

To my grandmother, Gretchen Turner

Acknowledgments

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Cellar Door: “Savor”

The Anne Williams Burrus Prize in Poetry: “Stag”

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ONE

Stag

We're going out tonight, and my friend is pre-gaming,
consuming the ruddy heart of a stag slowly,
ignoring the other's shouts to hurry up.
She consumes it like sacrifice:
adrenaline-shaking and white, but afterwards
there's a new brilliancy. She says she doesn't need her coat.

She loses her shoes on the walk to the bar,
outpacing us all on cloven hooves to kick down the door.
Three drinks in and she skewers a man with her horns
for getting too close. The bouncer is afraid
but can't do much. She buys everyone a shot of Jaegermeister,
licking hers clean with a long pink tongue.

She's grown two more legs by the time we're asked
to leave and forgets her tab, cantering off across traffic,
almost crashing a Ford F250. That was the last time I saw her
until yesterday, when she leapt into the road
outside town. I braked hard and just missed:
she nodded, then turned and bounded back into the forest.

Euthanasia Visit

The cat finds the highest place to sit.
She's arthritic, but the long dive from the file cabinet
to the floor is still graceful, her landing crisp.

She's best in motion, haunches bounding
down the steps, a skipping stone
or (even drugged) wobbling silver streak

out into the yard: mother chokes on her words
and the vet, floored, wipes away tears,
letting his assistant quickly re-pack

the syringe and twin bottles.
The cat washes herself until they're gone,
licking away the darkness with a rough tongue.

Later, she dispatches a rabbit at my mother's feet,
and sits before the bloody mess,
a yellow-eyed prophet.

Siamese Fighting Fish

One to each small bowl
in the store, their tail fins
ribbon out and redden
each translucent globe,
a slow brownian motion.
The label's sad story:
they are beautiful but solitary,
bred to compete to the death
over tank space, water,
food. At home when I drop
a pinch of musty flakes,
my new fish arrows up
to mouth the surface,
gulping until the water
is clear again. Its fins flare
when my brother and I
hold a mirror to the glass
to see what it will do:
the fish dashes against
the convex surface,
fighting its rival self.

Hermit Crabs

The three 25-gallon tanks smell
musty in the discount beach store,
over-chilled and halogen-bright.
Each one holds dozens of crabs,
empty shells littering the edges.
Plastic aquatic plants angle
into the gray sand, and I lift them,
searching for the biggest fastest crawler
with the most impressive claws
dragging its bumping shell
from shadow to shadow.
When I find one that's brave enough
to lunge at me when I lift him,
he gets his own plastic tank,
big as a lunch-box. I pick a few shells
for him to choose from, vermilion or gold,
hoping he will switch from dull gray
to something more dazzling
as a house for his soft spiral abdomen,
something large and spiky: maybe
he will choose to hide in there,
a stylish monk, at least until
we can finish the drive home.

Underwater

My brother and I swam out
to inspect a crusted pylon
at the end of crashboat pier,
planted into Puerto Rican sand
like a twelve-story sentinel
withstanding waves all the way
from Africa. Under the water,
the dark metal appeared to
bob and sway as forceful currents
pushed and pulled us: did I
hear the clicking of lobsters
settling into shadowed boroughs
near the bottom? My brother
dove to follow a fat needle fish,
his hair blooming red, floating
like dust in a splash of sunlight,
grown long to distinguish
his un-tattooed un-pierced self:
I watched the dark swirl of it
descend as I treaded water,
holding my breath with him.

Atlantic Croaker

The bloody-mouthed fish I threw back
into the bay is probably dead by now,

having helped a dynasty
of Croakers continue

the legacy of bottom feeding,
flat eyes staring for the churning

of an outboard motor, the explosion
of footsteps frothing the silty bottom

where it settled into the sand,
for a cold and quiet death.

Or perhaps it was struck from the water
by the claws of a cormorant

or fluted bill of a pelican.
Or its silver striped body

is finning by my hook right now,
considering the shining metal,

the long taut line ascending
into the wind and air.

