

# Gravel and Lamplight

Poems by  
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Advisor

With Love for 41 DC, Dad, Mimi, and M

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## Self-Service

It doesn't help that the desk is fake wood,  
this plastic laminate L tucked into the far corner  
of my room on the second floor by the window—  
the blinds that I lower with one hand

I'll raise them again later, just as the light begins  
to fade and the houses across the street shift:  
the color of leafless branches brittle in wind.

There are always dogs being walked by women  
in dark leggings and oversized hoodies  
with their hands half hidden  
in the cuffs of their sleeves.

It's not often that I think of you those times  
when I shut out the street and the houses  
and the women with their dogs. But sometimes I do,  
and I usually stop then,  
because I always think of that afternoon in March  
when through the open windows  
we heard my father backing out of the driveway  
and we ran naked down the white carpeted  
steps to the llama pelt on the hearth in the family room  
fighting over who would get to be on the bottom.

## Renaissance

It's different when the corner of 129<sup>th</sup> and Lenox is where you live  
and Lenox is really Malcolm X, just going north instead; but it's the same street.  
All the same asphalt in the eyes of the twelve in the coop in the tower of glass.  
Every block's got eyes and a church, singing what the hell's the matter  
with us, and it's hard to sleep with all the words and the blood  
thickening the air we shut out in the night that's too black.

You hit the clock first if you play as black  
when you play chess under the scaffolding where the gray cat lives  
outside the convenience store a block up, the one with the blood-  
scrubbed tiles and the sign with the \$10,000 reward for tips on the street-  
killing two months ago on 139<sup>th</sup>. Mikey and Fish say it's only a matter  
of time 'til they tag the fucker, Q just talks about the broken glass.

Mornings it's hot in the kitchen and there's always the roach in the Knicks glass  
TJ hasn't washed—"oh, that's Fred" he said when I texted him about it. It's black  
when I wake up: my window faces a brick wall on the second floor, so no matter  
the time of day I can shut my eyes and pretend that I am where God lives,  
pretend that I am the space in a hollow-tip shell, displacing flesh on a dimly-lit street,  
I can pretend, but then sometimes it takes all that I've got to not just see blood  
waiting ripe and mute in the veins that bulge in foreheads and throats, blood  
red as a trumpet's blare, red as the argon rooster, glowing proud in the glass  
of the club by the stop at 125<sup>th</sup>, bubbling hot with the dirt in the streets.  
Right now, I only see the man with a saxophone, a tilt of black  
and purple and brass, swaying noisily on the platform, deaf to the urgency of lives  
colliding around him. The cardboard sign at his feet reads "I Matter."

I read somewhere that a human soul weighs 21 grams. 21 grams of invisible matter  
sucked swiftly skyward at the moment of expiration; supposedly, even the evaporating blood  
and sweat cannot explain the fresh weightlessness of death. Q says Pac lives  
in Cuba with his aunt, rollin' dice and spittin' bars, the homie didn't have no glass

jaw, he says, he played the game right. Under the scaffolding, Mikey's fingers flick black plastic and Fish's king clatters to the sidewalk. They don't say "check" in street chess, just threaten and watch, pass the spliff, and if you don't see it, the street isn't for you—their fingers fast, unforgiving. Because here victory is a matter of touching and remaining untouched, measured in the careful alchemy of each black curving back silhouetted in the orange lacquer of June. Here, low blood shade blooms from concrete cracks in real-time beneath unlaced Jordans crunching glass shards to dust. Here, every pocket is full of stones, every doorway: smoke. Death lives in every barbershop helix; every street-sweeper and doubled pawn leaks blood like gumbo when no one's looking. Benzo black outs keep the blue static behind glass, but the checkmates don't matter when your only showers are lead, leading trigger-lilt lives.

## Bracing

My father once poured a cup of tea  
over his shoulder and onto my head,  
as I held him from behind.  
Room temperature chamomile.  
I held him only so that he would not leave—  
without love

Do you ever think about holding people?  
The ones that aren't there, weren't  
ever—always are? What it means  
to wrap your arms, those hinged  
and swinging flails of bone  
and blood and Jesus have  
you ever really looked  
at your arms?

I didn't let go. After the tea, I mean.  
After the initial wet that felt like cold,  
the blinking and sputtering. I might  
have even asked him if he had done it,  
if he had really just done it like that,  
just the way that he did, with the tea bag  
and all—dark, wet heap of leaves staining  
the carpet a honeyblossom pond.

