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To An Imaginary Travel Companion

Let me take you out on the porch
and give you a haircut. Our feet
ringed with soft brown commas.
We haven't groomed in weeks.
We should dangle our calves together
between the railings and cut our toenails,
sprinkle clippings over dead scrub
and juniper, little keratin
slivers of ourselves in the air
and the sandy loam. It would feel
like home. Here in Arizona
we have overstayed. What if we went
instead to Colorado, where they name
their towns Silt and Thistle
and No Name. Wouldn't it be a shame
to miss the train tracks running
through canyons, the aspens
fluorescent green in late spring?
Timing's the thing. Let's get there
on a Sunday night so we can watch
the SUVs trundling home with kayaks
and climbing ropes strapped to their backs.
Off the highway there is mountain
snow, lakes, thunder. Keep your eyes
peeled. If we drive long enough
we might see a herd of massive
spotted cows walloping together
across an empty green field.

Gleaning

We pulled over. They were all so perfectly
purple. He asked us
if we wanted any the field was

already picked the eggplants
were Old Testament leftovers littered
in the furrows like bits of gleaming trash.

Diane said yes, why not, load them up.
We stacked them as high in the open-top convertible
as we possibly could and nestled our hips into the gaps.

They teetered the car was brimming
with garden eggs, their stout necks and round bodies
sliding against each other brushing

our bare thighs. Diane hit the gas
and skittered back onto the road every
few minutes that first mile we would hit a divot

and lose an eggplant popping
the pavement like the sound a tennis ball makes.
She drove faster. How will we cook all this

I said. Moussaka for breakfast,
ratatouille baba ghanoush our mothers
will be furious. We let our hair go in the hot aubergine wind.

Crying Over a Chopped Onion

Crying again, after a long summer
of travelling and not crying—too many

trains, tents, things to pitch and catch
and cast. But now, chipped ceramic

knife in my fist, oil popping on the stove,
I break open over the broken bulb. It's not

about the onion, which is old and dried.
These are fluent saltwater, lichen and

barnacle tears that fold up my face
and cling to the corners of my eyes.

I know the new crying will erupt
in the checkout line weighed down

by a bag of red potatoes, in the shower
to the mildewed tile, into the crook

of someone's arm. In the kitchen over this
oil which is browning, this pot foaming

over, this onion unwrapped from its paper
skin, waiting for me to dry off and slice again.

Sheetrock

I don't remember why
my father punched walls
but we all saw the holes:
gaping, uneven edges rough
like entrances to caves.

One he papered over
with a world map I'd gotten
from a magazine. I stood
in the hallway and learned
the false color of every country
that week, waiting

for him to quietly peel
the map off and cut away
the damage, anchor the hole
with spare boards, smooth
the gummy compound over,
sand, and paint.

I hear I am like him, contained
to a bursting point, though we
never talked about it, my father
patching his rage, head
bent, while I tapped away
at the edges of his holes
with a blue plastic hammer.

Midnight on the Crescent

I would give anything to sleep that way here,
to lay my head on the scratchy armrest and never stir
when someone brushed my ear with their sleeve
as they searched for the bathroom. This woman,
for instance, with her sagging chin fastened resolutely
to her chest. Or the person snoring faceless through
a purple blanket thrown over their head, a little concave
O where the mouth should be. Babies sprawl sucking
their fists, heads bumping against their parents' thighs
when the train jumps. One woman has her legs
hooked over her seat partner's knees. They are quiet
and still. They seem to love each other. When the train
stops they won't stir unless the conductor shakes them
groggy-eyed. They will look out for each other's bags
and carry them down one behind the other and fall asleep
on a bench in the dim train station waiting for a cab.