Salamander

I can just make out the salamander
crouched at the center of the campfire.
Spine the white of embers,
he walks on three legs out of the blaze,
eyes cloudy, shimmering in the heat.
Tremors course along his back,
slick with river mud and poison,
covered in fiery red spots.
He looks toward me, unblinking,
then climbs atop my shoelaces
to lick my ankle, tongue a heated flicker.
A log splits and sputtering coals
spill onto my shoes. He leaps off,
slithering shadow replaced with pain.
Later, my feet under the spray of a hose,
I can still feel his phantom heat
crawling along my shiny skin,
each four-toed print a tight red burn.

Palmetto Bug

I woke up to a palmetto bug,
black carapace and quivering
antennae on the pillow beside me.
Swearing, turning on the lamp,
I realized it was just a shadow
in the crease of the pillowcase.
Trying to go back to sleep,
I imagined their large clumsy bodies
falling from the skylight,
thumping onto my outstretched
palm or uncovered cheek.

Tonight I imagine this bar small
as a shoe box. The drinkers shiny
and chitinous, jointed arms
and fingers waving erratically
to music, teeming out the door
to vomit or smoke or scuttle
through the rain into cars.

Pulling Ticks

They find the thinnest skin
on Goliath's hide, tender spots
where the strawberry roan
fades into gray patches of down
at his groin, the interiors of his ears,
the wrinkles behind his forelegs.
Deer ticks bloat to twenty times
their size, sand-colored and shiny,
while lone star ticks are small
but numerous, mottling the coat
with deep brown lozenge bodies.
To pull the ticks I pinch
at the base, where the head
is embedded into the skin,
and yank, drowning them
in a bottle of alcohol,
dark flakes in a snow globe.

Summer Pasture

Three shadows stretch across the pasture,
filling the empty creek bed. A whistling
whinny from the largest, chest pressed
against the gate latch; a strident bellow

from the smallest, whose shape tangles
with darkness at the edge of the field.

They stand at attention when the back door
opens, ears pricked, shoulder and hindquarter
lit by the porch light, vibrating,
eager to thunder along the dark corridor

behind the pond, to run night-blind through
marshy lowland cattails and johnson grass,

silencing the bull frogs and scaring black racers
from their thickets along the shore. They will
gallop to the top of the pasture, where timothy
grows along the gravel drive, and shiver

to stillness as the dark belching of frogs
and chirruping of crickets begins again.

All day they've been waiting, and the clang
of an impatient hoof reminds me what to do:
lift the rusty latch, drag the heavy gate
along its furrow in the dirt, and watch the horses

gather and explode from the opening, bucking off
today's last rays before reclaiming the night.

Grooming

Grime fills the creases
in my palms, a mixture
of sticky sweet feed,
clay dust, and horse sweat.
My hand fits the sweeping arc
of her neck, following
a twitching slope of muscles
begging for more pressure.

Her bristly white and black hairs
show my smooth finger trails.
There's teeth-gritting pleasure
in short strokes of curry comb
bringing up layers of dirt,
in vigorous circles powered
by back, aching shoulder, arm.

My stiff and soft brushes,
one in each hand,
flick dust from withers
to belly, especially the mud
hidden in soft wrinkles
on chest, forelegs, withers,
the downy hollow
behind each fetlock.

Her hooves are small
as clamshells, and one lifts
delicately if I rub
down the leg, pinching
the tendon then cradling
that roundness to gouge out
earth, gravel, tree-seed.

continued, stanza break

With my palms I wipe dust
from her flanks until they shine,
until my dark hands smell
of creek mud, johnson grass,
pine-bar, loam, and horse.

Goliath

The farrier is bowlegged,
back curled beneath
the draft's muscled shoulder,
gray hands trimming slivers
from the half-moon hoof,
morsels the dogs will
fight over later. He hisses
when the weight on his back
shifts, the horse striking a leg
against the concrete, head
stretching to lip the belt loops
on his weathered jeans.
I grab the lead rope to swing
the horse back in place,
stroke the velvet shot through
with bright blue veins
between nostrils big as fists:
the hammer drives a short nail
through the groove in arced steel
into the thick hoof sole: now
Goliath is sweating, coat twitching
and steaming in the cold stall.
He turns and butts me, showing
the white of one large eye, heavy
breaths filling my hands.

