

for my friends, my family, and Adelyn

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The Daily Tar Heel: “Power Outage”

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I. Inch

Keeping in Touch with the Ocean

Even a morning hundreds of miles
inland, I drip two plastic dewdrops
into my wet left palm and squint
to see them settle in the riverbed
of skin and brackish solution.
My hand, a fleshy river delta,
accepts the ocean. A blurry
right index finger with one lens
gaping toward an eye is an anemone
reaching out of the water
at low tide. Suddenly, the contact
kisses the slick curved eyeball,
brings high tide to the locked pool
of my cornea: another kiss and the sea is
everywhere I look, overflowing,
the drying salt pulling at my cheeks.

Cooking with Tar

When I went home the first time
from college, where all food
was fast, I watched and marveled
as my father simmered bacon
in a cast iron cauldron
hard as bedrock, poured in
half a blood-red bottle,
added big legs of chicken
on the bone, then slid
the pot into the oven
for an hour on 400°.

*Have you made this coq au vin
at school in that pot I got you?*

I shake my head no, and he
tells me again how his mother
made this back in Russia, as did
her mother before that, all the way,
it seemed to me, back to a time
when it was legs of mammoth
cooking for a month in a pot
lowered into a pit of hot tar.
I remembered going with him
to the La Brea Tar Pits and seeing
half a still-furry saber-toothed tiger
peering out the hole. My father
was famished after this trip,
bought some day-old shawarma
right outside the Tar Pits and told me
again about the thick smell of spring
in Moscow, the meaty steam
of homemade dumplings, the peeling
birch wood, the rusting steel staircase.

Gnomon

On endless cloudy days like these, the sundial stands
dim, a dulled arrow

pointed at the soft grey belly of eternity. Its only use
today is as a plaything

for the child clambering over its cold metal, tiny palms
slapping to the beat of

second hands, a syncopation synced to hidden
cesium transitions,

how could he know of definitions yet? Time is
frozen for him now,

his babbling tongue may just stick to the tilted bronze
obelisk stuck

in a perpetual snapshot of a stumbling fall, but
all he worries about is

where did the shadows go today, mommy? Will
they ever thaw so he can

keep growing into his sack of overalls? With a quick
glance at her Cartier,

lunchtime, dear, his mother conjures the ability
to tell time,

to tell it what to do, to have it answer with
a steady *yes, yes, yes.*

Turing's Lullaby

It's a fact that
One can encode
Only everything
In code.
"It's late,
I'm tired"
Ossifies to
0s and to
1s. Though,
I've never calculated
Inflection points
Of mood swings,
Or found the
Intersects of
Interjected comments.
I guess that
Intuition runs
On humans,
OSx, and Linux.

Out of Sight

I.

A black hole was the maw
of kitchen trash, the bin full
at night: when I tiptoed to peek
over its lip in the morning,
would it be empty? I was scared
I'd disappear if I fell in.

II.

A black hole is the last one
of a mini-golf course, the tube
to someplace else controlled
by its own strange gravity.
Standing there, twirling the putter
like a pulsar, my father tells me
that every black hole is a ring
from which nothing can escape.
Hit it in, see what happens. The dimpled
planet rattles down the drain: carefully,
I put my ear down to the carpet,
just far enough from the bottomless cup.

III.

I stood on the edge of a black hole,
the Caltech pool, and decided
to jump in, felt the pressure
of the water like so much starstuff
close above, pulling me in. Mother
wondered where her light
had vanished as I dissolved
on the bottom, felt more than heard
the muffled splash of other children,
saw the dry world squeezed
into a circle of distortion
glittering on the surface. Outside
the ring of the horizon, there was only
the reflection of pool linoleum, stark
as my ghost while window shopping.

IV.

Avoid black holes, my physics textbook joked,
which must include the hole in the side
of a deer carcass in a clearing, all tetanus
and buzzing flies, a peach-rich decay
that crumples noses and pulls
the gaze like light. If you smell it,

(continued, no break)

it's too late—beyond that line
is only death, some physics
we don't know. *Avoid black holes,*
the physicists said, *since we can't*
pull the dead back out yet. But now,
they're saying maybe everything
that falls, though torn apart, is
spread like jam on the event horizon,
waiting to be molded back. And so
I stand and fill my nostrils with
the stench of rotting meat,
trying to pick out whiffs
of the stag's life: that clean dark pool
he found at midnight a few seasons back,
the thick sweetness of sap pouring
from a gash his fuzzing antlers left in a tree.