I was on a raft in a river on 龙王山—  
it's not the same if you say it in English  
because it means Dragon King Mountain,  
but 龙王山 is so green and solemn  
and I was there, not alone, and it was raining  
right on the river, and I was so wet and the rain  
and the river tasted nothing like tea, but I drove  
my bamboo oar into the roaring emerald stipple  
and held my father  
still

## **Revolutions**

The traffic lights blur in the wet black  
of July, it's just after midnight and I am still.

The music is too loud for this empty car  
with the windows closed against the rain.

I am thinking about how you'd look at me  
those nights driving home from a beach  
or a bridge, our skin taut, and aching with sun.

Leaning back, then shifting to face me, sometimes  
slipping your shoulder under the seatbelt, letting  
the retractor take up the slack behind you, smiling  
because you knew you could take your time,  
take me in, my eyes on the vanishing asphalt  
ahead. I am thinking about that moment  
when your eyes were bright and wet and full  
of me and had enough, that moment just before  
you'd close them for the rest of the drive.

I pass the funeral home where Mike took me  
in his new car to go see Kyle and his dead dad,  
embarrassed and wondering how many girls he'd fuck  
'cause of it, and, briefly, if that was worth it somehow,  
before clearing our throats and shaking our heads and  
Hey, I'm sorry man.

Yeah, thanks.

I'll see ya around.

I drive past a police car parked on a slant in a ditch  
off 206 near the Kindercare, its lights a fury of color  
absurd in their silence. I can't see the car it pulled  
over, but I catch a whiff of weed and hear the thump  
of muffled bass as I pass, and smile a little and shake



my head for too long in the silence that follows.  
I'm at the light by the movie theaters now, across  
from the clinic where I got tested after fucking someone  
other than you for the first time. And the Smoothie King  
where you used to add an extra scoop of butter pecan to my order.

I accelerate into the turn because I know it's wet  
and late and no one's around  
and I am fine: I drive past the school and the retirement  
home; I remember saucepans full of penne cooked  
in the cafeteria for the senior citizens on opening night  
of your show.

I remember the Christmas Carol, taking turns pulling  
from the handle of Svedka in Pav's car during intermission,  
the little clouds of his laughter and the crystals on the windows.  
Afterwards, in the crowd of costumes and colors I remember  
your face through the make-up, falling when I hugged you.  
Later: "Did you really think it would be that bad?"

Passing Josh's block: the neighborhood of brown  
duplexes, every house is dark. I wonder which  
one was rebuilt after the fire set by the man  
who killed the woman he worked with at the pizza  
place by ShopRite. I wonder how her family's doing  
now. If they still live in this town, if they still eat pizza.

I drive too fast over the bump at the next intersection  
and savor the moment of knowing what will happen  
next before it does and my tires absorb the first shock  
of blacktop and then I do. Landing is louder than I thought  
and I let myself shake and keep driving.

There was a buck here once. It had just stepped off  
the curb of the island into the turn lane at the crest  
of the hill by the entrance to my block. I remember  
the way the mist grew like moss from its antlers,  
glowing in the light of the street lamps. How different  
he had looked from the dead ones with bright orange  
X's spraypainted on white underbellies splayed  
by the median. The street is empty now and I make  
the turn with no blinker, flicking my brights on  
for the last lampless stretch of road.

When I get home, I will hear my father's measured breathing  
from the couch where he sleeps in the family room  
during the warmer months. By the light of the hallway  
I will make out the shape of his feet extending from beneath  
the multicolor throw. In the morning when I come downstairs,  
the sun will not yet have dried the grass and the pavement  
will still be dark near its edges and it will smell like last night's  
rain and my father will open a new tab on his laptop and turn  
in his chair at the kitchen table, to say "Good morning."

I almost text you after feeling like I had forgotten to,  
like I always did. Like that time I was grateful for the raccoon  
that hustled into the middle of my lane by the farm on Hillsborough,  
the windows down, I swerved, and felt the car tilt,  
and pulled over afterwards to catch my breath and step outside  
for a moment. To hear the gravel crunch under my feet, the hot  
car creak and cool in the night air, to watch the blinking lights  
of construction over the fields in the Sourlands. The lights  
you liked to pretend belonged to a little town of people  
who woke up only after everyone else had gone to bed.

## **Fidelis**

I remember the wooden knight  
most. Angular and dark among the pawns,  
half in the slanting shade of the last step  
at the foot of our stairs, one wide, carved eye  
unblinking in the violence of late-night lights.