Luna Moth

A fleshy green moth
flops to the ground before me,
upside down. Wing span
wider than my hand, fawn-colored
abdomen furry like lamb's ear,
its thin legs and antennae
quiver like delicate fans.
Slick with dew, it flutters faintly.

This moth is nothing like
the ones that swarm the light
above the dining room table,
small brown bodies
downy and almost translucent,
collecting in the bright bowl
until their growing darkness
begins to block out the light.

It's fallen from the persimmon tree
like a wide-leaved relic of Spring,
but before I can flip the moth
my dog comes and mouths it gently,
disappearing below the porch.

TWO

Moonies

After dusk we swim, brushed by hundreds of fluid bodies, silvery outlines with no color in between. I see them undulating when I wake up in this rental house, their glowing delineating shapes from shadows, drifting through the air below the skylight. I sit up in the too-big bed: they slowly disintegrate to show the calendar on the wall, the drooping potted plant. We call the jellyfish *moonies* because of the glimmering guts that distinguish them from the warm current. Translucent during daylight, they only shine on calm nights, satellites compassing the surface of sleep.

Murmur

Drawing air is like drawing water
from a deep well, my chest rising
to the rusty crank of a lever
one revolution at a time.

Blood drums through the static
of cilia in my pillowed ear.

A cold point pressed between
my ribs, the echocardiogram
monitors my heart murmur,
its hidden pumping waves
quivering on the computer screen.

Self-Defense

If you're at a party, make sure
to note all the exits. There should
be two ways to leave each room.
If someone bothers you, start circling
towards the door. You're the end
of the compass. Keep it smooth,
don't stop talking, and speak up.
Friends and acquaintances
become witnesses should anything
happen. If he grabs your wrist like
this, peel it away with your fingers
hard, scrape it off like a leech,
use your nails if you need to.

Say that doesn't work and he's
got you pinned down like *this*,
and it's dark and he's heavy:
things may seem inevitable
but lift your hips up, throw off
his balance and he'll have to
use his hands, which leaves
yours free. Wrap your arm
under, then over, grip hard
at the base of his opposite wrist,
and then make your move.
Joints are delicate things.

Sleepover

Ursula forms tiny golden creatures
out of beeswax, some with two legs,
some four. She arranges them on
a white sheet of paper near the window
where their sun-cast shadows
grow and wane. She's just moved
to the states with her mother:
their small apartment painted
and bleached an anesthetic white.

We watch a black and white ballet film
after dinner, the ball at the finale a mass
of grainy figures, shimmering as they leap
and twirl across the screen.

Below them, the dark orchestra pit
roils with stabbing bows, whirling cymbals,
and lashing baton, the faces of the players
indistinguishable in the gloom.

Ursula's mother turns out the light
in the small square bedroom.

From the bottom bunk, I watch boxes
throw angled shadows across the wall
when a car drives by, tall murky bodies
in the darkness. The beeswax animals
by the window lie melted together,
cold legs and faces joined, waiting for sleep.

The Village of Yesteryear

At the fair when I was ten, I watched a potter
sculpt an entire teapot from heavy gray chunks
of clay, which he cut with a wire strung tight
between two arms of wood on his workbench.
Rolling and cutting purified it, he said,
getting rid of air bubbles, warming it up,
tightening the elements into a pliable lump.
He slapped it onto the wheel, his cracked hands
like elephant skin, and dripped water
down its sides before turning the wheel
as if by magic, the clay slowly rising into a spire,
rolling from a wavy candlestick to a deep bowl:
everywhere he touched, divots
appeared like a tiller cutting through water.
He pinched and pulled at the top and a spout
grew, he placed two fingers at the lip and
dipped to form the arch. Sculpting the whole pot
from the same piece of clay increased its strength,
he told us as the wheel slowed, but suddenly

the demonstration was over. He punched
the half-finished sides and they collapsed
inward, a soft demolition. As the crowd dispersed,
he dropped the flattened lump into a bucket
of gray water and turned back to his workbench,
bringing out new blocks of clay to cut and roll,
announcing that the next demonstration
would begin in five minutes, before he shrugged
out of his stained rubber work apron
and hurried off into the crowd, pulling a cigarette
out of the pack in his breast pocket.
Inside the bucket the lump of clay reached
up to me with its half-formed spout
and I rubbed a finger along the arch,
imagining ripples my hand could carve
into the clay atop a spinning wheel.

