”

The Daily Tar Heel: “What Went Bad in Our Kitchen”

Event Horizon: “Mutualism”

Raincoat Magazine: “Her Glum Face in Copenhagen Harbor”

The Red Mud Review: “Roses”

Should Does: “Sighting”

Contents

I.	
First Dissection	5
Minerals Cracked Open and Gleaming	7
Domesticated Brown Rat	8
Light Therapy	9
Crustacean Biology	10
Open Streets Festival	12
Virginia Knotweed	13
Thrill Rides	15
The Last Wolf of Navarra	16
Shingles	17
Statue in Copenhagen Harbor	18
Knife and Cutting Board	19
Bellstruck	20
II.	
Bitter Matte	22
Dormant Icons	23
The Most Popular Hike in Norway	24
Doing Hair	25
Iron and Steel	27
Electrocardiogram	28
Roses	30
Borrowed	31
Magpie Funeral	32
Aubade	33
Asphalt Cartography	34
Night Climb in Freiburg	35
Miserere	36
Jewelweed	37
III.	
Chrysalis	39
What Went Bad in Our Kitchen	40
Milkweed	41
College Graduation Party, May 1998	42
Werewolf, Age Thirteen	44
After the Centralia Mine Fire	45
You Say Yes, I Say No	46
Ruminant	47
Small Library Elegy	48
Sighting	50
Alternative Energy in Southern Germany	51
Two Oaks	53
The North Carolina Watermelon Queen	54
Hall of Taxidermy	55

I

First Dissection

I held a heart
in seventh grade.
Lump of meat,
stopped clock,
a slick weight
in my nitrile gloves.
Pig's heart,
similar in size
and weight
to the ones inside
the sixteen students
bearing down hard
with unstained scalpels.

After the first
muscle cut,
I found ventricles.
A jagged halving,
messier than the image
on the worksheet,
the diagram I smeared
red to label *aorta*.
Inert blood
on a yellow pencil.

One boy wiped
his hands on the girls'
aprons, and was told
to knock it off.
The meat almost
squeaked against
my gloved fingers,
the heart skidding
from side to side
in its metal tray
as I tried to steady it.

continued, no break

If I pressed too hard,
it was okay. Nothing
would leak out, only
the bruised smell
of aldehydes
and disinfectant.
Still, I tried
to be gentle
with its muscles,
narrow and stretched
like cocked
rubber bands.

There were empty
spaces within
the heart, places
to fit my thumb.
A valve flapped
wet and the words
told me to cut it
open and study
the little pathway,
to feel the force
of its openings
and closings.
The gate now
swinging open,
unlatched.

Minerals Cracked Open and Gleaming

How is an eye like a rock?
Both vaguely spheroid, both

cradled in empty spaces like
a socket or a mountain cave.

They found that my optic nerves
were swollen with crystal and salt,

protein and calcium deposits
in the soft topography behind the eye.

These are called *drusen*,
the German word for geodes.

An eye is a rock whose veins
might be crammed with gems:

wish I had clear quartz
or purple amethyst in mine,

wish I could pry them out,
hold one in each palm,

and hand them over to be mined
as easy as setting a geode

on velvet and plucking out
the crystals with a jeweler's tools.

Domesticated Brown Rat

His paws surprise me
the most: human-like
with knuckled pink fingers,
warm when he grabs
my thumb and brings
its pale nail to his mouth.

He climbs in the trashcan,
pulling out stale bread,
dragging it out of sight
behind my pillow, grinding
his teeth. A thump
from the closet means
he's climbed up my dresses
to reach the top shelf
and knocked over a shoebox.

I doze and he hoists himself
up to my shoulder, biting
my eyebrows. His eyes close
when I stroke his snout.
I can hold all of him
in one hand: quick little heart,
chalk-white coat, veins
branching in pink ears.

Light Therapy

Do not stare directly into the little square
of daylight captured in a box on your desk,
but keep it in your periphery. It's fine

to close your eyes and let the light
knock at your eyelids, stronger
than the feeble sunset out the window.

Do not leave the light on for longer
than ten minutes. In the same way
too much ice cream hurts your head,

too much of this clear cold white
will burn. Forget sunscreen, now.
Forget creamsicles and snow cones.

Forget the humid mattress exhaling
sweat and all the chilly libraries
of summer. Forget iced coffee.

Light, like caffeine, is a chemical,
to be consumed at the same time each day.
The medicine illuminates your throat.

