

Breathless, Wide-eyed

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Mantras

I

I woke this morning and found
that the tennis courts were still high
and dry, that puddles had only
gently collected on the brick walks,
mirroring buildings and grey sky.
I don't know how I imagined it would be,
last night's downpour's child,
if it would seep up through the cracks
like the Miocene reborn, rising, stirring leaves
into clouds with invisible currents.
I like to think that we could live in freshwater,
the grass twitching unearthly yards below,
everyone adrift in that silence,
billowing scarves and soft halos of hair
tinted by blue-green light,
messenger bags ready to float away.
I would find you above where we used to meet
daily outside the foreign languages building
and say in bubbles, *see: I am not drowning*.
And you would smile and swim away
into the silted depths,
where all the sediments would still be just-settling.

II

Remember the time I thought there was treasure
and patched off into the pathless woods
with a long, sharp shovel to find it?
You found me, hours later, entrenched in a small pit,
unsure and pausing my work to gaze at roots
sticking curious and pale out of steep loam.
*My dear, you called down, current studies show
that all things worth having in this world are to be found
where people have already made their homes.*
I stayed awhile after you'd gone, in the hole I'd dug,
letting the sweat cling thin and cool on my skin,
trees reaching to rim the sky opening above me.
And after who knows how long, I declared it a good hole
because it was mine.

III

I have spent so long
just remembering.

Development

Breathless: the day
I smashed through the creek
and found the cathedral of pines
on the other side of the paintball woods.
Everything seemed holy then,
transplanting wild onions to the opposite bank,
drying feathered algae into palm-sized cakes,
the smell of the dirt beneath my nails.
The spine-thrill of imagining wolves
in every hollow tree,
snapping and pacing in every sinkhole.

When did it begin? First, an avenue
of stumps high as my waist
and the ghostly presence of machines,
unmanned in the afternoons
when I'd ramble after school.
The rope swing by the boys' fort snapped
and no one came to fix it.
Then, sinking clay flats, gravel walls,
men shouting orders in yellow hats,
and the fresh-pressed pavement
of the first cul-de-sac.

Small magic

Fascination, the way
dad laced fingers together
and made an eleventh
double-ended digit appear
while mom cleaned my bloody knee.
Transfixed, I watched it move
perpendicular to the rest, against
all elementary school
taught me about counting.
In a breath I had dad's wrists,
pulled his parted hands
down so I could peer at palms,
heartlines and callous,
losing all focus for tears
and antiseptic sting.
But unable to find a mark
betraying the knack
of making forgetting easy
I could only hope he'd someday teach me.

The Valley

Things found their way into the woods:
unburst paintballs we collected like pearls,
an adirondack, a bag full of golf balls,
and five stolen street signs for Saxonbury Way
that none among us had the nerve to return.
In a circle of broomsedge and briars,
an old tube television sat,
lost relic of the fifties that someone must have
carried over the gorge crisscrossed by logs,
up to the top of this hill and left
for the snow and rain and us,
gathering round to peer back at our reflections
from this side of the glass.
Antennaed survivor, watching years flicker by
like an up-spliced tape, blurs of paintballers,
geocachers, and maybe the wild men
Shawn McIntyre said spent nights
under muddled blankets in the unclaimed tent,
still raised though run down, lower on the slope.
Though Shawn was known to hyperbolize,
we couldn't help half believing,
made a point to hurry past trees
carved with strange marks, heads down
all the way to this haven named at odds
with its elevation, still not scared enough
to miss programs, futures and histories
we imagined out loud on the tv's gray screen.
The air lingered here sweet around us
in this ring of dense evergreens,
where vintage glass bottles dangled
on strings from every tree,
catching and flinging light,
making the whole place shimmer.

Playground

I

August and Brianna Vincent
has lost a tooth in the mulch
under the monkey bars.
Fingers in the splintery bark bits,
a handful of kids hunt
for that cream-colored incisor.
When the whistle goes,
it takes a tale from Ms. Christian
of new tooth tracking technology
to convince Brianna to leave the spot,
quarter-ransom left to the Fairy to find.