3am, and seven hours ago your friend leaned  
casually against the laminate countertop  
in our kitchen, grinning as he told us the Marines'  
Equal Opportunity Program Director had ordered  
his platoon to Listen the fuck up  
girl scouts, because it's really quite simple:  
Rape everyone  
equally.

So of course there were frantic geometries  
of blood smeared on the tile beneath the table  
next to a Jack of Hearts and broken glass.

I didn't want to believe  
you laughed along. Because the lines  
on your wrists would never be the bars  
on his arm, but at least you could drink  
and joke and the shotgun,  
we found it, next to the black  
bag of razor blades in the back of your closet.

Later, we learned Girl Scout had taken a taxi  
back to Fort Bragg. He had choked you  
out to keep you from bashing your skull  
into the wall behind the toilet, but you never  
stopped waking to resume the mechanical crank

of your neck, screaming “Yes, Sir!” on each impact.

I wonder what courage the ceiling sung  
to you in the brief, cavernous  
pause of each recoil.

Doesn’t matter; plaster only cracks,  
doesn’t bleed, and you needed company.  
Drooling vomit and snarling, you asked us  
if we loved you before hurtling another shot  
glass against the floor.

After they tied you down  
and drove you away we sat on the brick steps  
of the porch for a while, watching the blackness  
pool in the spaces the lights left behind.

**Hey**

Do you still think things—no,  
everything—do you still think that *everything*  
happens for a reason?

Because, if so, we need to talk,  
because, if,

and you do, but I'm just checking,  
if you know what I'm talking about,  
you know I'm not saying, like:

Why am I bleeding?

--Well, because I dragged an X-Acto knife  
from Mr. Arndt's class across my wrist

less because I was hurting  
and more because I was curious  
to hurt—no,

like, not just simple cause and effect,  
not just

Grandpa stopped breathing

-because of pulmonary edema

-which was brought on by congestive heart failure

-which is a consequence of the heart struggling to pump blood through the body

-which is a mouthful so the obituary

-always reads

“natural causes”

—not that.

I'm talking about

*Everything.*

Do you think that if I were to strip down  
on a busy street corner  
in the middle of the day  
and spit and scream  
there would be a reason for that—not just that I'm batshit crazy

but that my nudity would be serving some greater cosmic agenda—

that the reflective moon is tripping through high-minded Sagittarius these days so while  
my motives “may not be apparent to others right now, I should be sure of my intentions

Nonetheless”

there is meaning.

\*

And maybe I never should have taken that astronomy class,  
but the point is  
I'm tired.

And you would not believe how many people think astronomy is astrology.  
And I always seem to be running out of milk, or gas, or toilet paper. And,  
no.

I don't miss you, I just miss having something to hold on to. I miss having someone good  
enough to care, to have thought otherwise. I miss your stupid hope.

## **Spring**

In fifth grade, I found the skull of a mole  
or groundhog, rotting in the mud  
by the banks of a creek by that Kindercare  
on 206. Grass had just begun  
to stubble the early April soil, loose and wet  
between my fingers as I dug.

I took the skull home and my father  
soaked it in a bucket of bleach  
on the back porch while I stood naked  
in the family room and he examined me  
for ticks. There were four of them.  
They looked so much like drops of blood  
and I remember my father's careful hands  
tweezing them into a Ziploc bag, and being  
naked, and trying not to meet his eyes.

## Satellite

She is sitting across from me facing the window  
with my jacket over her legs like a blanket.  
There are three muffins and a few crumbs  
on a white plate a little too close to the edge  
of the desk. Just as I think of getting up  
to adjust it, she does, but doesn't take another muffin.

Salem sits on the platform in the top level  
of her cage clicking her teeth and glaring at me.  
The truth is my ex-girlfriend suggested I get a chinchilla  
to make the distance a little easier when we were dating.  
So I got Salem from a PhD student at Wake Forest  
with 28 chinchillas, a rabbit, and four rare breeds of fish  
that were apparently the only ones of their kind in North America.  
They looked like the guppies I used to throw rocks at  
in the creek behind Dylan's house. Her walls were covered  
in what appeared to be a Windows '97 desktop background  
of a beach with a palm tree, blown up and printed out on wall-size  
paper. It smelled like everything had died.

The distance still sucked so we broke up, but now  
a fat ball of fur clicks her teeth and glares at me all day  
and her hard little poops clang lightly off the bars in her cage  
and litter the carpet in my room like confetti but shit instead.

Muffin girl is working on some psychology report  
about how our brain processes out-group members  
as all being the same and I think about how many times  
Jackie Chan came up in conversation with white people  
growing up.