Rennet

Christie's arms are thin
but sinewed, disappearing
elbow deep into the cast iron pot
on the industrial stove. She wears wool
to protect her arms from the bite
of the its heated edge, and rubber gloves
pulled up to the elbow, so sweat
won't drip into the milk.
Stirring the dormant liquid
in figure eights, watching the thermometer,
finally she pronounces:
"It's ready." She hands me
the eye-dropper: I lean into the steam
to drip the rennet in, one yellow spot
at a time. It smells like the spoon
after I've scraped my tongue,
this ingredient that turns milk
into cheese, this coagulant
she tells me is from a calf's stomach,
saying "You have to kill the animal
to get it out."

Waffles

He doesn't bother with the knife, instead
poking fork tines clean through the butter,
cleaving off a piece
to roughly swab the valleys and ridges,
sunny puddles on the hot dough.
He spreads it like he drives,
jerking and swooping, making me
gulp as his erratic hand pushes the golden thing
almost off the table. He saves it.
Every depression brims with butter.

Four Birthdays

Dear M,

Thank you so much
for the letter-holder.
When I'm distracted
at my desk, I often focus on
the golden spring of its belly,
coils shiny and vacant.
If I put letters between,
they might flutter in the breeze
from the open window
if I ever opened it.

Dear M,

The sweater you sent
was two sizes too small,
but I've cut it into pot holders.
The felted wool is definitely
what you would call fetching,
peeking coquettishly
from beneath the dutch oven.

Dear M,

Thank you for the \$15
Visa gift card. It was exciting
to rip through the cardboard
and scratch off the little gray box,
get the fourteen digit code
to type and redeem.
I considered ice cube trays
but instead bought a set
of felt furniture feet
so the kitchen chairs slide
much easier now.

continued, stanza break

Dear M,

Happy Birthday,
this is the last note
I'll write and not send.
The camellia blossoms
were beautiful at your funeral.
Someone sent us an hourglass
full of silver sand
with deepest sympathy,
too fragile to pick up.
I put it next to the letter-holder
on the windowsill,
where I might watch
the overturning of time
if I ever turned it over.

English Breakfast

The crumbling tea leaves come
stuffed in bags shaped like pyramids,
made from fabric not unlike
drier sheets and airplane pillows.

Each is crumpled, but swells
like a hot air balloon when dunked,
darkening the water
to amber in just five minutes.

Pulled out, the bag is just fiber-
wrapped pulp, shriveled and drained,
leaking tannic tears down the sides
of the trash bag

as I take the first hot sip,
robust and bitter as February wind.

Dead Presidents

What would they think
of where they are now?
Pressed face to face
in palms or pockets,
softening with age,
they're handled by citizens.
Rolled or clipped or tucked
out of sight, the chief
commanders-in-chief
lie atop each other,
open eyes staring
into the green dark.

2016

At night the stars are unrecognizable,
so numerous every corner
of black sky is littered
with a hazy blur of points.
On base, the windows are always open.

Five hours into the New Year,
fireworks exploded directly above
my grandparent's house,
the soft patter of debris
raining down in the yard.

The boom was deafening,
overwhelming the dark
and pushing down my throat
until I fell out of bed,
close to vomiting.

On the flat roof, how near
the arrowing bolts of gold or purple,
a hemisphere of lights
shooting shrapnel, trailing smoke,
eclipsing the stars.

Philodendron

This potted vine is older than me,
its first tendrils now hunched shoulders
rooted deep in the dirt, pulpy and white.
Clawed fingers reach over the edge
to crawl onto the wall and banister,
caterpillars and ladybugs scaling
its knots rolling over the rail.