Crustacean Biology

I. The Swamplands of Cary

Mud chimneys on low-lying golf courses
hide crawfish burrowed in the grass.
Dad used to catch them there, and so do I.
Plump little bodies, grayblue shells,
a tangle of joints scrabbling in my hand.
Nowhere near a creek, certainly no bayou:
just a lawn sinking deeper into the earth.

II. The Museum of Natural Sciences

A researcher lectured
on symbiosis, standing

by two crayfish
in a tank. There are

bad parasites, she said,
like the tongue-eating louse,

but the crayfish is home
to gentler worms:

That white spot
between his eyes

is a generous little cleaner.
Another worm negotiates

the mud in his gill chamber,
allowing him more oxygen.

continued, stanza break

III. The Kitchen

We didn't want to boil them alive
so bought them frozen at the store.
I shucked corn, chopped onions,
steamed potatoes in the pot
where their gray bodies turned red.

They cooled on unfurled newspaper,
grease turning the comics
transparent. Dad held one up
to his face and said *Look at us,*
two crawdads, waiting for a laugh,

then he peeled them for me,
pinching their primordial tails
to dip the meat in butter.

I cleaned the kitchen after,
scrubbed the seasoning
out of pots and pans,
out of the oven-hot air,
then took the bucket
of skeletons to the porch
and tipped it, a soft rustle
hushing crickets in the grass.

Open Streets Festival

In uniform gray spandex
capped by a chrome helmet,
the cyclist parts the sunny crowd,
weaving around ten-year-olds
with streamers and balloons
on pastel handlebars.

Younger children on balance bikes
glide chainless past their parents
eating crepes, shielding their eyes.

My old blue Schwinn sprawls beside me
in the grass, one pedal spinning
a lazy circuit, still chasing the sole
of my sneaker. Across the street
a worker rides to work with no helmet
and breezes through a stoplight.

Virginia Knotweed

I used to tap
the long, thin stalks
to make the seeds
burst and fly
from the creek bank.

Knotweed grew
everywhere,
ground cover
draped in a spray
of pinprick flowers
piercing the air
in downy spikes.

Jumpseed,
it's also called.
I would jump
from the touch
of bristle-fringed
leaves, shocked
that I could spark
the chaos of it,
more anarchic
than blowing
a dandelion out
like a candle.
More like
starting a fire.

Before long
my grandma said
Don't touch
the plants.
They'll smother
my tomatoes.
She seized

continued, no break

a fistful
of errant stalks.
I dawdled
in the garden
to watch her
deadhead them,
leaving behind
only the leaves.

Thrill Rides

In front of the Zipper,
Top 40 hits throb
from the speakers
loud enough to jar the stents
from your father's heart.
My mother shuns it, wary.

It's true, rides have killed
fairgoers. I came close
inside a creaking capsule
with a broken seatbelt
on the Skydiver wheel,
rotating like a circular saw,

shaking me and Rachel
so hard we nearly lost
consciousness afterwards
lying panting on the grass,
hands on pounding hearts,
trying to focus on the fireworks

rolling in the candy-apple air.

The Last Wolf of Navarra

The Biology building displays
hundreds of glass eyes
behind glass. *You'll never
see another wolf in this region,*
our professor host says. *Here
is the only one left.* The red
muzzle's grin is stiff with age,
the ears crooked forward
to approximate curiosity.

The first time I saw taxidermy,
it was a friend's after-school hobby.
She arranged three stuffed mice
in a nest of moss and feathers
as if sleeping. Other times,
she bleached roadkill bones,
like the fawn ribs I keep
on my bookshelf to remember
her. In Navarra, other things

remind me of the lonely wolf:
the fog crawling on the hills
like a living thing, rolling over
acres of sheep; a dozen empty
birdcages stacked in a window;
the curving mouth of a yellow beach.
And lounging in a deck chair
in an open-air market, a mannequin
torso, bone-white, tranquil in disuse.

Shingles

In the car, my mother and I would play a game: start with a long word, like *shingle*, and shed one letter at a time to build new words. We tore down *shingles* to make *single*, *singe*, and *sing*, then finally *sin* and *in* and lone individual *I*. She had shingles once, and I assumed the virus turned her skin to a blistered etching: hard layers one over the other, chipped and peeling. What if she slipped a fingernail underneath to scratch, and cracked the surface, and made it fall away? What if she lost her shelter, her shell? In the end the virus trickled from her nerves to mine like rain down a sloping roof, remaking itself in me.