My First Time in the Desert

I want to learn yucca, prickly pear, rocks
that look like the faces of sleeping men,
their stone noses turned up into the cumulus.
In the seat next to me, the man whose name
I've forgotten turns in his sleep. His mouth
opens. In the night my shoulder
drifted onto his and I woke up looking
at the bristly hair around his ears, my body
soaked in recycled nylon sweat. I sink
my head into my balled-up sweatshirt
against the window and watch west
Texas as it comes to light. Out there the plants
stand proud and spiked. My dad will say to enjoy
the desert blooming while it lasts. He never
forgets there's an end to everything, even
all this. Twenty-three hours on the train
and I like to think of Los Angeles
over there sitting in some forever
twilight with a million lightbulbs
in its pocket, waving frothy palm tree arms. Everything
west of here is just an idea. Soon, sandy gulches
and muddy rivers along the Mexico border.
The train sways from somewhere in the hip joint,
from the constant soft clack
and whistle of our clammy bodies.

The Last of the Radium Girls

The others, their bones turned
to lace: honeycombed
jawbones, teeth torn loose
from pink sockets.

Eight cents to paint a dial. To push the brush
between our lips and shape
the bristles to a point. Bitter grit
spitting fluorescent, where

every surface sparkled with luminescence
like a plague of smashed fireflies
or Marie Curie's splattered lab notebooks.
Some of the girls painted

their fingernails and front teeth
to shock their boyfriends in the dark.
It was good to glow, we
nuclear illuminators forming

perfect numbers from the undark paint, absorbing
the magic of radium: spires
of vertebrae collapsing onto riddled hips.
I got lucky. I never liked

the taste, never put the brush
into my mouth.
I was no good with the delicate numbers,
each crooked hour glowing green
from the ghost white watch face.

Delicate Arch

My sisters and I go into the desert
because we haven't been together in two years.

In Utah, everything is red rock and scrub,
what terraformed Mars could be
if the atmosphere wouldn't burst

our lungs, freeze
all the water in our bodies,
if we could even breathe there at all.

Breathing is difficult, anyway—
trying to quit smoking, trying to quit
sitting in the house all day, planning ahead.

We hike up to Delicate Arch, follow
the curves of the rocks
as the sun sets and turns them pink and purple.

My sisters are praying we don't lose the light
so that the photos will turn out,
so our lives will look lovely and more spectacular

than anyone else's. At the top of a rock basin the arch
balances on its squeezed crux, sandstone fin
that has been gradually worn away,

weathered and eroded. We take pictures
and watch everyone else take pictures of each other.
I want to call it sunset on Mars, but on Mars

the sun is a bright white pinpoint. There's no
asking each other when we'll pay back what we owe,
no wondering what comes next. No
squat twisted juniper growing impossibly
out of parched rock.

And That's How We Lived Here Most of Our Lives

When we first moved to Atlanta we moved into
an apartment in a condemned house on Peachtree Road.
We had we had a *wonderful* address
but the house was condemned but
you know people were still living in it.
They had converted it into
seven seven different apartments
and we shared a bathroom
with seven different families.

Well you know it seemed perfectly alright then
we were in love we were just
you know we were just concerned with each other
it didn't seem to bother us.
There were several windows broken out of our bedroom
 our kitchen was on a slanted floor but
we didn't care.

We lived in Bourgh Apartments and then
Piedmont Morningside.
We always had wonderful addresses
and we had a nice apartment there
and then we moved to Brookhaven and into Marietta.
We lived forty-seven years in Marietta, and we lived
in Atlanta for four or five years.

Train Delayed Two Hours in Seattle

The four white-haired
husbands and wives on the tall-backed
wooden bench across from me
don't seem to care. They bring
each other shrink wrapped
turkey sandwiches and vending machine
Lipton tea. The wives yank
sweaters from their leather bags
and force them on the husbands.
They sit with their knees turned in
toward each other. All they can
talk about is how lovely
the mosaic tile floor, the frosted ceiling
like a wedding cake, how good
the wilted white sandwiches.

When you give a child the name of a bird, it loses the bird.

I want to get back to that first bird.
Before binoculars, when I knew how
To know a thing, not just to learn the word.

You might think it's pretty absurd
For someone my age to bring this up now,
But I want to go back to that first bird.

And now that my brain's going blurred
I'm losing every feather, every crown.
Who knows how long I'll even have the words.