V.
I don't avoid black holes anymore.
I lay flowers at their cusps, headstones
of obsidian, and watch their petals
get pulled in like little letters
to everything I've lost, disappearing
into the dark slit of a mailbox.

Kyotera Road

On the road to Tanzania,
we pass bouncing trucks
stuffed with pigs or cows
or sheep. I'm crammed
into a quiet greying taxi
with twelve people,
try to move my big right toe,
but my leg is dozing, circulation
cut by Ugandan hipbone.
You-know-rock? The driver/DJ
skips over tracks like potholes,
barbers beats. We agree
on Red Hot Chili Peppers'
"Can't Stop", and I start
belting it out. Ugandan hipbone
bobs her headscarf
to the snares, cascades
gold specks of sunlight
on the seats. There's laughter
in the car now, and smiles,
and my foot awakens to the beat.

The Composition

I slam the brakes with
Heimlich vigor: good, the bird is
dead but not too bloody, doesn't
smell yet. My car's a hearse now
and the apples, carrots, pears—
having given up my neat stacking
in their brown paper bodybag—
bounce in the trunk like expanding gas.
At home, I compress the particles
of produce onto the kitchen table,
lay out the bird, pick up my brush
and try to resurrect the corpses.
It's funny how the French 'dead nature'
Frankensteins into 'still life' in English.

The Day I Learn How Currents Work

The ground sinks
 away into a swamp, but there is still a trail,

planks of old wood
 like trees cutting into the air: someone had built

a boardwalk to the river.
 The water underneath seems still, but I can see

the currents of energy
 in the slow billowing of long blades of faded grass

like wet hair in a bath.
 The only sound, the echo of my steps on the wood,

until I hear a gurgling
 that grows louder. Abruptly, the planks end:

My friend sits, stares
 at the river, breathes with it. She looks still, but I can

tell from the way her hair
 trembles that she's drifting underneath. The only sound

now is the water and her
 rush of sobs, catching in the throat. *You're a good listener,*

she says, but only because
 I just don't know what to say, my own thoughts

stuck on who
 would build this boardwalk, and how they must have

waded through the mud,
 fresh, lacquered slabs of wood up on their shoulders.

Fossil Soup

On one shelf of
a mountain gem shop,
between layers
of amethyst and opal,
teem trilobite
shadows, caught mid-
sniff, mid-scuttle,
mid-primal thought
of *dark* or *hunger*,
more gut than
thought, more rock
than gut. One is inset
in a sandstone bowl,
I guess for keys
and paperclips
and other human
sediment. I want to
take that parabola
home then fill it
with gazpacho
and eat slowly,
carefully shoveling
a spoon through thick
tomato mud like
a paleontologist
before licking the bowl
clean, the cold stone
skeletons familiar as
kitchen tile to bare feet.

Aubade

I woke to find you glowing
in the morning, buzzing legs
swung down like rays of sunlight
from your side of the bed.

“Go back to sleep,” you said
and, lifting long hair, bent
to kiss me one last time,
stretched into the doorway

as a train rumbled by, then stood
shining, shining just as bright
but redder now, garnet lipstick
and blushing cheeks, the whistling heat

of your voice during phone calls.
Then you left, or never left.

Plasticity

-for Samuil Marshak and my father-

Dad applied to grad school at Caltech
because it was free and the Soviet Union
had fallen apart. Boxes in the student housing
made it as cramped as Moscow apartments.
I learned English at the campus preschool
and Russian from my dad reading Marshak to me
as I went to sleep, his dark brown eyes darting
behind the fume hood of his huge 90s glasses.

*The lady was standing at bag check
with a lamp, and a stamp, and a tape deck;
some string, two rings, a strudel,
and the teeniest tiniest poodle.*

*They gave the lady a form
in triplicate, of course, to confirm
that her bags indeed had been checked:
a lamp, and a stamp, and a tape deck;
some string, two rings, a strudel,
and the teeniest tiniest poodle.*

Boxes still packed up from the move
stacked around my bed looked like
an audience leaning in to listen. Tonight,
like last night, a tape deck sat where my dad
sometimes would, injected hiss of steam
and pop of wheels as it pulled his voice out of the plastic.
Two dark brown eyes behind a single pane of glass,
one tugging on the other.