Statue in Copenhagen Harbor

In Danish *havfrue* does not mean *mermaid* but *half-woman*.
It's better to be seafoam than to be half a woman.

The images on posters and bus ads create an illusion of size,
heft. But she is only four feet tall, less than a woman,

slumped on the little rock, bronze arm curved over petite belly.
Her head was stolen in 1964. With a new one, is she the same woman?

Twenty years later, her arm was sawn off, returned the next day.
Hurt, whole, degraded, or grateful, she could be any woman

facing the sea, head turned from the crowd, spine curved,
knees bent. But she is protected by patina, an immortal woman.

Knife and Cutting Board

The field trip takes us to a historic mill
in the forest, home to goats grazing
in a pen and the family who runs
the museum. In the center of the house
grain spills from a carved wooden face,
kitsch with a grinning mouthful.

For lunch we sit at long tables draped
in checkered cloth. Each of us receives
a knife and a plank of wood, then
crusty bread with jam and cheese
and slabs of meat: cold pink ham,
bacon striped thick with fat.

Samir, next to me, eats nothing, observing
Ramadan. His board is clean, and he drums
his fingers on it, laughing when
the young daughter asks why he's not
hungry. The rest of us have never fasted.
Our hosts implore him to take bread home.

I keep drinking apple wine, aware
of the smooth glass against my lips
and the wooden bench at my back.
Hazy, warm, I could almost sleep here.
With one hand pressed to the meat,
I saw into it as gently as possible.

Bellstruck

Spirals of wooden stairs
coil to the barred chambers
in the steeple's belfry

where six bells wait,
antique, green-tinted metal
and the hint of a curve

cohering in the gloom.
Through clerestory windows,
the sky drones white

and poplar pollen drifts
in puffy cloud-clumps
down to the streets.

An alarm in the belfry
warns that it flashes red
just before the bells ring.

Why not sit and wait
for them to strike, a private
revelry quaking my bones,

ringing me like a saint—
that, or striking me
utterly deaf by noon?

II

Bitter Matte

When I was five
I ate a tube of lipstick
and smeared the gemlike
gloss of it across my teeth.
A year later, at the mall,
my mother took a photo of me
gazing at the Lancôme display,
reading the coy names
of the latest colors—*blush*,
pout, *siren*, *wine*—and frowning
at words that failed to capture
the gradient beauty of those
plush buttons arrayed in rows
on the mirrored counter
reflecting my mouth,
unpainted, voracious.

Dormant Icons

Lillian's green filigree
opera glasses, a locket,
and three compacts,
all monogrammed LAM,
one of them still filled
with pink powder
and a thumb-sized puff.

Her husband's steel marbles
in a velvet bag, clattering
against the silver pocket watch
hooked to its chain.

A yellow felt pennant: *I WAS
AT THE 1939 WORLD'S FAIR*,
pinned to Marilyn's coat
when she was in junior high.

Lillian's slim leather wallet,
too small for modern plastic.
Marilyn's nubby orange purse,
still filled with legal tender.

All their jewelry, tangled
in a gallon-size Ziploc--
my mother went through it
pearl by pearl by pearl.

She told me about some earrings
over the phone, and confessed
she didn't know why she was crying
until she heard my voice,

then saved a necklace on my dresser
for the next time I come home.

The Most Popular Hike in Norway

Sunlight bleeds through the curtains
and seethes into my burned skin.

I had filled my water bottle in a glacial lake.
In the highest places I crossed fields of snow,
solo, and the ice snuck into my boots,
numbing both feet, but at the summit
I stood one kilometer closer to the sun.

Lunch was ham on rye with watermelon
and cucumbers. I sat on a rock to eat,
and watched hikers pass over the ridge:
a procession of nimble, tanned blondes,
grandparents and five-year-old children,
a stern man yanking his dog by the collar.

On the ridge, where the sloping rock spine
suddenly became vertical, I was a giant
sending my arms ahead of me, trusting my legs
would follow. The long green lake below
kept the memory of glaciers, trailing
the slow wake of a ferry as small as a pebble.

When I collapsed in our cabin that afternoon,
burnt and aching, ready to shower, Jon asked
if I could hand him his boots. No, I said,
I can't even bend at the knee. Get them yourself.
I could barely untie my own frozen laces.
He'd bailed on the hike because of a bloody nose
and left me only one of his trekking poles.