II

Scatter of happy shriekers, runners
shooting what autumn left drying.
Who fired the first popper plant?
Bending the stem over itself
into a loop and yanking forward
to flick a grassy nib at a classmate.
No cops, no robbers, boys, girls,
just everyone unleashing on anyone
who reaches for new ammo.

III

Three girls started it, playing paleontologist,
the excavation of the sharp pebble
wedged in red clay, churning away
at the dirt snugged into its sides
with rag-edge stones of their own.
The growing indent drew interest,
army of the third grade class
taking turns scraping,
uncovering an iceberg of a rock
with no end in sight.
Winter dwindled them away
as wonder turned to work,
the ground firm in February,
tools hard to hold with gloves,
granite shard jagged in its hole, deep-rooted.

IV

Spring, the clover patch ringed
with kids as Audrey Herring shows off

her mastery of chain-making.
Inserting nails into the April-crisp stems,
slit and slide another green end in,
stopped by the blossom.
Amanda Lennon finds a four leafer,
tucks it behind her ear,
proud as any flowery crown.

V

It's July, but we've walked back
to our old elementary school,

where years of apartments now stack
up against the chain link fence,

to clamber on the jungle gym's underside,
perch unstopped on top of the monkey bars,

and, where we used to play fisherman
in the rainstorm puddle under the teachers' tree,

stand to breathe in

long-lemongrass fragrance still
wafting uphill from the vacant track.

Kate

Really I just wanted to see you break
like I did when we were young

when I aimed that dog chain at your head
left a dent in the stairwell wall

because you cracked the rainstick
I got from the zoo and I'd rather snap

that doll of Jasmine we shared from Aladdin on Ice
in half than see you pretend to mummify her for science

but you were always more reasonable
better at talking to mom and dad

maybe that's why I got my mouth washed out
with soap for shrieking my first demi-profanity at you

while you went unpunished for tricking me
into drinking that clotted water-cream mixture

you left out for three nights on your bedside
in the room we shared till I was ten

and sometimes I wanted to kill you
like the time I chased you upstairs with a kitchen knife

because you insisted you were a robot
only programmed to act as though you loved me

and mom and dad were too
but mom always said *your sister*

can be your best friend or your worst enemy
you girls decide and I'm glad

in spite of such times
that we did

Saratindon

*Far away, in the land of Gondor, there was a little town called
Saratindon...*

-Dad

The stories started not too long
after I'd had my first nightmare,
after Kate had finished *The Hobbit*
and we both needed more than this
bedroom with its sky blue walls.

So you tucked us in our beds
each snug as a bug in a rug
and spun us into a tale of two sisters
standing unshaken before the wrath
of the brilliant rust-scaled dragon
with fire that made the ground simmer
molten for minutes after each puff.
No swords here, but a purple cloche hat
on my head that turned into a house,
an impenetrable place
that I could call at any time to be safe,
dip biscuits in tea while the beast
ragged himself ragged outside and retreated to his lair.
Wits were rewarded here
and we followed him on tiptoe to his nest
bright gleaming with gold and
as he slept we took our battered silver bucket
to swoop up the whole river,
right out from under the fish.
Kate raced on golden superspeed sneakers
to spill our sloshing haul down the hole
a wash of steam rising in sign of the dragon's demise.
River replaced, we handed out what we found
deep inside the earth to the townspeople,
because heroes always share.

Is it any surprise that we were ignited?
Now when we ventured into our woods
we'd pack a sack full of buttered bread,
a chunk of cheese and deli slim slices of ham,
component parts just as in your stories.
We began to want to be ourselves
but more as you told us:
brave, bright, heart-strong and heroic.
Kate challenged every boy in her second-grade class
to race the day after your first telling, not holding back,
then crowed the tale on repeat when she won.
She and I would come together to reenact

our rescue of Gimlet, leprechaun friend
and supplier of all our magical odds and ends,
tools, not weapons, dreamed up by you
to get us through our daily adventures.