*Her things were taken away,
loaded quick to prevent a delay.
The train was set for her trek,
with a lamp, and a stamp, and a tape deck;
some string, two rings, a strudel,
and the teeniest tiniest poodle.*

*But the door was left slightly ajar
and the poodle jumped out of the car.
When three or four state lines were crossed
the porters noticed something was lost.
The next stop, they ran through a check:
a lamp, and a stamp, and a tape deck;
some string, two rings, a strudel...*

(continued, no break)

Wait a minute!—where's the poodle?

*They looked everywhere and they found
by the wheels a huge, frazzle-haired hound.
And, so, by the scruff of its neck,
they threw it in with the tape deck,
the string, the rings, and the strudel,
where recently bounded a poodle.*

I wake up when the tape deck stops clicking.
Yawning, dad puts the tape deck back into a box:
I'll read to you tonight, okay? Not too many experiments.
He kisses me before he heads across campus to the lab,
lets me poke the cartilage of his flattened nose, which
still gives like stretched polyester from when a goalpost
fell on it when he was little.

*The lady got off the next morning,
tired and cranky and yawning.
Her luggage came out when she beckoned:
a lamp, a stamp, a tape deck, and
some string, two rings, a strudel,
and something that wasn't a poodle,*

*a big hound that started growling
till the lady was yelling and yowling:
'Idiots! Imbeciles! Hogs!
How the hell do you think that's my dog?'*
*She kicked at the lamp, she tossed out the stamp,
the string, the rings, and the strudel—
'Return me my favorite poodle!'*

Back from college in our neat new house, I find dad
left his mother's stamp collection by my bed. The soviet red
is fading from the acid yellow squares, plastic slots
the only thing that protect them. In the room next door,
I can hear dad reading to my little sister,
her giggling at the end of the poem.

*"Sorry," said a worker, "my sweet,
but according to this here receipt
when you left, you had checked:
a lamp, a stamp, and a tape deck;
some string, two rings, a strudel,
and the teeniest tiniest poodle.*

*Though, I wonder, might you also accept
that your little dog grew up while you slept?"*

Here

More familiar than it should be,
the photo sent from Mars.
I feel I've been there.
Mojave Desert's iron sand more
solid than the grainy panorama,
but only for a second – that, too,
slips away, my mind an upturned
hourglass. There was a time I
clambered canyons red and
young and jutting crust, made habit
out of place. Was it windy?
The crisp gust of realizing
I've never been anywhere but

II. Kilometer

How I Wear My Poems

Don't know how I got
those first t-shirt verses.
I've outgrown them by now:
little hand-me-down iambs.

Slip new ones on right away,
shoes smelling of new leather,
tags still flopping on the sidewalk.
Five blocks later—sewn meat
bites below the ankles. Blisters.

A Robert Hass one
for a baseball cap
floated into my head
while waiting for
all this hair to dry.

You took my sonnet
to sleep in. Mornings,
you wear my aubade
around the house, so now
it will always smell of you.

Short lines are
slimming on you,
someone offered
at a bar, at last call.

Every day of a cold week,
they're unfinished scarves,
a few lines hanging off
the ends. I guess my hands
were worrying them while I
was waiting for a cup of coffee.

This one has a coffee stain
in the second stanza, right on
the shoulder of its comfy fleece.
Rubbed and anxious, it stays
in the bottom of my dresser drawer
till I need it to go out
into this unwritten world.

Equinox

With a sudden peal
thundering the sky,
a deep vibration
ringing earbones

and shuddering marrow
like a serrated knife
sawing at a T-bone:
fall came on a Wednesday

this year. The pit of seasons,
the heavy minimum of flying
on a swing set before
being dragged back

up into winter's wind,
its moment fast
as a sharp inhale.
The lightning bleaches

everything an equal white,
leaves just a whiff of
ozone sweet as
rotting meat.

Angles of Refraction

The worst part of getting used to glasses
was the glare: the sudden bursts
of rainbow at the edges. Soon, I learned to
look everywhere, just not sunward.

But now, the sunlight wriggles deeper
in the glass—compression ripples
near the frame, the blur of
streetlamps spreading, corners alive

with ghosts of passers by
whose wavering reminds me
I am nothing but a greenhouse,
an eddy in the energy, a trapping of

a bit of Sun, interred inside
the innards of a human prism.