What's worse is that I'm losing what I've heard
all those mornings dripping from wet boughs—
I can't recall the sound of that first bird.

Yes, I love the staccato and the whirr
of bullfinch, guttersnipe, swallow, thrush, and owl,
but it's not enough just to know the word.

The kind of longing to which I just referred
has to do with color, touch, flutter, the wow
I felt when I couldn't name that first bird.
To know a thing, but not yet know the word.

My Father, Who Died Before You Were Born

My father grew eggplants.
His knees left sharp imprints in the soil.
My father was thin and soft like a bean tendril, and stooped at the waist.
My father wore torn straw hats with massive brims and swaths of green plastic sewn in.
The sun claimed chunks from his nose, cheeks, and ears, so that his face was a
mottled mosaic.
My father didn't like to look at himself.
His eyes were the color of a delftware pastoral scene.

My father almost wasn't my father.
His first wife tried to shoot him after the war because he fell in love with my mother.
When he met my mother, they were trying to stem the blood of earnest boys from Georgia.
They were sewing up the gashes and picking out bullets.
In the dust-colored photos they look not at all adulterous.
They look like tourists.
My father left his other family up in Raleigh.

My father ran a mental hospital after the war, but he didn't talk about it much.
My father threw away all his white coats when he retired.
He had a carved stick with wings and a snake twined around.
Your uncle and I used the stick to play Moses in the desert. We took turns being Pharaoh.

My father smelled constantly of Sir Walter Raleigh tobacco and fresh dirt.
He liked Werther's and Old Crow whiskey.
Which is what I drink when I get lonely.
In his later years my father started most sentences with "a little birdie told me."
He wouldn't own up to his own memories.

My father is the reason your father is so quiet.
My father liked to fish in the surf and throw sharks back in.
My father pressed tobacco to the jellyfish sting on my leg, you can see the scar here.
My father gave your father his nose and his crooked back.
My father didn't laugh, but he often smiled.
He played Solitaire all day, let the rabbits eat every last one of his roses.

Automatic Card Shuffler

Into the clouded plastic
I would stare for the secret
to the card deck's undoing.
Every afternoon Papa split
the deck into right and left
and the cards rapid-fired
through the plastic slots
into the tray at the bottom that slid
out like a trundle bed.
On the screened-in porch
he played Solitaire and smoked
a cherry pipe with no hands,
puffing air and dropping ash
onto the beige carpet. Maybe
he played over the wobbly table
I have in my kitchen today,
the one with yellow tape spelling
Mary Faison on its underside. The table
on which I imagine my grandmother
talked shit and played bridge
or gin rummy with her friends, third
Bloody Mary in her hand, lipstick
smeared on her teeth, though
she's been dead seventeen years
now, though all I ever really understood
about her was that she loved
lima beans and salt and solitude
in her kitchen. Big hair
and Old Crow whiskey. She
always won or claimed she won.
And how I wanted, when I was young,
to sit at that table and flip Jacks
and play myself. How I want
to run the smoke-stained cards through,
to push the long button and hear
the machine heart shudder and thrum.

My Darling

sea oats still barricade the house
and because today was so windy the dunes
are strewn with plastic fragments, shell,
bits of wood. I couldn't tell you
if they're driftwood or just the bones
of some old rocker. Up the beach
in the direction you like to walk, mist
swallows the barnacled pier and further
there's the wharf I cannot see just now.
Here at the house's feet a two foot tall
creature in a green coat and green boots
scours the tidal pools for pastel coquinas
and desperate sea stars. I think coquinas
because I remember how we would laze
on the same rocks that keep the beach
from sighing into the mud-green ocean.
Everything clung to them and lived
under them, and when you unearthed
a handful of the crooked fan shells
they would turn upright and dig
with their rubber radula back into the muck.
I loved so much to dig with you.
In the gloaming where you left me
I sit mostly in the mist coming in
through the screens and listen to grit
as it batters the house. The tide
is as you left it and the shrimp boats
rust like old nails beyond the dragging surf.