And every night, pleas for more,
a mewling *tell us another Saratindon story*
when your hand went to hit the light.
We brought you names of boys we liked
shyly and obsessively,
and you turned out a tale of how Kate's Stuart,
the over-ambitious cook, imprisoned
my good king Patrick in the tallest tower,
poisoning him with pastries.
I was distraught,
but Gimlet taught us the tongues of the swallows
and soon we were passing messages
and fresh-baked bread from the hat house.
When we kicked down the castle door,
green eyes flashing, I cut in
to tell you I didn't want the throne after all,
that Patrick would be fine ruling alone,
and could you end it so Kate and I could keep
adventuring from our little farm home?

A sense of justice teamed us in reality too,
together talking Emily Hoff out
of beating her gangly brother up
on home-from-school walks.
I started carrying a stick in the afternoons
swishing it with all my seven-year-old strength
through shadows, at every suspect vine,
to prove I didn't need four walls to be my shield.
Our games of House became home base
for baking treats to trick marauding trolls
into traps laid against them,
and the circle of abandoned tents in the woods
was recast as the cottage of a one-eyed witch,
her caged crow passing hints along—
Kate's and my device for rule-making,
for rewriting our shared universe
into the everyday.

By the time I was nine,
story hour was a flurry of suggestions,
Kate and I bickering over which monsters
should ravage the land this time,
could we have horses,
and would it be okay if we each received
another gift from Gimlet,
so sure you'd have something new up your sleeve.

Then one night Gimlet was sucked up
into the evil sorcerer's darkening cloud,
and that was the end.
You left us wide-eyed
at the mess left in his hollow oak home,
and went to bed, saying,
why don't you girls finish this one on your own?

Excalibur

Monstrous yellow dust-coat machine,
driver's door ajar four days of seven,
a quick clamber over heavy tread jowls
for exploration. Inside, black-knobbed levers,
a flannel shirt (worn, by the smell of it)
crumpled on the floor, and sometimes keys,
dangling easy on a red floatie chain.

Word spread that Megan Puzia tried
and failed to turn them in the ignition.
Then everyone was doing it: the Cicien boys
twisting their wrists sore, Emily Lamb
almost too timid to touch the thing,
John Pouliot wiping snot on his sleeve,
saying it was a stupid machine anyway.
None had the knack, that missing destiny,
nor knew you had to jam the brakes
to make the thing go.

But if it had roared to life,
and if we could reach the pedals
and if it pressed its wide nose
against the trunk of a winter white poplar,
would we have even thought to stop
or pushed on with our game
until the wood snapped
thunderous and sap-spattering,
another lean body crashing to the ground,
in our kingdom of fallen?

Snow days

I

Some sort of post-December superstition:
chanting over lunchroom bustle,
spoons slipped under pillows,
pajamas worn wrongside out,
and those cold months of breath pressed,
nose to window,
volume up on the woman
with the weather map
in hopes of cancellation.

II

It wasn't real till we'd run in it,
Kate and I, sliding off socks
to print a ring on the pristine porch layer,
lay out a bowl to fill with fresh white
untouched by dog paws
for afternoon snow cream.
Mom, Michigander, shaking her head
over oatmeal in the kitchen.

III

Mornings like this were worth waking early,
backyard backing the sled hill.
First ride powder-slow, but the real reason
I'd go in the six-thirty snowglobe quiet
was to blemish the fresh-fallen
before kids from three suburbs
pounded it to ice tracks and mud.

IV

He was the kid who rolled rocks
into snowballs, but we still sent someone
back to our block for help
when he broke his nose flying
over the spot that everyone knew
launched you off the slope
across the clearing and
if you refused to stop
into the icy creekbed.

V

Even when it came,

it never lasted more than a day.
I'd cross the trailside creek
into wood edge, crick my way
over frosted leaf-fall to the floodplain,
where I could hear melting begin,
follow trails of trickle
along the northern bank,
twigs wisping out,
shadows lengthened by sun peep
over soil-ridge snow bones.