Looking down the vine, my face
is their moon, waxing and waning:
if I go to the bottom and yank
to unsucker it from the paint
just for the pleasure of hearing
the fingers pop out in succession,
if I grab fistfuls of leaves
to wind the vine around my palm
and heave the giant urn,
down the stairwell onto the tiles,
if I leave its world in a heap
of broken crockery and scattered dirt,

will the vine climb again
sprouting new stalks at every node,
leaving bodies in the dusty crevices
for me to discover?

Slow Magic

Ashley talks to her plants, and while she's crouched
cooing to the minuscule melon vines

I wipe red clay from my sandals onto dewy grass.
My toes are wet and itchy with tender spring leaves.
She says watching growth is like slow magic,
and I want to tell her about the couple in the news
who eat a slice of their wedding cake every anniversary.
It's been 45 years. I think she'd like the idea.

Any other morning she'd be up at five,
driving into town to give sponge baths, take
blood pressure, walk with patients down miles
of hospital hallways--a different kind of mystery,
but just as slow, like skin knitting back together,
or learning how to step again.

I feel red ants boiling up through soil,
ticks and chiggers creeping toward the warm vertices
behind my knees, beneath sweaty layers and elastic.
I've got to go to class, but she has all morning
and is unperturbed by grass poking up her skirt,
sweat trickling from beneath her thick unbound hair

as she talks to her plants, my crouching friend
cooing to her invisibly growing melons.

Long Distance

The only entertainment in Statesville
is static or bible verses on the radio
and counting down the miles until mountains
rise ahead, still only a violet stripe.

Climbing to Asheville, trucks go 45
on my right. I try not to look
beneath their painted bodies to see
chains swinging lazily at eye level
as we snake side-by-side
between mountain and concrete median.
There's been another rock slide,
tractor trailers are hauling off debris.

Gassing up before Knoxville traffic,
I always stop at the town where cows
are sprinkled on the tops of the hills,
gazing down sides so steep
they could clear the fence
just by falling past it.
The key to the bathroom
hangs from a piece of driftwood,
whorls smooth and soft.

Soon the clock goes back an hour.

The billboards for Belle Meade Bourbon
start 100 miles from Nashville,
the road quiet and dark again,
but there's jazz and rockabilly on the radio,
and sometimes soft mist that smells
like rhododendron undergrowth,
hiding the passing cars.

And you, ninety minutes away,
asleep but waiting.

Hands

I crack my knuckles, each finger
its own mechanism of sound.

The index crunches
if folded under, the middle
pops when pushed up
against its knobby joint.

I pull the pinky
until the joint disengages,
then further until
the faintest click echoes
like a pin tumbler lock
shifting into position.

You take my hand to stop
that incessant cracking
the cleaning of fingernails
and dirtied nail beds.
I feel the web of skin
between your thumb and index,
the warm elastic ridges of wrinkles
rolling across my fingertips

and I remember the socks
mom put on my hands
to stop me from scratching
chicken pox sores, how
I screamed for hours
from the itching
until I fell asleep,
my fingers finally still.

To Build a Fire

I began with brittle twigs
thinner than fingers,
and a pile of postcards,
ticket stubs and love letters
written on notebook paper.
I crumpled and tore
handwritten notes
swirling with ballpoint pen
shoving the fluttering remains
into pockets in the dusty pile
of dead wood.

With a lighter I ignited
long strips of paper
and dropped them into
the nest where they crackled
and spit sullenly
before fading into smoke.

I lit more tapers,
blew hard on the smoking ashes,
fed in yellowed wood
and finally the blaze was going.
The sunset postcard
burned from the outside in,
each edge a horizon lit
with hungry orange flame
leaving night, -- curled
and sooty in its wake,
and the words I wanted gone,
the ones our hands wrote
to each other.

Night Terrors

I slapped her face with an open palm
in a surge of half-wakened adrenaline,
left her lips white and slackened,
tears pricking the corners of her eyes.

Afterwards, the docile hand lay
on the pillow between us:
a sleeping animal, numb and quiet.
She covered her cheek and cried,

fingers shaking against hot skin
while I stammered apologies,
turned toward her like a stunted tree
grown against the wind.

My hand was asleep, limp and tingling,
dreaming of the colliding flesh,
the snap and stinging surge,
the catharsis of unspoken words.