She used to sleep over every other day  
and she poured candle wax on my chest



straddling me in the middle of the kitchen floor once,  
but she has a boyfriend now who's in South Africa  
and is part of a book club that meets twice a week,  
so

I lie in my bed and watch her type and she loves  
to tell my friends that we "used to do the naked dance"  
when she runs into us at the gym and I wonder  
sometimes what she saw in me before I told her  
to move on  
but

I also think I know, because most of the time  
I'm trying.

Salem's new cage is really meant for ferrets  
but it's much nicer than the lopsided black  
chicken wire crate smelly PhD student  
convinced me to pay \$110 for on eBay.  
It has this fun yellow and green hammock  
that hangs from the bars on the ceiling  
that she'll only sleep in after she's  
undone the knot in one of the corners  
with her teeth which she's managed  
to stop clicking just long enough  
to take something else apart.

I do that thing where I make sure  
I can still remember all the names  
of the people I've slept with and  
try to drink too quickly  
from my water bottle and it spills

all over my sheets and I look up  
to see if she noticed.

Eventually she leaves. She'll finish  
the report at home, and after locking the door  
behind her, I head upstairs and stop to look in the mirror  
in the bathroom on the way back to my room. To remind  
myself I got a haircut today. To see what she might have seen  
if she glanced away from the words glowing out at her  
about "the other," I wonder

how it must have looked from above:

two naked bodies on the tan travertine laminate,  
I wonder if we looked cold.

I remember us laughing at the label on the candle—*fall sentiments*.

Candles don't have *flavors* I said  
and then she poured its wax on me  
in small, glowing circles, rocking the whole time.

## **Hadestown**

96th street he missed his stop.  
The doors closed twice on his hands  
before he drew them back,  
letting the peeling rubber meet.

His hands never left the doors the whole way  
to 110th, fingering the grain of the steel  
in the ridges, picking at the meeting  
of the rubber, pawing the portal  
that closed on him, before  
he could've shaken  
whatever reverie into motion,  
wiping dust from the glass  
against the black tunnel  
walls whirring past.

Gracias, he said  
getting off at 110<sup>th</sup>  
to cross the platform  
to plunge and  
grind and hiss  
back again.

## Notes on a Funeral

I am polishing the bones in my mouth.  
rinse. spit. repeat.

black wool over black cotton  
black  
it's a long drive  
and the car hums  
black rubber on black pavement  
humming

it's a small home with stone steps  
ivy wallpaper and pink floor lamps  
the air freshener in the corner hisses  
every five minutes

the box is stainless steel, a deep blue—  
the color of his 1982 Grand Marquis  
roses and heliotrope on the lower half  
red white and blue ribbon  
a triangulated flag, pins and bars,  
his purple heart  
on an end table  
next to wedding pictures

his face just powder and paste  
the cosmetic stillness of each pouch  
of flesh each wrinkle, his mouth gummed  
shut  
the little hairs in his ears

his nose  
orange with dust

the plastic on the kneeler is torn

my father's hunched back, slow  
trembling into loud  
ugly sobs, the sobs  
of late middle-age recognition:  
the reminder:  
relentless.

Now turning, awkward half-running strides  
his whole body shaking, such a shrill  
howl growing, escaping, air he can't keep in  
he's a deflating balloon screaming flailing  
against the ceiling  
in an empty room

"Must be the world's best son-in-law" said someone.

And now the neighbor  
in the turquoise jacket—a turquoise jacket  
and the lipstick, sickly pink against her white  
powdered face—she's already gotten a head start  
    she's sorry though, and I believe her  
and How old am I now? My how the years go by  
as if you don't know what happens next

And my mother thinks she saw him yesterday  
in the bright bird that flew in circles round the hood of his car  
in the broken sunlight under the tree where she parked before

it—he—no it—dove into a bush  
but why that last part Dad, why are you hiding  
from me, what are you trying to tell me, she asked

The heavy gold pendulum in the lobby,  
the cables and weights  
and the moon dial  
all that air  
in that little room  
out one dry clammy mouth  
dissolving a chalky peppermint  
and up another bristly nostril  
just recycling hot vapor  
the soft pink glow on that ivy vine wallpaper  
knowing that a hand on the shoulder or knee  
is probably enough application  
of pressure  
to crack some

wooden fiddleback chairs  
my father is still crying  
trying to tell the story about the time he stood  
in my grandfather's garden  
and my grandfather told him  
his new mailwoman was Chinese  
and my grandfather had told her  
that his son-in-law was Chinese, too  
and my father had known then  
that he was alright by him.