Small magic

Mom had the thumb for it,
pressing indents in soil,
opening roots to breathe
and re-placing greenhouse sprouts
for in-house display. Kate and I
grew up in the garden, tapping dirt
with trowels, learning to till each spring,
but never to call a shriveled succulent
back to fragrant life, nor coax
zinnias to three-and-a-half feet tall.
I collected whatever I found
in the woods: fistfulls of moss
carried home to brown the floors
of empty terrariums, wild ramps,
grass tips thrown in with twigs,
Queen Anne's Lace snapped off midstem.
But mom could always make something new:
though the flowers were dead,
that night she turned them blue.

Sighting

Still in a half-dream daze, I slipped
into the pre-dawn dim of the kitchen,
and found myself frozen
by the sight of you standing
sinuous in the backyard ivy patch,
skin silvered as though moonlit,
antlers mingling with branch shadow above,
and the only sound the thick simmer
of oatmeal mom had started on the stove.
The lamp over the table warmed the breakfast nook,
strange contrast to your lightening grey world,
a pane of glass away, bordered by trees
stretching forth from the soft dark
like some page torn straight from a fairytale.
Perhaps it was the whisper of my naked feet
on the polished oak floorboards,
that stirred you to this sudden
velvet-eyed vigilance, not knowing
the nameless gaze tracing your frame
belonged only to a child.
How could you possibly live here,
in this heavy lace of neighborhoods
so close to the city?
Had I been able to breathe in that moment,
to somehow go out into the frost-glazed yard,
I would have asked you to show me
what secret trails remained to discover,
but with a flick of an ear
you bounded over the fence,
with the skeleton of honeysuckle
weathering winter at its base,
and vanished into mist.

Site

Almost overnight, this tangle of roads
where our trees used to be.

And it was almost as good:
an airstrip, a labyrinth, the desert
we'd all been waiting to play in.

We flung the biggest stones we found
into red-earth muck with heavy splacks,
as tiny brown spiders fled the gravel stacks.

Echoes of the woods' old wonder
seeped up through the streets:
the jangling ring of pebbles chucked
at the sign saying Coming Soon,
a shattered sideview mirror's bits sending
nothing back up to the sky,
long metal rods that left a creamy scratch
on the cement when dragged.

And who didn't want to leave a mark
on something as pristine
as the tunnel running under one street,
whose walls we crimsoned with spraypaint,
first words, then just the color, spreading?

No quick fix

I will finish what I start,
pulling every bit of that crackling patch
of rough brown barely-skin
away from the sticky pink indent
under it, teeth gritted.

Sometimes I feel sure
I can erase the damage,
that by sliding nails under to strip
away the scurf, fleck by russet fleck,
I'll find, unblemished just beneath, my own skin.

Emily

She says, *how can I write:*
nothing in my life is beautiful,
then drives him down
to the strawberry fields at night
where the white moon turns cirrus
into long rows, stacking into sky.

Walks home

Night

When the streetlight flickers overhead,
I imagine how I would plough
into the man approaching on my side of the street:
my shoulder in his armpit
fist in his face, how his knees
would crash into the ground
when I swept them out from behind
and then I'd run. A car driving by
makes me jump, and I pass the man's left side
with hands clenched in their gloves,
eyes wide and muscles wired.
And then we part, and I have to pump
The Pixies loud just to let my breath out.

Noon

The morning glories were all furled away
and my legs were just long enough
to keep up with Kate.
In third and fifth grade we never took the bus,
stopped at intervals on our half mile route
to pick weed bouquets, made believe
that orcs had the hobbits, forcing us to give chase,
and one lucky day, to make snow angels
on some stranger's lawn.