I leaned it against the luggage, dreading
the cold room waiting for us in Oslo,
wanting to be alone again, solitary
as the ridge I had to trust like my own spine.

Doing Hair

Today Marge's grown son comes by
for his every-six-weeks haircut,
the lowered slope of his shoulders
leaning against the leather back
of a salon chair in the bathroom
where her cosmetology license
is framed on the wall.

Marge's own granddaughter
snubs her for a salon stylist.
In the sixties she did hair
for brunettes who went blonde,
but none the other way around.

How long has it been since the girl
climbed up into the big chair
and stuck her fair head under
the hooded bubble of the dryer?

Marge drapes a black cape
over her son like a shadow
grown heavy, brings the scissors
up to his thin, fine hair.

Her platinum bob shines in the mirror,
curled soft below the ears with a wisp
of sideswept bangs: classic pageboy.
Back in her salon days, she used to do
beehives and bouffants and perms,

used to let the boys keep
their hair long even if
it made their mothers sigh.
None of them had more hair
than her own son: the thick
brown mop-top fell in his eyes,

continued, no break

wet with sweat on Sundays
when he mowed the lawn.

Marge puts the scissors aside now
as she makes a last pass
of the electric razor up his neck
and combs back his soft hair,
gray now, grayer with each visit.

Iron and Steel

Once, in a restaurant—it was late
and we were the only customers,
conscious of the waitstaff watching us
behind the bar—my friends saw
a single ice skate on the floor, stained
red on boot and blade. Whose?

No one noticed our discovery,
and we paid for our lumpy pizzas
and walked out. Music spilled
into the street from a club, and
we swing-danced on the sidewalk,
already forgetting the question.

Electrocardiogram

a translation of Blanca Castellón

After many blissful years
together, yesterday

for the first time
my heart wrote me

a long love letter
on a narrow page

like a month's worth
of supermarket receipts,

thanking me in its precise
language of wavy lines

for the full life it had enjoyed
in its warm home. Steadily

it affirmed its strength,
assured me it was proud

to share the intense emotions
I'd procured over time.

It had infused them
with only the best blood

and had no complaint of me,
only of the wounds dealt

by those who left this world
without saying goodbye,

who turned their backs on
our gray century, from the wet

continued, stanza break

scar of global poverty.
It signed off with a plea:

*keep loving, and tell
your husband not to suffocate*

*his heart with the smoke
of his idle cigar.*

Roses

On Valentine's Day my roommate took herself on a date
to the tattoo parlor, where they outlined a rose

on the left thigh. I saw her that night, walking
down the sidewalk with the new clean lines exposed

to the cold, the fresh tattoo slick and shining
in its thin layer of plastic. Saw her left black stocking

rolled down to the knee, the asymmetry daring
men on the street to stare. And up close, I saw

a faint afterimage of blood pressed into her skin,
tinting each blue-veined petal red. This bouquet

she bought for herself. She was heading home
to take another aspirin and warm up. I wanted

to be alone too, not standing on the street
with my date's cold fingers locked around mine,

hunting for a restaurant with an open table for two,
remembering the fresh roses on my nightstand.

Six clumsy flowers, their heads knocking
together in the vase, their prickly stems

ready to draw blood, their buds pliant.

Borrowed

At work Rachel is a brisk flash of black,
turning on her heel to deliver another tray
of Bloody Marys. She forgot to bring
a change of clothes, so I give her a shirt
of mine. In her closet hang my blue camisole,
my softest gray sweater, and a raincoat.

I wear Rachel's Bright Eyes tee, plus
her bra and a pair of glittery green heels
that hurt her feet. I wish they lent me
a stubborn grace, too. Instead I stumble
down the sidewalk just behind her.

Back home we make instant mashed potatoes
and later, because that left us hungry,
fried rice with chicken. She pours peach tea
into a cup of vodka, sweetly cauterizing.
Tonight we're going to walk hand in hand
to a bar that won't study her fake I.D.
and we'll slouch back to her bedroom,

and I'll fall asleep on Rachel's thrifted futon
still wearing a borrowed skirt.

Magpie Funeral

The walls of the citadel grow
clusters of birds like flowers

sprouting from stone. Below
the aqueduct, a rustle

of blue-black feathers falls
on the grass of the fortress.

The magpies give a harsh
rattling call and shriek down,

moving their black beaks
over the one who was killed.