White Noise

The motion sensor floodlight above my window stripes the bedroom every time a cat pads across the drive, or a car hums round the corner. My phone charges next to me on the mattress, speakers murmuring rain or ocean to drown out creaking footsteps, laughter, or groaning beds through thin walls. I turn up the white noise when my roommate fights with his girlfriend over the phone, nodding off when the shouting finally quiets to mumbles mixed with rushing waves. I wake later to the echo of a screamed word, the floor a map of shadows, the incandescent eye staring through the blinds.

THREE

Inscription

In an illustrated anthology
the fierce green eye
of *tiger tiger burning bright*
has lost its crazed and fiendish glow,
Frost's two dark roads diverging
look much the same,
and the crumbling
of Ozymandias's pedestal
seems much less desolate.

On the title page,
my mother's elegant scrawl:
to a poetry loving daughter,
from a poetry loving mother,
her A's and O's
not meeting, sticking up
like cartoon waves
between consonants.

Archaeologists study inscriptions
to date the surrounding remains,
photographing, sketching
and taking rubbings of the scribbles
that last after all else is gone.

Herniated Disc

Did she dream under the anesthesia?
A waking vision as scalpels slid through
the sun-damaged skin of her belly,
a grand performance of
Los caballitos blancos,
the Lipizzaner stallions stirring,
obscured behind heavy curtains
of nerves strummed like harps
by gloved fingers sliding apart to reveal
the stage of bone to the audience:
faces behind surgical masks.

The Performance of the Airs begins as I
wait at school, as my father drinks
two-quarter coffee in the waiting room,
as my mother dreams above a surgical table.

Lights are maneuvered to illuminate
the little white horses, rows of vertebrae
rearing in unison, *Levade*:
a controlled elevation.

Mother's Day

A fist of dough opening into fingers.
Grated zest brightening a lawn
of sugar. A sprinkling of cranberries
and the reach-and-turn of the rolling pin,
dusty with flour. A stick of butter
warms on the counter, waiting beside
the sweating teapot while they bake,
backs cracked gold and swollen.

I pile the small scones onto a plate
to bring upstairs, cooked soft, the way
she likes them, their crumbling bodies
crushed into dust we pick over later.

Savor

For breakfast we order eggs Benedict, which dad eats
in two big bites, yolk dribbling into his beard
while I disassemble each layer to reconstruct
neat piles of equal proportion on my fork.

He mixes Velveeta into canned tomato soup
for lunch, waiting impatiently for me to tire
with my salad, built from separate piles of ingredients,
to shake the remainder into his empty bowl.

I twirl spaghetti bolognese on my fork that night.
If we were wild dogs, you would die first of starvation,
he says, cutting his pasta into short pieces
to scoop up with a spoon. A meatball topples from it;

beneath the table, our two dachshunds race
to claim it, growling, never happier than when
licking the splattered red sauce from the floor,
returning hours later to sniff the sticky trail.

Ovation

My father, brother and I have the same clap, palms and long digits matched to create the percussive chamber, a rushing snap of air deeper and louder than the whispering patter of polite appreciators. We can clap and clap with no pain, an efficient union and reunion of flesh. Our hands are made the same--long bent knobby fingers, green veins a nurse could easily puncture, the same convexes, the same concaves. When there's a standing ovation, we applaud with elbows swinging wide, half-clutched jackets falling to the floor, rumpled clothing unattended to. At first the palms smart, flushing as blood flows to capillaries, but then they fade to numbness, our echoes the only record of their meeting.

The Word

The first time I said *shit*
was at a dinner party
at our house, my parents
hosting old college friends.
Six and I was quiet at first,
but when the table laughed
I became more bold
Shit, I said, and *shit* again.
Every time, my mother
squeezed my hand
under the table, our code
for *stop that right now*,
laughing tightly, until finally
she spoke my full name.
In the upstairs bathroom,
the orange liquid hand soap
tasted bad, but didn't froth
in my mouth, didn't
make it feel any cleaner.