Morning

Coming back from the grocery store
I had a vision of this sky blue bag,
slung on one shoulder like a bow,
splitting from seam to seam
and ingredients spilling out,
apples bouncing to bruise,
flour a split and puff from its paper sack,
but worst of all the milk,
a heavy burst of white,
the liquid jumping out in a ripple from impact
and then settling in a puddle
in and around my shoes,
sending me back to buy it all again.
I shifted my bag onto my hip and carried it
like a baby all the way home.

Our house

9225 Heritage Woods Place

The blinds I never used in my old room
are always shut when I detour
to this street on dog walks, still curious
what color the walls are now.
I hope they like the wide back deck,
light streaking the living room at sunset,
the wallpaper textured like elephant skin
I once loved skimming hands along
in the downstairs powder room.
A strange dog runs in the yard
where the gardenia bought for mom's birthday
withered, flowers fermenting sweet,
and I wonder if the new woman
ever came across the skeletons
of our fish and rats and parakeet
buried by the patch of now-rampant ivy.
From the sideyard I can just see
that the treehouse dad built
stands, slide brown with neglect,
but they took down the swings,
even the tire horse with its bristly twine mane.
Yet worst of all, they didn't leave
our skinny maple where it stood—
Kate's and my pretend pirate ship,
since the day dad wove us
a crow's nest of long purple rope,
placed a piece of shop-fresh plywood
down below as main deck,
a game we echoed for years—
in the yard, just blank dirt.

Even roads

Sometimes I wonder if you remember
that one night I snuck out
after even the fireflies were asleep
and walked halfway to your house.
You came to me when I called,
voice a bright quiver
at David Cox and Sugar Creek
in the no-man's-land of suburbia,
under the orange triangle
of a streetlight, both of us pretending
to be brave for the other.
You laughed at me, said
next time I should call sooner
and you'd give me a ride.

In your first car, that well-worn
but sound VW Bug
we shared stirring,
synthy music from your iPod,
which I joke-called my Boyfriend
because I wished you would be.
But you were, that summer,
the one who gave me my first tour
of the back roads,
loose strands at the edge
of this net of neighborhoods,
dense-knit with people,
traffic and stoplights.

We'd snap-decision turn
till we ran out of new ways to go,
then loop and reloop
in hours-long drives.
Who wouldn't end up in love
with those lazy curls
over hills, the untouched
farmland, the sanctuary
of our joyrides? I remember
full moons over hay fields,
pulling off to philosophize
in ripe August pastures,
stargazing on the car roof
with the warmth of your voice
in so many places,

along routes I retrace
in my mind some nights,

smiling at the memory
of every curve,
the familiar ways we felt
certain would endure.
But things always change,
and now when I do drive
half our roads are repaved,
walled-in by houses,
or completely relaid
toward different destinations.

Learning to let go

Warm-up

The floor is your first partner,
where you spread in X,
let bones press into slats,
tilting your head back
like floating on a lake.
Begin: bend to the side
at the waist till you curl
into fetal, pause, and unfurl,
trace fingers along an invisible circle,
Vitruvian in motion.
Never lose touch,
a toe always grounded,
the palm of your foot
sliding soft over wood.
Even when you rise
the floor will wait below,
lowest level of the air above
where you carve space
with the same shapes.
When it ends, the floor stays
ready to catch you,
cradle you as you melt back flat.

Center

No standing is still,
you learn with eyes closed,
feet planted shoulder-width,
and the tower of you sways,
core keeping you always
in a state of not falling

not falling

not falling.

Partnering

You must have trust
in hands placed cool
on your shoulder blades,
pour weight slow
into them, be still,

at forty-five to the floor,
and wait for a shoulder
leaning in, pushing
you back to your feet.