Around them, kids play soccer
on lush fields, and dogs romp

without leashes. Pamplona
circles the star fort. Distant

from its defensive geometry,
the O has fallen from HOSTAL

fixed on the side of an inn.
Birds nest in the remaining letters,

in the crook of L's arm, in
the gentle undercurve of S.

The lost vowel leaves a ghost
of itself on the wall, untouched

by weather. Down in the fortress
a stray tabby circles the magpies,

making them scatter and rise.

Aubade

I rise in a fugue, blinking in dim light
at the voyeuristic crutches standing guard
against the wall, and swallow oxycodone
with a sigh that wakes her. She tells me

I still have a great pair of gams, even
the one with a glorious bruise swelling
to embrace my broken ankle and stroke
a swath past my knee, almost to the thigh.

Soon I'll leave for the doctor's. Until then,
trying not to jostle the three pillows elevating
my leg, she leans down for a cautious kiss,
another ache sunk in the marrow.

Asphalt Cartography

For days I'm a camera
mapping local parking lots,
translating their landscapes
into two dimensions. Each space
is a circle on the map, merging
in a blocky pointillism.

In my mind every car is a dot,
including my beige Civic
nestled against the curb.
I must measure everything
in automobile-lengths, like when
learning to drive, resting

my foot for the first time
on the clutch in the parking lot
of an abandoned strip mall,
circling the carless spaces,
the neat field of white lines
marking nothing for no one.

Night Climb in Freiburg

The arch over the rail station
bridge is just wide enough
to climb, so we do, first
upright and then at a slow
meticulous crawl.

It's a long slick parabola
in misting rain. Halfway
to the top, my hands slip,
and I try to shuffle back,
bumping into Caroline.
No choice but to keep going
up, my glasses water-blurred.

At the top I'm afraid to spin
around and dangle my legs
over the edge like everyone else.
It's too late for the trains to run.
If I fell, I fear I'd land on top
of a sudden locomotive,
whistling shrill and carrying me
away from this foreign station.

Crouched at the apex,
I have to slink to my belly
to finally crawl down
the other side, clinging
to the wet bridge that pops
the buttons off my cardigan.

The night bus ride home
is damp and peaceful.
Like the others, I throw
my head back and laugh
at my rain-soaked clothes.

Miserere

The chapel expands with smoke
and the boy next to me leans forward,

shaggy head bowed, fidgeting
and twitching his hands, distant

as the voices rising from the chancel.
In the church choir I used to send

kyries up to vaulted ceilings, numbed
by anodyne Latin, reluctant to praise

a remote god in English, or ask him
for anything at all. I feel that way again,

like I am the melody rising in the nave,
or the hot smoke spilling from charcoal

swung from a censer. Afterwards
we walk into the clear cold night,

my heels staccato on the flagstones,
hands hidden in my coat pockets

so I won't touch him again.

Jewelweed

is named for its waxy leaves.
During storms, they repel raindrops,
saving them like cabochon glass.

The flowers are their own gems,
orange teardrops like citrine, red-flecked,
lustrous as fire opal.

Their stalks surrender
at a gentle tug. Wading into the bed
leaves me with spiders

on my legs: it's rained so much
this summer, I wonder how many
have drowned on the leaves,

overwhelmed by the water,
sealed and hoarded like the spark
of a diamond's flaw.

III

Chrysalis

I left you one night to find
a new traffic light hanging
over the crossing, swinging
and draped in a black sheet.

The crunch of ice and snow
underfoot forced my gaze
down to every cautious step,
the first on the sidewalk.

No one witnessed my fall,
though I sensed the three eyes
of the traffic light behind me,
shrouded as if cocooned.

What Went Bad in Our Kitchen

A carton of blackberries, half full,
left out on the counter, now fuzzy
with beaded gems of mold, studded
with fine hairs, opaque and wet.
Half a watermelon, picked up
at a roadside stand and turning black
in the bottom drawer. A bottle of wine
uncorked beside the fridge,
glass abdomen reflecting
the sheen of grease on a gray
chicken biscuit. Two peaches,
banana-cradled, soft with rot
in a fruit bowl. Months-old milk,
year-old mayonnaise. Stagnant water
in your aluminum thermos uncapped
by the sink where you left it. Something
long forgotten in the microwave.
Something in the oven too.

Milkweed

One day I found a paper nest
in the magnolia, an oblong lump
teeming with bald-faced hornets.