I Know Some of These Women Had Big Personalities

What a sweet kind way I'm going
to remember that. I don't know if I can be as
delicate as you. Mary,
I would just say she was very controlling.
But at the same time,
she was a lot of fun.
But when you went to Mary's house,
you did things Mary's way.
And you knew that when you went there.
But you did things her way,
and often some of us would get uh
disturbed by that, but we knew it
when we went there. But
Tom was always laid back and easygoing,
and whatever Mary said and did seemed
to be okay with him. There were times when we
would all be there at the beach and if politics came up oh
my goodness Mary and Tom and Paul and Sara Lee
and Top and Bond would have a knock-down drag-out.
Brock and I wouldn't get into it. But they
would just have a knock-down drag-out.
That's not a term you hear today.

One thing Mary used to say,
for years and years and years
when we would all be talking and she'd say
When I become dictator
I bet you we heard her say that 3000 times at least.
She had every intention of living
to become a dictator, and she would say that
if it was the end of the world, only she
and the roaches would be alive.

And I always knew that there was a soft side
under there, but you know she didn't let
many people see it. But I could see it
even before we had all this retirement time together, but
we really enjoyed very much
being with them then. You know, she
was more relaxed I could even
get in the kitchen with her. Oh, maybe you
don't know that she would always say
no one could get in her kitchen no one.
You know she moved around so fast

she didn't want anybody in her way. So
you know I could get in and work in there with her.

Mary would be cooking in the kitchen
and Tom would come up behind her
put his arms around her tummy and
you know they you could just tell that they
loved each other. I don't remember what
he would say now I've forgotten that but
they loved each other. Very much.
And as I said, we I was so so so so glad that
I got to learn Mary.
You would have loved them.

If I Could Be Anything, I'd Be a Snapping Turtle

For her chelonian hiss and belligerent disposition match her claws.

For her claws tear through muscle.

For she is part dinosaur, part snake, part bird of prey.

For she wears her ridged carapace like uncut gems.

For her saw-toothed tail hangs heavy.

For she is wrinkled, scaled, mud-colored and caked in mud.

For she is cold-blooded and hot-tempered.

For her beaklike jaws will amputate a finger if she needs to.

She honest to God does not give a damn about your turtle stew.

For she burrows into the muddy bottom.

For she is queen of the muskeg, morass, and mire.

For she does not suffer from loneliness. She does not suffer fools, does not withdraw
into her shell.

For she can hold sperm inside herself for seasons and use it only as necessary.

For she lives in fresh and brackish water.

For she eats anything she can swallow:

crayfish, chara, catfish, spider,
sedge, lily, gosling, toad, vole,
salamander, slug, chub, worm,
muskrat, copperhead and turtle.

For she eats carrion, too.

For she forages just until she learns the art of the ambush.

For her gaping pink maw.

For she keeps quiet until a sunburnt boy grabs her shell and she has to remove a chunk
of his boot.

For if I don't disturb her she will sit draped in shallow algae and stare.

For no one knows how old she can be.

She is powerful and paludal, extant child of the Chelydridae.

For she is one in ten to survive to adulthood.

For she has seen hatchlings cracked open by the raccoon and the great blue heron.
For she is the great blue heron flying up from the marsh across my windshield,
she is the chipped windshield,
she is the road cracking as the cypress trees press upward,
she is the bony cypress knees that wreck canoes,
she is the grass shrimp in the salt marsh casting off old legs,
she is the spiky marsh grass that rustles over water,
she is the algae and detritus that color the estuary,
she is the estuary running out to the dark deep sea.