Falling Asleep in Public for the First Time

The sun heats beach sand
into fine-grained butter,
people or seagulls
squawking far away while I
teeter on my side, carving
a Zen garden with my finger.

I see each ridge, each groove,
each grain I index under
index fingernail. The heat, the sun,
the memories of other
sands, all rust me
off to sleep.

I wake absorbing orange,
dissolve in the limbo
of twilight's witching hour
soaking through clocks
hung out to dry. The sand
is flat and so, oh joy,

am I, transparent now
as a pane of glass.

Talking to the Tree in Front of a Frat House

My shoes tsk at me as I step
on the sticky hardwood floor
of my living room, littered
with red Solo cups, and step
down onto the front lawn.
If it weren't for this hangover,
maybe I'd remember why
I'm out here. My hammock's
still up so in I climb and see
you up above, so I ask:
How many brews of frat boys
have you seen rotate through
this 12-pack of a house?
Do you hate the plastic chair
the previous president heaved up,
still hanging in your branches
as if lifted by a flood?
Do you try to shake it down
every autumn like the leaves?

I remember now: There was a party
last night. People scuffed around
as if there was a fire to put out
and the only thing to douse it with
were cups of frothy keg beer.
I grabbed a draft in both hands,
went quietly upstairs, and watched
a nature documentary on plants.
There was a time-lapse of fallen leaves,
rotting over roots. Sped up, rotting
is a kind of slow clear flame. That's
what I came to ask about. Is that
how you see us? Some windblown leaves
burning up, half-drunk cups of beer
nearby, still searching for a fire?

Beached

Shit—there it goes, the bus slips
round the corner with a huff
of steam shooting from its blowhole.
I guess I'm walking in the rain today.
Unrolling phalanges of sea-trench-blue
umbrella like a flipper, I see the bus
down the hill, deflated on the grass
as if it had been washed up there
by the waving hills of the rain-slicked road,
a blue whale drooped on the shoulder
of the road, so much mass in stillness.
The driver stands in the doors, turns to me
as I approach, shakes his head: *Bad news,*
it's dead. The steady click of hazard lights
the only sound it ekes out now, this beast
of weighty grace—that each weekday
ambled past my stop, not caring
if it was full or empty, following
the migration of its brethren, bellowing
and singing—can only idly purr.

Rains

1. Los Angeles, California

It rarely happens, but when it does,
rain pours for days and days. Fat droplets, each
a little water balloon exploding on the pavement
and the windshield. Thick, like my mom plucking
at guitar strings. She hates listening to music,
but steals the show each dinner party

when she plays and sings. In the front seat,
she says *nobody here knows how to drive*
in the rain, and *we have to be careful*,
the roads are slick from months
of oil buildup. In the rearview mirror,
I still see her smile just a little.
The only music is the rain.

2. Countryside near Moscow, Russia

My mother, her friend, and I are rowing
to a little island in the middle of a lake
when we get caught in a storm. My mother
didn't listen to the boat rental girl. Once
she set her mind to something, it was
a chord progression we had to see to the end.

Everything is rain: it's coming down in waves,
splashing from the waves, bouncing into the boat.
We get to the island and take cover under the trees,
find some dry wood for a fire to warm up.
The rain ends just as quickly as it started.
There's a rainbow over the water. Everything is air.
We're pushing the boat out again.

3. Kalisizo, Uganda

I passed chocolate milk puddles
dissolving the orange dust to find
my new home for the summer.
My host mother Betty made all the children
popcorn and gave me a poncho: *tomorrow morning*
it will rain. I asked her how she knew

and she laughed: *it rains every day during*
the wet season. The next morning, our neighbor Joachim
bounced me on his motorcycle to work in silence,

(continued, no break)

the rain the only sound like woodpeckers on my helmet.
We didn't speak for weeks until, one morning,
I pressed my helmet to his and asked Joachim
to tell me about his mother.

4. Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Now I know: 30% chance of rain
means it's raining constantly at 30%.
Walking home from chemistry class was
was more like swimming through a mist.
Droplets beading on my glasses, growing
like the crystals I had just watched

form in a petri dish. One droplet bulges,
quivers, and then streaks down the glass.
Russian rock shuffles onto my phone,
and think of my mother when she would scold
but smile, give me new umbrellas to replace
the ones I always lost. I take out wet earbuds,
listen to the rain instead.