Fourth of July

and after the block parties are over,
Jordan Navarra has promised us
that rarity of entertainment,
streaks of light shooting
thick as downpour into the sky
in fushias, neons, bursts of
aquamarine flowering overhead.
We assemble that night with
or without parents' permission
on the Davis Lake playground,
in lamplight half-shadow,
where lays a box of poppers,
a few Bic lighters and a slim sum
of Roman candles. Chad
and Walker and a few others
whose names I've never known
seize the pile on sight and
march it out to the parkway,
where they take sides to fire
misset missiles at each other
out over the road,
one red flare dangerously close
to a battered Civic swerving
its way home. Others have begun
to play Ghost on the Run
and I perch in semi-participation,
arms around knees
under stars hazed out by light,
on the roof over the slide.
Someone brought alcohol,
Pinnacle mixed with
lemon Crystal Light
to mask the sting,
and a circle confessional starts,
but I've stopped listening.
Back on the street, the two teams
have already burned through
the entire rocket supply
and have started a contest
of stepping barefoot on poppers.
Down in the mulch, a shrill
titter and someone
begins to cry, and I wonder if I
would do better to go home and stay
shuttered insomniac till morning
or if I could still convince
anyone to go alone with me

off to the gazebo
lit with Christmas lights,
where we could sit and swirl
sparklers lazy through the air,
other teenage revelers' fireworks
fizzling streets away,
visible over houses
and in the reflection of the lake,
half-choked with lilies.

Davis Ridge

Half the new neighborhood to the north
was to be filled with families fleeing Katrina,
and already a rumor of the future spread,
all kicked-in windows and a sense of menace
from the lonelier corners of the bike path,
our homes funneled into theirs overnight.
Our development's delinquents went invisible,
every graffiti mark already made
respun as a darkening pall cast
in advance of some storm moving in.
They came in July-swelter and I only drove through,
but there were kids on bikes
with handlebar streamers in silver and pink,
while drive-tired parents pulled
their handfuls of boxes from Uhauls.
Not long after the trucks left,
a petition came, not to reclaim the woods
Davis Ridge buried, but to install checkpoints on the trail
and have police on-call to escort anyone without
neighborhood ID. No one signed it:
too inconvenient to have more stuff filling our pockets,
and we'd probably never catch those kids,
not with their ability to melt back into their own turf
just across the creek. My neighbor down the street
insisted there were less fish in the neighborhood lake,
catch-and-release not respected by *these people*,
as if he'd counted on his nights spent casting.
They're no happier to be here
than we are to have them, his wife said,
already making plans to move away.
Fresh farmland had just been flattened
into houses east of here, a short commute,
and Davidson, with its clean streets,
widening selection of high-scoring schools,
and well-washed populace, always seemed
more small-town charming than Charlotte anyway.

Summer's end,

the fester of cankerworms
scrambling frantic over the bodies
of their dead compatriots
to reach the bright oak leaves.
A line of sweat slides slow
from the crook of my knee,
and the air glazes over an avenue
of frothing Bradford trees.
You have nothing to say:
our legs have grown too long
for our old bikes and the blackberries
are gone, a patter of violet rot
bruising the bike trail asphalt.
We walk heat-empty streets,
no lemonade stands left,
just an occasional splurt of canary
spilled caterpillar guts.
I would tell you that kind
just turns into wasps anyway,
don't be sad, but you know that
piece of old playground mythology.
We've both filled our days
with every corner of this place.
We could go to the creek,
I almost say, but it is slick with oil,
orange with red clay runoff
and it has sweat itself to a trickle
between houses and we can't cross
to that place where, years ago,
you were my first kiss.

Notes from the small hours

I

Check out short girl's tits,
one says of my sister,
who stares steady out the window
at neon graffiti flashing by.
They don't know we're also anglophone
but because I don't want their apologies,
I don't tell them to stop.
Everyone packed into this Métro car
probably knows what they're saying anyway,
multilingual as the French are today,
comments reaching every woman on the train.
The air seems to bristle with hush,
save the whirr of the rails and these two
talking, taking up the fold-down chairs.
But when the double doors open
one rises, gives his seat
to an incoming woman with a cane,
and their conversation slides away
like the pools of light marking our path
through this airless tunnel.