And now my mother is curled up before the coffin  
her shoes are off and she's half-sitting, half-squatting  
on the torn plastic of the kneeler  
playing with his hair:  
*He would always let me mess it. I'll mess it again in heaven, dad.*

It smells like flour and sawdust.

I imagine there are birds outside  
pecking in the shadows of the holly bushes  
whistling like broken glass.

## **L'appel du Vide**

The light comes early  
and clean as a slice of lemon  
and I know the air  
will be cold.

Arching her back, I can see her tattoos  
like this  
flowers tessellating the soft hard ridges  
of her ribs, the ink now bluer than black  
still moving, bleeding through the fibers of her skin  
creeping into the geometry of honeycomb  
stilling just below her throat

and I remember my conversation with Dan earlier, about how we will witness  
the machine singularity in our lifetimes

She grins at me, not yet awake  
still blurring  
so I trace lemniscates on her thigh  
across the face of the stag  
staring back  
through its epidermal sheathe  
the haunted black filament  
of its eyes

until she stirs,  
bites me  
tastes the uninked flesh,  
tongues me  
to her palate, mouths  
warm surrender  
into the frosted morning air



and in the air

I shudder—

controlled, rhythmic spasms, in the silence

I imagine the black metal stock of the .22 250, against the crease

between chest and shoulder, heaving with each crisp crack, each

depression of the trigger coming faster

than the last, lungs swelled and still

against the smoke curling

brief and white from the chamber, the clink of brass, the leaves

a dead and falling déjà vu in the bullet's vorpal wake

and I think of killing her

just for a moment, the way I think of screaming as the congregation

bows their heads in prayer, or stepping off a rooftop in the black of night

and eventually

our bodies stall to breathing:

quiet pistons in the air we half-expect

to fog.

## Rot

I lit a match in an empty forest  
and left it at your feet.

No.

But if I did, it wouldn't have burned  
like a pile of yellow bones.

no.

There is nothing simple  
about the grass  
its obedient

thirst

each time the sky  
empties.

I sit in the center of my bed  
preparing to shower.

It takes more  
sometimes,  
than others

to strip

and step:

white porcelain and water  
the way the streams all bead

near their end  
--like dashed lines  
--like we will.

I saw a biplane fly low  
over a field of bowing feather reeds  
and knew the coup

of wind, the vortex  
of its violence

was a song not sung  
for us.

I have never picked a flower that didn't remind me of my father.  
Not for any other reason besides  
knowing that I killed it.

- I. It was summer and M had a job on the lower east side, assisting with individual, foundation, corporate, and government fundraising for an off-Broadway theatre (or at least that's what her LinkedIn says now). I'd take the F downtown to 2<sup>nd</sup> and walk a block up, trying not to sweat through my suit, before finding a table in the shade at the Italian bistro across from the parking lot with the big yellow billboard that read *Stop praying...God's too busy to find you a parking spot* in bold Litera. I only knew it was Litera because one day I was walking down the same street with A who had a stint doing design at one of those buildings in Tribeca that are all glass and white brise-soleil. She said the curvature of the *k* told her it wasn't Futura or Gotham, but it was close. I told her I liked it when she talked fonts to me and she punched me in the arm and we kept walking.

**II.** M would round the corner at the end of the block just as I would be finishing my drink and she'd always see me too early and have to roll her eyes and look away or dig around in her purse for a bit until she was close enough to look up again and ask if I were ready to go. Once, we went to a Dada poetry reading in the basement of a fancy open-air restaurant with white table-linens and cloth napkins folded into flowers in the wine glasses. Downstairs it was much darker and smelled like wood and we drank beer from the bottle in a corner booth and watched a man seriously recite a sestina he had written comprised entirely of the word "blah."

**III.** M had to leave early to catch a train back to Newark for the weekend, so we snuck out after the woman wearing thin, colorful scarves had clambered on stage, and blown out the candle she introduced to the audience as George W. Bush. It had started raining while we were underground and we came up the stairs to the streetlights being on and the endless slosh of tires through puddles and neither of us had brought an umbrella. Hugging the sides of the buildings in-between, we flitted from awning to awning, sometimes pausing long enough to trade a smile or a nod with some barista or dishwasher leaning in the doorway thoughtfully puffing a cigarette.