Oxidation

The bike I got from Craigslist
creaks beneath me, squeals
and lurches when I pull the brakes
like reins. Professionals in suits
and biking sunglasses streak past, sleek
on their Cannondale machines smooth
as assembly lines, smirk at me while I
try to wrangle a beast that wants
to buck me. On days like wet hair,
I worry that the speed bumps
will launch me off the road. And yet,
I still prefer this '90s Schwinn
the color of sun-licked leather, with
more than a few teeth missing
from gears that hiccup, joints rusted
after hibernating under Boston snowdrifts,
its frame osteoporotic. That tumor of red
that used to be a bell—what part
of town does it remember?

Ambiance Nightclub

Living in a new country feels like I'm eight again,
worn out by eight again, stomach rumbling, wondering
just what I ate again. I need to get away from family

who every night reads scripture, so I join an intern's
twenty-first year celebration. Inside the buzzing, greying glass,
a mass of people skipping mass tomorrow throbs moth-like
in the lights. It might have been a Brooklyn club. But no:
they wouldn't let you mix your own drinks in America.
A flask of Smirnoff for four dollars in one hand,
Crest bitter lemon in the other, I try to find a table
to figure out which to pour into the other.
Some forty-something passes out on a luscious couch,
but tea tray steam a barmaid brings him brings him back.
I need to get away from these tiny strangenesses
and the taste of bile in my mouth, so out onto the balcony I go.

Living in a new country feels like waking up from a dream
repeatedly, and, suddenly, I wake up to the fact
I'm in Uganda. But where's the snooze?

So dark outside you can see the spilt milk of stars.
The music's faded long ago, the buzz of night envelops me.
The only manmade light comes from the junkyards
across the street; their tall sheet metal's bathed
in buckets of it. Black spots whirl in the light.
Are those cicadas? Locusts? Moths? *Grasshoppers*,
says Raymond, a local that we came with.
*Those things are traps for grasshoppers. They come
for the light and slide down the wet metal sides
into a pool of water down below. Then, they die.
In the morning, the workers will collect them
and dry them out to sell on the street.*

Living in a new country, I feel like a grasshopper
who sees a familiar light, then finds itself sliding down,
everything slick and with nothing to hold onto.

Moths Navigate by the Moon and Stars

Looks like we're doing
this again, under a streetlight
outside a bar at 2 a.m., you leaning
against the wall with your head
in your hands and me asking
the same *what's wrong, what*
did I say? question like that moth
around the lamp, a moth
that thinks it stars or moonlight
and wants to open up its body
to the rays, use that radiance to fly by.

Too bad: this light doesn't come
straight down from a great distance
but from a point so close
it spills in all directions. Your hands
are down now and your eyes
are shining and my wings of words
struggle against the glass, phrases
dusting in a circle. You look away.
Why do we see moths
only when it's dark
and they are dying?

Listening to You Wrap Birthday Presents in the Other Room

The first time staying
at your mother's house,
you kicked me out
to the kitchen while you
wrapped my gifts
in the living room.
I tried to guess what
they were from the sounds,
but all I could hear
was a fire of similes:
Some boxes lugged around
like logs. Scotch tape
pulled out like a crackling
of kindling. Quick cut
of wrapping paper
like flames shooting up.

Triple Point

Finally, the gate has opened
and the frozen crystal
of the Southwest line melts,
flows down the gangplank
and jostles me onto the plane.
We slosh around, find seats, ignore
the “Fasten Seatbelts” sign to pour
bags into every overhead compartment,
spill over armrests to visit
friends and family, fill up
the bathroom one last time.

Once liquid settles, the plane
takes off, the ocean below
grows and curves till it explodes all
white, the scattered snowball
of a cloud right on
my porthole window.

And we transition too in these
few minutes of ascension,
of evaporating into clouds, when
trays are stowed and laptops put
to bed. Soon, we’ll be
gas, lost to our fluid friends below, our
phones on “Airplane Mode”—we might
as well be other people. What will
we search for now? I do not know what
state of being I will be in
once this flight is over: son, student,
friend? A gas, a solid, plasma? Will I
condense back to a liquid?
One time, I melted on a flight
from LA to North Carolina. It
wasn’t bad, just different.