In the morning when I haven't slept

I drop an egg on the floor.
On the dirty tile, saffron bleeds
through pointed white chips.
The coffee pot churns and spits.
Shot through by a long dead
enemy, the kitchen is a cathedral
with stained glass pastorals
broken to bits under the vaults.
It's okay to pray to the framed
yellow poem which begins *Please
stay out of my kitchen* and ends
at the spider egg sacs caught
between window panes above
the sink. What comes out
is rusty and distracted. What I'm thinking
about is the egg, how cold it is
to crouch barefoot over the spilled yolk
and gather it into a paper towel.
I drink a third cup of coffee
by the window. Outside, a man walks
with a leaf blower strapped to his back,
a cyclone of broken leaves.
Under a paper angel hung
on his kitchen window, the man
in Apartment 35 scrubs every last one
of his pots. The morning bleeds
brown-gray. Across the way, strung-up
scuffed white sneakers swing like fake
seagulls below the drooping power line.

Now That We Have Started to Lose Ourselves

Let's climb into your claw
foot bathtub with a bucket of fried chicken.
We can read girl sleuth stories aloud
to each other until we start to prune
the vines off the plum-colored parts
of our minds. I mean the parts that slosh
through the marsh to your little wind
beaten green house and its bullfrog pond, the parts
that talk for hours over the oyster water-
colored behind glass in its frame above the bath.

Not the mica-glint barnacle crust
of the shell—the slimy ear-shaped
banana pudding rubber
that people pay for. A dinner I've never
tried but always wanted to. What about you?
We could pry each open with a bone
handled knife, trading slurps over shell
ground into pluff mud. Below our feet, the marsh water
confiding in the grass. It could be that way
for hours. You and I copper-blooded
under swinging grey moss.

How to Kill a Dove

Pop its head clean off
if the birdshot doesn't do it.

This may be hard the first time.
Just please, don't

screw around with
trying to only break its neck.
Easiest thing to do is just
pop that whole sucker off.
Won't feel a thing. Just pop it off.

My Father in Space

Now he's sending me misspelled text messages
from a capsule full of levers and silver switches,
vises and water droplets, bobbing
around in a blue jumpsuit, his tools
heavy, the wrenches float
from his hand to the ceiling like sea plankton.
When he calls me from orbit
he flaunts his space pen.
Jotting! Upside down!
as if he's forgotten
they sell those at office supply stores
now. On Earth he forgot
a lot of things, anesthesia wrapping
his brain stem in sub-Plutonic cold, so I don't mind him
in space so much. Muscle atrophy trumps
the fatigued walk home from the mailbox.
What's a little intracranial pressure
when your optic nerves are already shot?
And how he loves all
the earth-gazing, the atmosphere clinging
to the rest of us like a contact lens, my worries
invisible under a swirl
of white cloud, while my mother
walks the dog and the telescopes
whirr alone on their mountaintops, and the science
fiction books whose plots
he can't hold onto settle in the dust
of our garage with all the dying
manuals and misplaced bolts.

We Would Go Out Many Times a Week

We would dance.

We loved dancing well

Brock didn't to start with cause

he was always self-conscious he told me
about

his size.

But I finally talked him into

you know if he was going to be married to me

well both of us needed to

enjoy dancing.

And so

we took some lessons and

then he

you know learned to love to dance

and we would go out during the week even

and to, you know

find a place where they

played live music and

go dancing.

Oh yes.

He was

six-four and a quarter.

I was five-two.

We could dance beautifully together.

On the River by Your House

Two dozen bees belly
up to the bank because turns out they love
the odor of mud, the wet give
of dark clay. They may
be masons gathering for a cavity nest,
or they're thirsty
for dirty water, would sip from fresh
poured concrete. They are soft
and press their faces softly
to the stick-littered mud.
The sun makes it glisten, turns the bees bronze
with mud-covered mandibles.
They take their time, their fine
hairs twinging in the summer river breeze.
They fall to their knees.

The Year I Forgot to Wash My Hair

I have done nothing all day
but peel vegetables.

I have filled the sink
with potato eyes. I have

ignored the long letter
you wrote me on a break

in another kitchen. I will
not write you back.

I will wipe my fat knife
with a swollen sponge

while curled skins settle
around the drain.

The dimpled envelope growing
wet with fingerprints among

beets and yams piled
naked and angular waiting
to be boiled soft.