II

We can all smell it on her
the moment the too-rosy
frazzled-blonde frenchwoman steps into the car.
She is looking around, glazed
but smiling, meeting eyes that shift away.
Her slurs are too thick to understand
but she's crooning at the kid in the corner—
can't be older than five, on his mother's lap—
and making him smile too.

III

Maybe if he weren't so heavy
or if he weren't first
leaning on the whole vertical handrail
then tumbling on top of others at stops
he would be tolerable,
the giant englishman, roaring laughter
at god knows what.
He lands on a woman's sandaled foot
so hard it starts to bleed.
She cringes, but no one says a word,

just a swift exit at the change-over
onto a quieter line home.

IV

An empty train, few faces
leaning into wide, clear panes,
and the insistent whisper
of the woman on her phone in the corner,
tearful behind glass frames.

V

They're on roller blades,
but somehow down the stairs
and on this Line 2 car.
They skip spritely over legs
stretched out into the corridor,
past people slouched half-asleep in their seats
to the middle of the train
where they sling arms around each other's necks
and weave themselves into a net
around a handrail, snickers and shrieks
rising and falling in waves.
But there's something to it,
and when they start to sing
La Marseillaise my sister and I join in,
humming over the words we're too tipsy to shape,
and soon the whole car is rising,
or clapping from their seats,
and one of the youngest girls on wheels
breaks off to circle around the center pole
faster and faster in an attempt at dance,
wobbling and blear-eyed but laughing.

I woke this morning

and felt myself forty years in the future
stretching in the same morning sun
in a city far away, sipping from the cup
of cold honeyed chamomile forgotten on the bedside
and, without thinking to, reaching back
along bars of light sliding through the fire escape
to the way it flittered and fell among the trees,
scattered at the base of the wild roses I ran past
that day when

but I can't remember anymore.

Alewives

October, and the fishermen
had beaten us
to the beach, leaving trails
of small fish gasping who'd
slipped from the nets.
While my sister and father threw
those who hadn't yet lost eyes to birds
back to the sea, wondering at the massacre,
my mother told me how,
when she was young,
the Nova Scotian alewives funneled
down the St. Lawrence Seaway
by the thousands,
swimming till all the salt
had pumped from their gills.
I imagined them, silver slips,
saline-clear eyes
blinded by flat blue, heaving
silted water of the lake,
their billowing thick of bodies.
They washed up in windrows
on South Michigan shores,
wide half-rings where waves
pushed them weak onto sand,
not knowing to hurry back north
when hurled into the lake
by the Stevensville kids.
Towns took turns with a frontloader
just to clear the dead from their strands.

Retracings

I

it had snowed
and Taylor and I were waking up
in your house or her house
and the mother with the auburn nest of hair
bustled in with a basket
said you were home early from the Rio Grande
that you were fixing something
maybe a railroad or a fence
with the other men in the town
where you and I had grown up
and I took the basket
full of cheese sandwiches folded in wax paper
hopped on my bike with the red bell
then flew down the mountainside
dissolving around me
and it was summer in the suburbs
and I was trying to find you

II

you'd somehow shorn my pixie cut longer
into a shape I'd seen
in some post-apocalyptic sci-fi special
and as you ruffled your hand through it
I told you about the time I'd fled a construction site
yelled at by men mixing cement
or maybe concrete but the point was
I had been scouting out a new way
to reach the plywood fort on the water
where every spring I made a ritual of kneeling
to unclog the leaves and branches
streamers and grocery bags
that caught between the rocks
and then I was there but running
through holes in chain link fences
and light dropped from the sky
pooling over the ground
and something in me snagged

III

we'd broken into my old house
for something I'd left behind
and found the furniture had learned to dance
waltzing around between rooms

a lean brassy lamp orbiting
the twirling teak rolling cart
even the old armoire in the main room
shifting gently from side to side
and though it was sweet to see
that my childhood's decor had survived here
in snatches between flipping pillows
tipping linens from their closet shelf
and hurrying hands through sheer curtains
I had to tell you
things weren't always this way
and we hunted through all the flour
and eggs spilled out over the kitchen island
but couldn't find
whatever it was we'd come looking for