The One Place in the Cabin Which Gets a Little Signal

Three iPhones, huddled
on a warm wood counter,
no buzzing or wiggling,

quiet as upturned turtles
on the side of the road. And we
are just as helpless: stranded,

my parents and I take shifts,
check in and prod to see if
the little beasts are coping

any better than us. Every
few minutes they call out, yet
their faces are cold. I want to

stuff all three into my pockets
for warmth, feel the faint heat
of other people like a phantom

limb. But they need rest, too.
The only thing the phones catch
is sunlight through windows:

that, too, they send to us,
rainbows on the wooden ceiling
above our breakfast.

III. Lightyear

Static

The Big Bang ended when
we switched to cable. Before,
remember flipping through the
snowball handful of channels
and stumbling across a blizzard?
A popping melting-pot of
scrambled M*A*S*H, torn-up
Top-40 Hits, and garbled late-night
pizza orders reflected off
the moon. Well, one percent of that,
perhaps that snowflake
of a pixel there—the one
on Alan Alda's nose—is the
Big Bang's voicemail, stretched
dial tones of creation, the radiating hiss
of cosmic microwave background.
Our TV dishes and antennas
were telescopes but, not being
radio astronomers, we called
the static useless noise.
Sometimes, we'd let the universe
whisper us to sleep. But now
there's cable, a thousand channels
of pure signal pumped through wires
spreading through the ground like
the first fingers of the last frost.
And no more static.

William Coker's Copy of Charles Darwin's *Diary from the Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle*

Gold threads stick out of the tattered
binding, green bubbles up in places
like a layer of moss. On the title page:
an inkstain where you, Professor Coker,
signed your name. Inside: pencil marks
that could be yours, made in 1933.
Was your gesture just as sweeping
as your scrawl when you pointed out
the cow pasture you wanted to caretake
into a garden here on campus,
an arboretum that now bears your name?

I flip to a random page: no notes,
just Darwin recounting his troubles
with getting into a hammock for the first time.
He misses a pronoun so the editor, Darwin's own
granddaughter, brackets one in to correct him.
Back in Darwin's time, a voyage was the travel
and the ship, and books are much the same.
I want to tuck this diary under my arm
after a day's excursions and slump
against a tree in Coker Arboretum,
a cup of dark coffee in my hand, savoring
the wait to make my own mistakes.

The Avocado Tree I Gave My Father for His Birthday

He planted the five-foot sapling
on the far side of our house,
where nobody went. We forgot it.
At breakfast a few years later,

my spoon a shovel in the green
of a half-avocado, soy sauce
pooling like oil in the peat,
a smile rose to my father's face

and he led me out around the house.
The tree was thirty feet at least, fat
leaves and heavy fruit. He propped
a ladder against it and disappeared

into the branches, speaking of the years
and all the fertilizer he used,
the seasons each leaf was spotted
with disease. I was scared at how fast

this tree had grown, that it had pulled up
ground and foundation, left a sinkhole.
My father laughed and told me
that trees grow not out of the soil

but into the air, distilling
the carbon dioxide and the sunlight
into smooth trunks and splitting branches.
The atmosphere is everything, he breathed

to the leaves, punctuating his points
with dropped bombs of avocados,
hard and black and coarse as granite rock.
They'll ripen in the kitchen, in its thick air.

Power Outage

for David Bowie

I heard the guy next door start
playing trumpet. I grabbed my guitar
and called him over to my porch
so we could jam while sunset
blushed the receding storm clouds.
When darkness fell, it fell hard
into the depths of our pupils.
We played "Space Oddity"
over and over, the moon
and passing headlights
our spotlights, the upright shadow
of a passerby our audience.
I sang the loudest I have ever sung.
When the power came back on
we went inside, turned off the lights,
and talked about how different
the stars looked today.

Dust

Sagan said the Earth is just
a mote of dust suspended
in a sunbeam. I guess he wanted us
to feel the wind of insignificance.
But what's wrong with dust?
The interstellar clouds are
also dust—a billion pollen miles
that birthed the stars. Dust made
our planet, pressed itself into a crust,
then rose into men and buildings.
And now, my room's dust is
a skin-cell haze of people
I have touched and loved.
At night, I lie in bed and watch
the ceiling fan go round:
the blades spin but the dust piles
only grow and never slip,
remembering every visitor
better than I ever will.