My mother quizzes me now,
what does she want to hear?
Yes, *it tasted bad*, I admit,
but I never packed to run away.
It's true, though, I conclude,
I didn't curse for years
after you scrubbed out my mouth.
I wish she'd respond, *no shit*.

Topsoil

My parents are leaving
the house in the countryside,
which makes everyone
uneasy. Mom says *we'll always
have a room for you*
in the car after the realtor leaves,
and takes my hand, colder than usual.

Sometimes we'd watch TV
in her bedroom when the pain
was bad, again: she'd wrap
her fingers round my wrist,
mouthing *so delicate*,
or sandwich it between her palms,
rubbing briskly to warm flesh.

It's dark. Her hand covers mine
like she would bury a seed
in fertilizer and topsoil:
carefully, pressing, but already
imagining the future spring
when I'll erupt from the soil,
careless and bright.

Pocket Angel

Left behind: a chest of tinker toys
and purple woolen cloak
from midwest winters,
satin-lined pockets hollowed out
by my parent's hands.

And in the left, a pewter angel
the size and weight of a thumbnail,
its grooved wings and edges
softened from handling, ever ready
to be warmed in the palm.

It will wait after we wave and leave
the house, just a cold bright glint
in the musty pocket,
a curiosity to anyone else
but my mother and me.

Cross Country Skis

They hide behind the woolen cloak,
another relic of Chicago winters
and Seasonal Affective Disorder
in the already crowded closet
of my parent's former lives.

The two extra-long skis toppled out
last year during the freak ice storm
when dad was searching for
the bucket to refill the toilets.
Their lacquer wore off years ago:
the wood underneath shed
blue splinters all over the foyer floor.

We found the old fleece-lined ski boots
beneath the porch, savored by mice.
The road was white and empty
until it met the iron-gray sky,
the air silent and heavy except for
the *swish swish* of my skis
and dad's crunching stride. He waited

at the top of the hill while I slid down,
picking up speed, hoping the mute blankness
would never melt and I would never
reach the bottom, the intersection slashed
with tire ruts, slush-filled and black.

To the Future Owners

The driveway gravel is ground
into a chalky gray path.
The horses won't mind walking
in wheel ruts where the dust
is smoothest. The end of your road
turns into woods, oak trees
ringed with hairy poison oak
ending at four hillocks cross-hatched
with fields of corn.

Over the hill is the cow pasture.
Don't ride your horse near
the livestock feeder: that may
tempt them into a slow
stampede, jumbled black
and white bodies throwing up clods
of wet earth that will spook
your mount into the corn,
trampling thick green stalks
swaying taller than you both,
cool and dew-hung with spiderwebs
that will veil your helmet visor.

You might get bucked off,
lose your breath on red clay,
find three puffball mushrooms
bigger than your face: they may
make you sick if you slice
the meaty flesh and fry them in butter
but only if you eat too fast,
standing over the scrubbed gas range,
too hungry to sit down at the table.

Smith

Mr. Smith built concrete cabins
on the Chesapeake coast
and a wooden clapboard at the edge
of a square mile of soy fields
for himself to live in.

The clapboard burned
and he trucked in a mobile home,
now grown through with weeds,
flimsy foundation crumbling
into the sandy soil.

Then when the family grew,
a white three-story farm house
rose along the margin
of brackish Snug Haven harbor,
nestled between crabapples and black alder.

The road to the deserted house
was part of a three mile loop of fescue
and jumping crickets,
ending at our Whelk-Home
squatting on a slowly eroding bluff,
a third of a century to go
on the hundred-year lease.

My brother and cousins and I
explored the Smith houses
poking beneath the rusty furniture
for old coins or clues until a creak
or skitter frightened us back
through the swinging door.

In the backyard choked in reeds
is a small cemetery, gravestones

continued, no stanza break

quietly sinking into the marsh,

chiselings fading beneath
layers of lichen and moss,
each etched with *Smith*.

Hygge

A Danish word for the pleasure
of everyday things, it's pronounced with
the delicate breathiness of *oeuvre*
combined with the solid G of hug.

I learned this the autumn after you returned,
our books spread across
the sticky tabletop. Outside,
it might have been raining or overcast,

but it was bright in the shared room,
and there was work to be done:
you'd stolen the novel I was reading
and I needed to catch up.