The Father Running Out of Words

Sits silent on the phone playing chicken never talks about the army anymore
 sighs forgets the old stories, the ones about falling in love
sighs when you fall in love when anyone tries to talk about it smiles with
his mouth closed has a face like a Christmas tree farm in April uniform
not yet done mails envelopes full of near-expired coupons for Tide and Campbell's
 crossword puzzles as if there are none here clippings from the newspaper about note-
taking and namesake bricks believes there is a scientific cure for you believes nothing
is wrong when everything is believes everything
 is wrong when nothing is stops spouting facts about missiles and
the feasibility of the movies stops going to the movies watches Roman Holiday
at home no crying stays awake in the blue light and reads about other
planets doesn't ask when you are coming home if you are anything
swallows water in his thoughts his eyes are broken lightbulbs in my chest.

To Wave a Handkerchief

To wave a handkerchief, to cry
as the wheels turn slowly away
and the faces in the window
tilt and tilt to keep looking. To
lift your heels and crane
your neck to keep looking
back. To stand on the platform
until the train's last passenger
car disappears into the next town.
To drive home through the streets
you've known all your life, take out
your keys, warm soup on the stove.
To be the one left and not the one
leaving. To know what was
going from you as it blindly went.

Letter From the Garden of Eden

Dad, last night the street was a firecracker store. I mean the kind where everything screams at you from the shelves, exclamation points and red-yellow explosions. It was dark and not dark. Over the sidewalk, the neon marquees of the strip clubs jiggled and flashed. I walked up and down for hours, then sat on one of the dark benches lining the cathedral. On the bench across from me, a man your age wearing socks with sandals tried and tried to peel the plastic off a Pepto Bismol bottle. It was so cold out. Even though it was June it was stupid not to wear socks. I didn't have any. For just a minute I stood under the artificial heat lining a garlic restaurant in the light of its glowing bulb. I counted gelato flavors in all the windows. There were lit up books on a string crossing the corner of Columbus Avenue. And even though I didn't have any money, this man named Manep invited me inside a club called the Garden of Eden. The sign was a round pink palm tree with a snake hanging off, and he stood under it in an ill-fitting black suit. Under the awning, dancers stood surrounded by a velvet rope. They shared cigarettes and complained about work. I felt so strange and so lonely. Manep said I could come in for free because I seemed like I was real. People are always saying that and I have no idea what it means. Nothing ever feels rooted in my body, not the sidewalk, not the blinking neon. Maybe you know this, too. Maybe you feel it right now. I hope the world's still going where you are, three hours in the future. It would be nice if you could write me back when you get the chance.

Elberton, Georgia

Whatever happened, it happened long
before light brushed the dusty slats
across our windows. And I swear
it was the bitterest winter I ever saw.

As light brushed the dusty slats
your uncle pulled wool up his ankles.
It was the bitterest winter we ever saw.
He bent there staring down the frost

straightening the wool around his ankles.
It was time to crack the ice off the face
of granite terraces, to wipe down the frost
over someone's future gravestone or tabletop.

To crack the ice off the man's granite face
they'd want a carver's chisel, the same
kind they would use to write his name
on a donated tabletop gravestone.

Your uncle grabbed his chisel, the same
carbide-tipped piece his father had carried.
Whatever happened, he'd find that it happened
to a man who lowered himself into the ground

in the carbide-tipped cold the winter carried
as if the quarry could warm his blood.
The man lowered himself into the ground
like some middle-of-the-night stone cutter.

As if the quarry could warm his blood,
your uncle would tie his coat around his waist.
All he wanted was to be a stone cutter,
to take the earth out in blocks. And I swear

he came home with a stone around his waist
that day that he's never taken off. His whole life
he took the earth out in blocks and dropped
thoughts like stones to the bottom of the quarry.

Your uncle climbed back into the ground each day.
After he saw that man curled like a frozen
lima bean dropped to the bottom of the quarry,
after he carried the man up with a rope

looped and looped around his frozen waist,
he never could take off that carbide-tipped day.
It was the bitterest winter we ever saw, it left us
chapped like middle-of-the-night stonecutters.