When they crawled out to seek
milkweed, they bloomed white
in the radial globes of flowers,

stark against purple and red.
I waited until late summer
to destroy the nest, and did it

quietly, with three pre-dawn
sprays of poison. The colony
had already disintegrated,

the queen outlived. They
will return in spring, and build
another nest in another tree,

above the milkweed still
sending out its woolly silk
of seeds, filling with sugar.

College Graduation Party, May 1998

Susan's friends placed a call
to *Hot Raleigh Strippers* in secret,
knowing there were children

in the family room with crayons
and coloring books, young enough
for our flailing limbs to threaten

the drinks perched on sofa arms.
Two sharp knocks at the door
and her mom and dad goad Susan

to *answer it, already*, as she crosses
the room, nearly trips over her sister
sprawled on the shag carpet.

The man standing on the porch
is a cop, but he sends his hat sailing
across the room into her mother's lap,

and everyone cheers when he rips off
his vest for Susan, blushing, silent,
back in her stiff chair in the corner.

He is made of glitter and sweat.
From his stereo the Backstreet Boys
croon *Get yourself a bad boy*

and all the lights are off now except for
a disco ball lobbing red and blue light
onto the stiff spikes of his gelled hair.

The whole room shakes and throbs
with the snap of his hips in Susan's face
and her father's wild laughter.

continued, stanza break

Later, I wave goodbye to her, silent
still, hands folded tight. My parents shut
the door, muffling the shrieks to a murmur

like the low thump of a migraine.

Werewolf, Age Thirteen

At dawn, when she returns to herself
with dirt in her mouth and blood under
the French manicure, she will bend
aching knees for the long walk home.

Her mother will be waiting at the door
with a ham sandwich and a glass
of milk, ready to mend the sweater,
wash muddy jeans, and arrange

the sneakers in a neat line. The girl
will stay home sick from school,
curled in bed, and the hands folded
under her neck will remember

the throat they wrapped around last night,
that conscious and sleepless anatomy.

After the Centralia Mine Fire

Kids were forbidden
to venture into the hills
punctured by sinkholes
swollen with heat
and carbon monoxide.

The soft earth disguised
its softness under moss
and leaf debris, under
clumps of maidenhair fern,
under the bloom of spicebush
and wild geranium, hiding
the traps of its tunnels.

Pierced with mines built
over mines, the gutted hills
filled their hollows with fire
and longed to suffocate.

My father played in the yard
or in the squat stone houses
of his dour aunts and uncles.
In their dark parlors he lost
toy cars to the cellar grates.

The heat that rose up
smelled like wood smoke,
but bitter, and it infused
his clothes deep as the dust
that bloomed from the coal,
the grime that sharpened
the stale air of the cellar
and blackened the skins
of carrots and potatoes.

You Say Yes, I Say No

I was thirteen and nothing was harder than singing. The morning of our May ceremony, Tara and I wore white dresses and played “Hello Goodbye” on stage. To be precise, she played guitar and I sang. To be precise, I sang badly, my voice too shy to hold onto the right note. *That was so emotional*, Matt said afterwards. *Your voice cracked*. Yes, only because it did not belong to me and would not submit to my control, like a Frisbee rolling down the road before falling into a storm drain. Soon I said goodbye to singing altogether, to acoustic guitars, to microphones on stage, to the dress that shone like a beacon in the dark for an audience obliged to be polite.

Ruminant

How can a cow ignore the flies
licking her flank? Hazy black mob
shifting in the heat, cut in half
by flicks of her tail then coming together
again. More hum than murmur.

She doesn't care about them,
a black patch on her hide same as dirt.
Her long piebald tongue rolls out
to hold a clump of sod, shakes
the dirt off before pulling roots
into a fly-heavy mouth. Her black
eyes are luminous, thoughtful.

In the low afternoon light, a swarm
of bees lingers at the edge of the field
where we stand, seeking a new hive.
The sky darkens with their weight
like an itch settling under the skin.

Will it leave us alone, this single body
teeming with mouths and stingers?
The swarm collapses over the horizon,
anxiety bearable for being just out of sight.
I close my eyes and a black vibrato
mass of wings twists in the darkness.

Small Library Elegy

The last box in the attic held
Marilyn's books. To haul it
down the clanking ladder
was to carry her weight,

the titles that might have been
on the bedside bookshelf
or stacked on the end table

or—the lone cookbook—
propped up in the kitchen,
so she could flip through it
while stirring Fordhooks
at the stove. A bookmark
rose from a casserole recipe,
waiting for a church luncheon.