**IV.** I went to a reading with A, too, at a little bookshop in Brooklyn with “molasses” in its name. We went to hear up-and-coming Asian-American poets read, and we both nodded (me out of embarrassment and A out of empathy, probably) when one began “this poem is called *Asian enough to fuck, but not white enough to date....*” I bought a copy of Sarah Jean Alexander’s *Wildlives* because I was still feeling a little badly about my complacency, and A smiled. As we left to catch the L from the station on DeKalb, a man sitting outside asked the woman across from him “so do you write?” “I don’t identify as a writer,” she replied. They were both smoking, and A and I hid our laughter in violent coughs as we half-ran the rest of the way to the train.

- V. The first and last time I had sex with A, we had brought a bottle of merlot and some take out from the Piccolo Café on 40<sup>th</sup> back to my apartment, but the wine and the inevitability kept us hungry and we walked two blocks to the Japanese noodle bar on Frederick Douglass after taking turns balancing across the parapet overlooking Lenox. She ordered us lychee martinis to go with our ramen and when we got back we could hear TJ snoring in the other room. I said something about the fact that all my friends are bankers and she curled her fingers in my hair and pulled me down and told me I think too much. The bed kept moving because it was a cheap twin on wheels and the floor was hardwood. At one point, it rolled so far that we almost fell into the space between the wall. In the morning, A got dressed in the dark in front of the old air conditioner lodged in the window and told me I needed to get a new bed. I walked her to the stop at the corner of 125<sup>th</sup> and we almost kissed goodbye the same way we had almost fallen into the crack the night before and walking back home I wondered what God could be so busy with now that everything was already done.

**VI.** M was holding the bag with our Pad Thai and the bottle of Yellow Tail in her left hand and leaning against the pole in the middle of the subway car. She hummed and played with the hem of my shirt with her other hand until we got to the stop by my apartment. We started squinting before we came up the steps at the stop on 125<sup>th</sup> knowing it would be bright and there might be the men with the tubas and the snakes on the corner. Back at my apartment we took TJ's tarp from the living room (I had asked earlier in the week and he'd grunted) and rode the elevator to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor and then climbed the last flight of stairs to the doorless entrance to the flat asphalt roof. We sat on the blanket and ate and pointed out the obvious landmarks we could see and once we had finished the wine M looked at me and smiled and looked away and shook her head and I said "what?" and she shook her head again and kept smiling.



## **I'm glad I am a piece of him**

what I'm trying to say is, I called my grandfather  
two days before he died and the help  
answered because he was sleeping  
and I knew the next time he would be dead.

in between I woke up and wiped water from  
the seat, keyed the ignition, rode through  
the rain and smell of wet mulch        stirred  
rice noodles in a shiny pot  
until they sunk  
into a thick mass of fine strands,  
sliced cubes of tofu  
and red and yellow slivers  
of pepper in the center of the kitchen  
at midday with no one around. What

I'm trying to say is

my chinchilla won't stop gnawing  
at the bars of her cage in the middle  
of the night and I know that she watches  
sometimes when I am not alone and

I've started, again, to wear the small octagon of gold  
with the yin yang surrounded by eight trigrams  
and “出入平安” inscribed on the other side  
on a silver chain around my neck

it tastes like metal the way blood tastes like metal  
and it's bent and dented because I've been biting  
it all my life                the rest of the gold gifts  
阿公 and 阿妈 gave you when I was born, you

pawned, and that's okay because I only remember  
the ugly Mickey Mouse charm being one of them

and

what I'm trying to say is:

I know you did more than you had to when  
everything happened the way it did, and I remember  
the round dimmer light switch in the family room  
that didn't work anymore after you punched it  
when I said I wanted to move to New Mexico  
when mom left and I forgive you and

I love the first spoonful of cereal before the milk  
and the flakes have had too much time together  
and I'm not really sure how to tell anyone that  
I love them if I haven't fallen apart  
and

yesterday, in Geology,

I put a drop of acid on this rock  
that looked just like a granola bar  
made up of hundreds of tiny seashells  
and it fizzed  
because things that are made of carbon  
effervesce, you see  
they just effervesce like that  
if you place a drop of acid on them  
and you and me,        we're carbon too

and what I'm trying

to say

is—do you remember that thing I said before,  
about telling people I love them? Well maybe,

it's the opposite

because last month I stood naked in the ocean  
at night for the first time and stumbled back  
and forward and back again in the wet sand  
after each wave broke against the soft skin just  
above my hips, and it felt the way it looks  
when it's storming in the summer and the rain  
is so bright and a gust of wind sweeps  
the thick green trees, all at once, and they show  
you the white bottoms of their leaves

and

what I'm trying to say is,  
that I wish I had always known that everything  
is always turning and  
falling,  
and that thing about us, that we effervesce,  
and that I will really miss the cold, small bowl  
of figs on the needlepoint in his kitchen,  
the stiff old couch where I'd nap  
after Thanksgiving, the way he cooked mushrooms,  
the ridges of his wide, wide hands.