I Want to Be Good at Something

The way the conductor is good at marrying
two train cars just before midnight
in Spokane. We girls who have slept
curled up in the back of the train
sit up and stare as the door opens
onto nothing but yellow lamps
on black. Empty rusted track.
The conductor walks back
and braces his hips against
the two safety bars in the doorway.
His legs tilt. He leans, holds
a walkie talkie to his lips and speaks
into it: 3, 2. One more! 20 feet. Roger.
He guides the new train cars
toward us till we are nose to nose. Easy,
easy. When we attach, there isn't
even a jolt. Just a pop. He lets
the walkie talkie drop, adjusts
his hat brim. He is gentle and firm and good
at what he does, like a dam builder
or a whale rider. He slides the door shut
and strides up the aisle. We'll lurch and swing
onward to Montana in a little while.

Inspection

You've got what my cousin calls//*swimmer shoulders*
not exactly//the best for filling out
a summer dress but I'm sure
you look great in a suit//no shoulder pads
for you//no ma'am//you don't
need a damn thing do you.
You can break down doors and bowl
over the best of 'em. Don't//feel bad
about your shoulders then//we're all
built different. Why me I've got
ankles thicker than good meringue
and a forehead that can crack a walnut open.
Not you//your ankles are taut
and bony like a thoroughbred's //I bet there's a runner
in you//like you've sprung a leak
you can't shut off. I tell you//you're the kind of gal
I'd want on my bench any day. Any day//of this week or the next.

Here Is My Lead-Footed Apology

For that knock-down drag-out,
firework store on the state line
of a fight. I'm sorry I moved
your boots from their place
against the front wall of the house
and tucked them into a far corner.
I'm sorry I folded all your socks
into mismatched pairs. I shouldn't
have filled your pockets with sand
and graveled the floor where
you swing your feet off the bed
in the morning. It was wrong
to cut the handles off your paper
shopping bags. I know you like
to reuse those. Even worse
to hide your painted amaryllis
spoon rest. It's on the bookshelf
behind your Greek cookbooks.
But I'm especially sorry for the other
day when we walked together
and you said you loved the kudzu
and I said it looked like shit, and you
pointed out all those pink and white
shorebirds, I think they were spoonbills,
stacked in a tree and called them beautiful,
and I said they looked like a bunch of
used tissues—I was wrong. I carry them
with me still. They reminded me
of paper flower pomps stuffed into
a float that sailed slowly over our heads.

As the Almanac Makers Say of the Weather, My Condition Was Variable

Sometimes my body was hours
of full tide, church festivals,
the ideal time to plant stone fruit.

I became a tonic for rash
and the cold that overtakes
the spine in winter.

I was a score of hurricane
seasons, solar eclipse, the day the red drum
swim to warmer water.

What can I give myself
now that I'm old?
Tears without motive,
a morning picked clean of stars.
The knowledge that the heavenly bodies
line up to better see us,
our joy and sorrows,
our weal and woe.

What can I give you
now that I'm old?
Prepare to be pummeled with days.
Prepare for years of shrieking
kettles, kleptos, glistening divots
in the mud after a spring rain.

I Missed It the Way You Miss a Train

All summer I sleep walked
from bench to bench, gripping a plastic bag
with a loaf of wheat bread
and a jar of crunchy peanut butter inside.
In Union Station I collapsed
at 4AM against the wooden seat dividers.
Everyone else was sleeping
wherever they felt like sleeping.
I never slept. When the light broke my jelly legs
took me out into the courtyard
and sat me down on the chipped edge
of the mosaic tile fountain. I fed bread
to the wrens. It's good to know there are still wrens
all the way out here. People started
to pour from and into the station doors
on the way to work. When I finally dozed, propped
against the wall of a breakfast joint
with sawdust floors and muttering
Chinese men, my backpack wedged
between my swollen ankles, the
dreams were travertine and terra cotta,
winding into the belly of the transit center,
hair blowing and numb as the last Coast
Starlight crept from the chipped concrete
platform, toes edging the long yellow line.

It Was Not Hard to Adjust

Not at all.