A Prayer Guide for Lent
lay creased in the box,
with other brochures
on how to pray for children,
and for one's husband,
and for acts of mercy.

I'm sure she curled up
with Nora Roberts
in her green armchair,
and sat at the old rolltop
with Nicholas Sparks,
and took her coffee
outside with Don Rickles
on the rose garden porch,

and I know her fingers
worried the pages
of the last book in the pile,

continued, no break

the heavy *Encyclopedia
of Symptoms*: a complete
guide to Chest Pain, Chills,
and Nicotine Withdrawal,
maladies receding farther
each day from the soft
paperweight of her hands.

Sighting

Today a team of researchers
was surprised by a sperm whale
circling their sub, its cautious face
caught angling toward the camera.

First the head visible through
the cloudy window, then body
and body and body and finally
the triangular lobes of the tail
passing the boat, again and again,
as the whale inspected the vessel.

If only they still walked on land.
To lie in a garden and see, among
sycamore branches, a massive eye.
To sit rolling in an office chair
and drop a stack of papers
at the sound of whalesong

and the sight of the smallest part
of something big peering inside.

Alternative Energy in Southern Germany

I. Schönauf

Nuclear disaster irradiated
the mushrooms, and pigs
who scavenged in the forest:
everything was toxic, even
the hazel trees. The mayor

pointed to the river
where they were going
to build the reactor.
The town fought it,
she said, led by a famous
chocolatier, horrified
by the threat posed
to hazelnut candy bars.

Nuclear power vanished
from the valley. Now
all sweets are benign.

The mayor explained
that there's a German word
for the feeling of a stone
falling from your heart.

II. Emmendingen

Hiding from freezing rain,
our class huddled in the warmth
of the biogas tanks
at the Schneider farm.

continued, stanza break

They used to raise livestock,
but now Rico the Schnauzer
is the biggest animal there.

Crowding the empty pastures,
the plump round tanks seem
like sleeping beasts, rumbling
and clanking, bulky as sows.

The daughters and sons
have forsaken the family business,
unwilling to breed meat or fuel.
Their mother hands us umbrellas
and gives us cherry schnapps
from the cellar distillery
to keep us warm.

III. Wildpoldsried

The church roofs are studded
with solar panels, and long rows
of photovoltaics rise
from lavish fields.
Sheep graze between
the sharp blue chips
as if they're just another crop
turning sunlight into sugar.

Over the hill, behind a line
of fluorescent pink rhododendrons,
turbines rise from the fog, mist
beading on their white steel stalks.

Two Oaks

The post oak still dominates
my parents' house, shadowing
the yard, but I can already see
its stump. They keep the tree
for me, and I'm not the one
who has to rake its nubby leaves
out of the nandina beds.

I know it will come down
one day, though I'd still see
its phantom branches framing
the gables, the way I see
the white bench circling its trunk
though five years have passed
since that seat rotted away.

Last summer, a storm felled
the arboretum's swamp white oak.
The sky forgot its branches
but the fallen trunk endured,
carved by somebody's chainsaw
into a loveseat. I sat there
with a date one night and told him
I'd seen the calamity firsthand.

The North Carolina Watermelon Queen

Harvest goddess
of rind and sweetness,
herald of August
leading Murfreesboro
in a parade down
Main Street, she waves

from a float decked
in green and pink.
Draped in a satin sash,
she shades her face
with a black-seeded
parasol, squinting

under a pale sky
looming like the awnings
at the farmers' market.
Watermelons pile up
at her royal feet,
a sweet unstable heap.

She holds thick slabs
of fruit, rind striped
and sun-bleached, juice
dripping into her palm,
then hands her bounty
down to hungry kids.

After the festival,
she blesses every plate
in every restaurant,
her portrait beaming
from the shining backs
of the napkin dispensers.

Hall of Taxidermy

The giraffe's neck rises
through the stairwell,
casting a long shadow

on the wall's tidy array
of antlers and horns.

It's more imposing than lion
or rhinoceros because
I have to tilt my head
back to meet its eyes,

or else climb to the top
of the stairs and look down
on the black lashes
curving over glass,

the ears that must feel
like velvet, the hide
slick and dust-free.

Some janitor must come
once in a while, wet
a rag with furniture polish,
and make this stuff shine.