## On Pain

Here.

I am jumping out of an airplane.

Here.

please

it is flying too low and every minute

it is shrinking. Take this dream

from me

I know

I am too big to fit

anymore. I

cannot open my fist I

have no parachute I

am asking you to take it from me

//It goes like this

because I cannot

release//I need you to take it//I jump//I jump I

release

like scraps of glass // I want you to leave

me

warm wet gaping

memories as it goes

//you're squealing in the dark

I don't really want to forget

only not to have

In my hands

a dark gray house

all its windows//shuttered

please  
you fall  
against the shadow  
your bed beside the window // next  
scrape it through the flesh  
between my knuckles  
he falls//hungry  
as glass as house as clouds  
covers up your nakedness  
with his  
please. I  
cannot need  
release  
//you// like scraps  
like bed like every flesh  
your nakedness like  
shadow I  
am jumping

**Since**

Vestiges of oil and dust on a light switch  
a fruit fly, indifferent, on a surface of flesh.

## **Gutters**

clogged  
with rotting leaves;  
my father tilts  
above me  
before the rain  
begins to fall.

there is no peace,  
separate. It's right there  
in the word—No, don't  
look. But, believe me  
we need each other

and the metal of a ladder  
in the clenched hands  
of a boy looking skyward  
no—not at the in-rolling gray  
roil, the promise of rain—  
at his father: his dirty old shoes  
the soft skin of his knees,  
flecks of decay

that have spattered  
the glass of his lenses,  
the tendons of his hands, and  
clumps of leaves crumbling heavy—  
all this he sees  
and the metal is cold.

## Palimpsest

There is a man selling drawings on the side of the street.  
It's October in Boston. Your coat is bright red.  
You're glowing.

This is not the city I thought it would be  
and sometime later we sit on the pier  
pretending not to be cold, watching  
two sailboats cut slow swaths in the choppy  
water. There is a blue bicycle lashed  
to the worn wood post where the water  
laps against the dock and I try to think  
of a way to ask you to see what I am seeing  
without sounding insane.

I imagine leaving this world  
is much like the moment  
after you have been sitting silent,  
alone, when you realize  
you've been hearing the hum  
of a refrigerator or an air conditioner  
forever.

This is about the way your knuckles smell  
after peeling an orange. This is about the girls  
in Bath & Bodyworks by the candles, who laughed  
at my aunt's shaved head and long robes.  
This is about Nick who taught me to dribble  
a basketball. Nick, who the headmaster  
said was slow as molasses.

This is about me moving away and forgetting  
until I saw his face in the paper years later



above columns of ink spelling words  
like “closet” and “rope.”

This is also, always, about you.

The other night I hung Christmas lights  
on the wall behind my bed. They blink  
so slowly—I never notice them dimming  
until it’s already black. I remember reading  
somewhere that if you boil a lobster  
one degree at a time, it will not feel anything  
and then it is boiled and dead.

I want to be the water:  
I will not feel anything  
either, moving faster  
and faster, so slowly,  
until I am boiling and deadly.

The other night, I tried not to think  
of you while the lights  
blinked in the dark, and she showed me all of her  
tattoos. First the fox,  
then the serpent,  
the moon, and the flowers, one  
by one, until she had nothing left  
to show, lying there naked, glowing  
and dimming, covered in ink.

## Being of Islands

it was always the kitchen things  
that seemed to separate me  
  
from the continent  
of promise, the shores  
my great-grandmother  
alighted sturdily, stepping  
off the dock into a dusty city, nothing  
like her Palermo. The continent  
of promise, the thousand blinking  
lights my father could not help  
counting, flying silently through  
a sky that no longer smelled  
of mango trees. I remember  
  
the boy my father told me  
he was, sprinting with classmates  
through crowded Taipei streets  
to shout, panting, at the vans  
full of American tourists,  
“Hi! Hello! Blah Blah Blah!”  
never knowing if they understood.