When I locked the door behind me
that was it. You know always when I had left where
well, I only left alone one time, but
wherever Brock and I lived when we left
that would never seem like home anymore.

So you know, when I left it, that was it.
This was my home.
And I do love it here. I love my home.

Tell Me About a Time You Got All Dressed Up

Maybe you had nowhere to go after all. Maybe it was a Tuesday night and you felt you had something to prove to yourself. You wore velvet smoothed over the ragged oysters of your knees. Your curled feet were perfect molluscs. No need to be modest. I want to know what it was like to walk in your shoes across the muddy pit of your yard to get to church on the hottest Sunday of the year. Tell me how your mother used to dress you. And if you hated it, tell me what you imagined you wore instead. Tell me what you wore when your father was late coming home after the bridge collapse, after the fire across town. Tell me if your elbows were open and exposed when you crouched dark-eyed in the pantry after the toaster had been thrown across the kitchen tile. Tell me about being left in the dirt lot of the county fair in your favorite dress, pearls that started as battered foreign objects clipped to your ears. The useless lights tacked to the carnival rides reflecting off your two-dollar silver ring. Tell me what you did then. Start there.

I Didn't Have the Heart to Tell Him

He jumped off the two AM Silver Star
into a cloud of Camel Blue smoke
and said, to no one in particular,
and then to me, Never
in my whole life have I been South.
He beamed at his own feet
spread on the dim train platform, said,
I'm here to visit my son. Haven't
seen him in twelve years. What I really want
is to catch an alligator
while I'm down here.
Is that hard to do? I hear
they're all over, I hear
you can pull one from a ditch by the side
of the road. I can't leave
without one.

When Judy Garland Sings In My Kitchen

When Judy Garland sings
in my kitchen, brassy and clear
and low, I'm transported
back to the couch with Dad
on a Saturday evening. We've got
nowhere to go. He tells me
a story (this was when he still
told stories) about how Judy
was considered too fat to play
Dorothy. She went on a diet
of coffee, cigarettes, and chicken soup,
sad and on pills to go to sleep
or to lose weight or to wake up.
That's what the documentaries
all said. Judy Garland sings
about love in my kitchen as I scrape
the skin off a sweet potato
with chapped fingers. She heaves
her voice out like a rope, tintured
with pills. I go back and I think
he was telling me to be bold.
Maybe he meant I was beautiful
and should forget about her nose caps
and the false teeth and the slaps
to the face. At the ends of the documentaries
she would pull herself back up
and make everyone weep
about a man that got away, then die full
of barbiturates in a bathroom. Here in my kitchen
it's cold and the mushroom stems pop
perfectly out of their caps. Judy sings
about Christmas in the middle of a war.
She sings about happiness in a cocked hat
and she sounds like she wants to die.
At home, Dad sinks further
into the haze of his own head. He
nods along. Maybe he was saying
that my life could be run down like hers
and he would muddle through with me.
Maybe that was it, that nutmeg
of consolation, that fluent knife clicking
on the cutting board the only live sound
for miles. Now Kennedy's dead
and she's singing the Battle Hymn

of the Republic. I hear her shoulders
go taut and her eyes turn upward.
Glory glory hallelujah. Her lips
curl out. The three of us are together
again on the stage, the chipped linoleum.
When the song ends, the sequins on our chests
catch the floodlights. The crowd claps.
We all blow three kisses and we back away.

How I Began to Move Away

Well the house and the yard
were much more than I needed.

So I had begun to pack long before I knew that I was ready to move.
cause you know we had so much stuff
from being in the house for that long.

So I had started giving things away and packing up
things to take to Goodwill and
when people would visit

you know I would ask them if they knew anybody who wanted
whatever furniture I was not taking and
so they would say no but my daughter needs a dresser
or whatever. So I just gave a lot of it away
just downsized. Gave away all

my china, all
my crystal, all
my linens,
all my silver cause I did not want to spend all my time ironing and polishing
you know,
so I gave all that away and bought acrylic dishes and acrylic glasses.