*

When I visited you in Copenhagen we walked back
to the flat through the salty wind of a thunderstorm,

our jeans dripping down the stairwell,
cooked red curry and drank strong black coffee.

The alcohol was cheaper there, so we bought
Merlot to deglaze tomato sauce, sipping

rum and coke, a new habit. There was only
one fork but sharing was easier, with nowhere to go.

*

In winter we're too busy flipping
through day planners seeing when the next break is
to notice the sausages have burned:

continued, stanza break

the fire alarm goes off, but the windows
are painted shut, and while you rush around
flapping the dish towel, I remember how you'd sit

on the sill in Copenhagen, watching neighbors
clip tulips, four stray cats sunning on the bench,
a man smoking on the porch across the way.

*

It's Spring: we climb out your window
onto the roof to feel the early morning sun,
and watch the neighbor's dogs
sprint through the mulch. I braid your hair,

the long slippery strands of premature silver
mixed in with light brown like mine.

After I'm done we steal a few minutes longer,
Hygge unspoken in the warm air between us.

Pen Name

I unstick cedar-infused pages
covered in grandma's looping script,
fading ink the color of weak tea.
In her journals from Argentina,
she wrote about Ramon,
a grad student housemate,
who would raise spirits
from old dish rags soaked in blood.

~

She could sense the other side,
a trait which runs in the family.
She signed her work Samantha K.,
a signature constructed from Sam,
Anne and Katherine, her three children.
Born so soon after her death,
I was given her pen name,
large hands and rust eyes.

~

Did she write the way my mother does,
bold cursive strokes linking letters into words
and words into sentences
smudged elegantly in green
or purple ink? Did she sign
Samantha like I do, A's constricted
into folds, ends barely meeting
in the haste of a triple syllable signature?

Whelk-home

I.

During the lowest tide, the sandbar walks
south to Cape Charles, a shallow path:
conch and mussel shells
skirted by crabs running sideways,
burying themselves in the shadows
of trenches on either side.
Grandma Gretchen found whelk shells
lining the front walk
to what our sign calls “Whelk-home.”

II.

Inside the crab pot, red
bodies have stilled, ready
for dinner. Dusk-drunk
mosquitoes buzz against the screen.
The wind has died, and the fan rotates
slowly, wafting seaweed and Old Bay,
butter and the crab’s last-meal chicken necks
down the table to where my mother
sits, beside me.

III.

Crayon drawings of sailboats and sunsets
have faded on the walls
and every year or so the cracks
in the ceiling start leaking dust
again. Growing up here, mom
tells me, meant staying through the winter.
The kitchen in the back of the house, a long
breathless slit between concrete walls,
was the only place to get warm,
out of reach of the wind.
Her mother would cook
grouper, mussels, flounder, tuna,
clam chowder made with steel-gray

continued, no stanza break

bay water, salty and hot,
while mom froze on the porch,
avoiding the smell of seafood.

IV.

Walking on the sandbar earlier today
I found a whelk shell
with my foot, the crown of coils
poking half-buried into my heel,
its blushing empty
except for oily dribbles
of black sand, the kind
full of tungsten and thorium.
If you rub it onto jellyfish stings
it soothes the pain.
After washing out the chamber
I held it to my ear, like always,
to hear the whispering echoes
of blood beating.

V.

Now we sit at the kitchen table,
onion tears on our cheeks,
hands sticky with garlic skins.
The fan oscillates, weary blades
edged with dust, blowing the smell
of crab down the generations,
a strong briny memory.

VI.

The dogs are lying at our feet,
asleep on the cool concrete.
Some have died at Whelk-home,
but their breaths fill the space,
lying back-to-back with the living.
Grandma Gretchen is here too.
looking over my shoulder towards
the sandbar, until she gazes at me.
“She didn’t even try one bite?”

continued, stanza break

VII.

My parents spread her ashes
out there before I was born,
between warm shallow bay
and ocean, coastline and channel,
where the tide rises and falls,
she and the whelk shells
always waiting just above
the surface, or just below it,
for us to come again.