How would I have seen him?  
This round-faced child, cheeks  
flush with exertion, dark eyes  
shining amid the noise and neon,  
the smell of drying meats, the tents  
crowding the curb selling soybean  
cakes and flyswatters, hurling tattered  
American greetings at us:

air-conditioned and wide-eyed, Nikons  
swinging from our necks. How could he

know, years later, he would return  
with one of them—a woman, small  
and loud, with a sturdiness in her eyes  
that stepped everywhere  
before she did, searching humid  
alleyways and rooftops dotted  
with potted plants—for what?  
She seemed to collide

with every passing body  
in the hungry din of the night  
markets, shouting “没事!”  
(no problem) instead  
of “对不起!” (excuse me),  
and he followed her,

the abrasive pitch of her  
misused Chinese, through  
the lights and the smoke  
until they reached a dim corner  
where an old woman sold dumplings  
and small tumblers of tea  
from the back of her cart. They  
sat on bright plastic stools

cupping the chipped porcelain  
with quiet hands, watching  
her fold crescents around morsels  
of green onion and garlic and pork  
in the dark. And here he was home

again—a boy with scabs on his elbows  
screaming “Hi!” at the passing outlines  
of faces behind tinted windows. She,  
on his island, found laughter and tea  
and a mind like her eyes, always searching  
and ready, for a voice to reach back  
in a tongue not his own, that understood  
nonetheless, the hurtling warmth  
of a word—that a word is an isthmus  
always unfinished, in need of another.  
And when nothing but the bitter black  
vinegar lingered, they looked out at the night  
that had fallen around them like petals or snow,  
smiling in the silence

they owned. Years later, in the bright  
mid-afternoon, I watched my father knead  
dough before his powdered hands rounded  
bits of ground pork and green onions  
into teardrops he tucked away  
beneath thin folds pressed tight  
with wet fingers. In the mornings,  
he’d boil jujubes and dried dragonfruit  
in a big pot that never left  
the front burner of the stove: ladling  
the steaming broth into a mug, he’d sit  
at the head of the empty table sipping  
slowly between bites of 皮蛋, black  
duck eggs preserved in clay  
and quicklime and I saw the silence  
and it was not his. She had left

and though the cabinet above the counter  
where he stacked his books still held her  
teas in multicolored boxes and tins, she  
had taken the laughter and the silence, both.  
And when the dumplings he had shaped  
with wet fingers went to school with me  
in a black Velcro lunchbox emblazoned  
red with a dragon, I carried that silence  
that was not his, too. I unfolded its  
potpourri corners in my lap, cradled  
its edges against the lunchmeat-filled  
mouths spitting questions about pets  
and my chopsticks, until it unfurled  
itself like a serpent. Remembering  
the weight of its fangs, it rose  
like a cloud. My Nagasaki.  
If my father's father  
could have looked from the deck  
of his carrier, floating in the port  
of Keelung, to see the ash  
and dust blossoming over the ruins  
of his occupiers' city, would he think  
of my father, his son?  
    Could he know the bright blinking lies  
of a shore, the silence of a kitchen,  
empty in sun?

## **Ouroboros**

my mother likes to tell me  
that I was born with a blue

leg, wrapped tight  
in the slimy rope of yolk

and vein we shared.

In a different poem

I would confess that I can feel  
it still, sometimes, running

at night in the summer,  
passing through the darker

shade of trees thick with bloom  
and cicadas. Or knee-deep

in winter's white,  
carving megaliths of ice

from the sloping pavement.

The truth is that this story

has no body, only a grinning  
barricade of instances:

grape cigarillos on the roof  
outside my open window,

smoke, warm as lips, us,  
quietly wanting to know

that chiasmus. Or

pizza on paper plates

in the cramped kitchen  
after grandpa died—all  
that grease and silence.  
It's easier to close  
your mouth around something,  
to taste ash or oil, than the jagged  
empty lattice of enamel. It's easier  
to parse the syntax of a jawline,  
to scrape dead yellow jackets  
greying on the mullion  
into cupped palms,  
their little bodies somehow  
realer against flesh soft  
with perspiration.

Some, though, slip  
and are not a barricade at all.

Like this: your face buried  
halfway in blankets halfway  
across the country glowing  
in the palm of my hand  
you, trying not to explain  
how he felt underneath you.

Knowing I deserved worse,  
for the bodies I heisted, you shrunk  
from being retribution  
for the warm and the faceless.

Or: I can't remember the last  
time latex separated me  
  
and another because I'm only  
ever hungry if I don't think too much  
  
and hate intimacy just less than  
the thought of losing appetite

so

it's always a race now  
  
like in high school  
when I'd wait for the first whistle  
  
to shed my sweats, off-balance, catching  
on the points of my spikes, before  
  
spreading my palms, fingering  
the uneven polyurethane surface,  
  
coiling into the explosion  
of the gun the slanting blur of next  
  
till crumpling breathless, back  
at the start, disbelieving  
  
the raw, reckless stagger  
fading in our wake.