Lwemodde

1.

Forty minutes I bounce on dirtbike taxis
from the edge to the middle
of nowhere. *It's down that dirt road,*
there, there, there. Even in the village,
people don't know where I work.
Chair of Kyesiiga Subcounty? No?

2.

Bbale, the man in faded floral blue, greets me
with a bony hand and a bonier smile.
What just creaked, him or his wheelchair?
The four phones he incubates
in his Airtel mobile minutes shop
screech all at once for his attention
and advice. He coos to them, funnels sunlight
down to warm them through USB umbilicals.
One phone's alarm goes off and Bbale asks me
to look after his brood—it's time for him to pray.

3.

Two girls named Sylvia watch TV
in front of my desk at the Airtel shop
when lightning burrows
down the antenna and explodes.
One falls over, her screams like bright thunder.
We take turns massaging her spasming leg.
The other wears earrings like engorged resistors,
all red, green, yellow stripes. Perhaps
that's why the lightning skipped her?
No, I tell an elder, red does not attract
the lightning, it's not a matador.

4.

Miki, lanky chairman, fat cat of town,
beaming, shows me the tractor
the Vice President gave them.
Nobody knows how to use it
so small dresses are drying on it for now.
We stoop to pass slowly under
the chessboard trellises of his passionfruit
plantation. Kids run around, get scolded
if they play anything but
"Build Your Passionfruit Plantation."
Miki slices open the heavy pulp
of a fruit and we split the fleshy seeds.

(continued, no break)

Their assets are liquid, I realize,
as passionfruit juice drips from our lip.
A week in, I've got Miki's chain rotation
figured out: red gold, gold gold, silver.

5.
All better dressed than me,
full suits and flip flops.
The only money they save
they bury, and that gets
eaten by termites. My look
of horror makes all of them
laugh: *better than eaten*
by the police or politicians!

Hubble's Law

Standing in our Pasadena backyard
on holiday, tossing a slime of tennis ball
to my parents' dog, brings vertigo
like the airplane that brought me
here: a rush of speed, white fur,
hip-length blond little sister hair
twirling on the trampoline, the weeping
willows we planted years ago down there
exploding above the cinderblock wall
like fireworks that I see only through
a strobe light, blinking once every few months.

As my head tilts back and I'm about to fall,
my eyes catch on the jagged line
of San Gabriel Mountains above
the wall and willows and torn wallpaper of sky.
The roughness right where I'd left it, crowned
with antennae and blinking lights.

That's where Edwin Hubble shivered
in the night, the sky a rotted gash
in his observatory's milky white.
Staring at the whorls of photographic plates
through his breath, he saw the galaxies
all rushing away from Earth. The first glimpse
of the expanding universe like a fierce inhale,
the dizziness of the universe receding
from the peak like the lights of Pasadena.
Late into the night, they spread so far apart
he could no longer see them.

My sister asks *what's wrong,*
you haven't thrown the ball in minutes.
I smile, throw the ball, and don't say
that I'm dizzy from how far away
and fast she's growing up.

The World's Best Planetarium Is a Gold 1990 Subaru Legacy Station Wagon

I.

On the dark two-lane capillary
feeding the Sierra Nevadas,
I studied the scream
of Morse code lane dividers
until *Papa, I'm carsick*. He told me
to watch something far away:
the torn cutout of mountains,
the lights of cities in the foothills,
stars and not cacti. I lay down
in the backseat and looked up
through the back window, stared at
the only constellation I knew: Orion.
Papa was saying something like
lightyear or *photon*, eyes jumping
from road to rearview mirror. I reached
for Orion, familiar as heavy fruit
of the squat orange tree rustling
in our Los Angeles backyard,
whispering from the lowest branch
that I still couldn't reach.

II.

My father woke me up
at 5-damn-a.m. to go
watch the Leonid Meteor Shower.
I had school and a physics test
in a few hours, but some twist of stomach,
some thirst for stars and my father's voice,
got me out of bed and into the Subaru.
Hugging the curves in the cold
of the San Gabriel Mountains, I started
to get carsick, even in the front seat.
My father said to watch something
far away, but LA below, the hills
all around, even the stars, kept
turning and falling. I closed my eyes
and pretended to sleep until
we parked at a dusty turnout
overlooking the throbbing glow
of the city. We lay on the hood
and watched meteors streak across
the sky, an Etch-a-Sketch of constellations,
quickly shaken invisible. *They aren't falling stars*,
my father says, *they're bits of a passing comet*.