On the rumor of coyotes

I heard you first as a grin
stitched into wood scraps
smile among low-growth sumac
Ms. Graham swore she saw
while walking Jack
her sweated chihuahua
in dawning mist

headlines warned
northern invasion
squeezed down out of development
in south Virginia
or maybe all the way from Maryland
where the city sprawl
had gone rootbound
in the state's confines

then you were by the highway
exit I'd passed a thousand times
now wondering how close to the turn-off
you'd been clustered
beautiful and shameless
nose-deep in the velvety red
roadkill carnage matted fur
delving white-toothed
into matted fur
as someone said they saw

I heard the howling
night after night
dreamed gunshots
then more howling
dreamed the smell
of the creek, the silver fish
darting alongside you
underwater in moonlight
dreamed you curled
muzzle tucked in tail
under corrugated tin lean-tos
left behind

ravenous ghost
I imagined you
glowing golden by the bins
toppled streetside on Thursdays
or as you had appeared
on front pages from Cornelius:

Pip the sheepdog
found dead following two attacks
come in through the dog flap

some nights my little dog refused
to go alone in the fenced yard
after sunset
motion-triggered spotlight
no assurance against you
with springs for tendons
that could clear five feet
I'd heard
in a single bound

and how could I save her
toe to your ribs
rake swung in a wide arc
around myself
at your numerous jaws
snapping out of the dark?

I almost wished it true when
rounding the corner
of a walk's home stretch
I was struck by fluttering sureness
that I would find you
beyond the front door
carelessly ajar
in window-cut sunlight
gleaming

At the end of the neighborhood

It's just a bike ride away,
this curl of a place, nestled in the space
between houses, all spring-soft grass
and golden brambled drifts.
How old was I when I made these marks
with charcoaled nubs of wood?
Tracing the undersides of right-angled beams
with spirals, pentagrams, and a note
in case anyone wanted to know my birthday.
But here now are marks that are not mine,
I love you J-scribble and *NO NO NO*,
and I wonder if I can still climb highest
up the pylon out of everyone who comes here.
I can see the boys from Crofton Springs
have been at it again,
and it's clear sixth grade English
hasn't shown them any favor
in spelling new-learned words,
fuck bich dick shit blaring red
from each of the four legs
of the stack-spindle steel monolith,
stretching into sky.
Let it not be their shimmer
of broken bottle glass glimmering green
and clear around the firepit,
not their stubs of spitty paper joints
scattered with the dandelions.
The ground is like waves
in the wind, puffs of seedlets release
like sea spray off hillside, and over there
an ancient, wrecked trampoline's legs still jut
from weeds as they always have,
or at least since before my time.

Small magic

When we could count to thirteen
between the strike and rumble,
dad said it was okay, so mom zipped
us into jackets and told us to be safe
following him into the summer rain,
pouring in strings. Every step trembling
I trailed dad and Kate
out to the creek to see the water
frothing and shredding the banks.
This is normal, dad said, as sound
rolled through the clouds
like the ripple in a shaken sheet,
and every tree burned white
in my imagination, the water rising—
thrillingly cold for the season—
up over the first bridge,
seeping into the foundations of houses
and carrying us all away
so that only the woods remained.

Development

of the first cul-de-sac,
the fresh-pressed pavement,
men shouting orders in yellow hats,
gravel walls, the sinking clay flats.
And no one came to fix it—
the rope swing by the boys' fort, snapped
where I rambled after school.
Unmanned in the afternoons,
the ghostly presence of machines,
and stumps high as my waist
lining an avenue. When did it begin?

Snapping and pacing in every sinkhole
and every hollow tree
the spine-thrill of imagined wolves.
The smell of dirt beneath my nails,
drying feathered algae into palm-sized cakes,
replanting wild onions on the opposite bank—
everything seemed holy then.
On the other side of the paintball woods,
my cathedral of pines, found
the day I smashed through the creek,
breathless.