(continued, no break)

See how they blossom from one spot?

When we get off the hood with the sunrise,
the only stars still out are on the Subaru logo.

III.

In college, out on our fourth date,
we settled into planetarium seats that reclined
not nearly enough, kinking our necks
as the dome darkened and stars dotted out
one by one, a pricked skyful,
then swirled. Orion spun, shot arrows
in all directions, and I felt sick. After the show,
we sat in my friend's borrowed Camry
so I could catch my breath. The wave
of nausea passed when you pointed at Orion
through the windshield, your eye a vault
full of stars, my new favorite planetarium.

Queen Elizabeth National Park

The mountains thrust us
down into a long, flat plain,
its green-gold grass
like toothpicks stuck
in a homemade tablecloth.

Its trees are cacti,
many-armed menorahs,
their dull green wax dripped
down to stiffen in puddles
of the wisps of bush beneath.

This plain is a Jewish table
named for a visiting queen
and we, a solitary Grand Cherokee
safari, are a Black Vine Weevil,
scuttling toward the feast.

Adaptive Optics

And have you ever seen a constant? I'll concede the c of light holds true, but only when there's nothing in the way, out there in space's vacuum. And are we even sure that's there? All we can ever see is light that entered glass or eyeball fluid: flipped, reversed, slowed down, took a side street, took its time. Starlight—unsure, uncertain since it's so rarely there—twinkles in the air, distorts the gaze of telescopes. They have these fancy mirrors now that bend, contort to fickle waveforms, adapt to murky skies. Yes, my eyesight's getting worse each year but, hey, even the Hubble needed glasses. Inside, the light refracts and ripples or, maybe, photons bounce like memories interred. Each night, reviewing photographic plates of what we saw, the radii of questions dodged, the angle of a gaze, what color were her twinkling eyes—we're all astronomers.

Satellite Dishes in Uganda Point Straight Up

Joachim saved every shilling
from his motorcycle taxi business
for a month to, beaming, buy
a satellite dish. He held it like a shield
as he lanced his way through cars
and back out into the countryside.
His mother shushed him when he arrived
at their brick house rising from red clay,
said not to interrupt the telenovela
she could barely see or hear through static.

Joachim climbed up on the sheet-metal roof,
hacked clear the green of neem tree,
offered supplication to the sky
so those little gods of satellites
looping far above the equator
would see their dish and smile down
a clear show or two upon his house.
That night it rained. Joachim's mother
got up at purple dawn to watch
yellow weaverbirds bathe in the dish.

The Big One

The thought arrived through no fault of your own,
or mine, or that of San Andreas which
now slices plates between us—no. This thought
came through the earth itself: I sensed it with

the certain doom that dogs feel right before
a quake. The strain of distance like a rubber
band between us, a tension I can't hold.
The wait so heavy, maybe neither can

the ground. The thought was: any second now,
it might all snap, collapse, the Great Plains drowned,
the Mississippi joined to river Styx,
and California touching Carolina.

Would you feel bad as me to learn we caused it,
our fractured closeness causing dogs to bark?

Ways the Universe Could End, in Descending Order of Probability

I.

Expanded to infinity, the threads
of time and space unravel,
death by chill of zero Kelvin.
Plucked stars, a string of
Xmas lights left up
into February that, one
by one, wink out.

II.

The mass and energy
of everything hangs heavy
as a storm cloud, collapses
into fog on the road. This future,
a Big Crunch of the first snow.
The flow of time might be
reversed, which would be nice
for those who value symmetry.
All hurts undone, all loves unmet.
Our Earth, a snowball, melts.

III.

With no warning
whatsoever. Could be
electrons all conspire to
flip their charges and, whoops,
no more atoms. Could be
that gravity skips out on work
without giving two weeks' notice.

IV.

A rogue black hole opens up a sinkhole
in a Louisiana bayou, flushes the universe
down the drain. However, this might have
already happened and we are just
in another bathtub now.

V.

You, me, the Earth, the universe are all
just figments of the imagination
of the girl with the ponytail
standing two people in front of me
in the Subway line. I see her
everywhere. When she dies, we'll all
go with her.