

*For my mother
and for all the women who raised me*

Table of Contents

Eulogy for the Schoolyard Robin

Tunnel Vision

Alta

She's Praying in the Shower

Alice, at Dinner on the Night of My Uncle's Funeral

Holidays

48 Hours in LA

For the Opossum, on its Side in the Middle of the Road

For the Cartoonist by the Pool

A Woman Still Living in the Same Town Where She Learned to Tie Her Shoes

Good Food

Autobiographia Literaria

Purity Myth

When Queers Tailgate the Monster Truck Rally

How Moments Pass Without Measure

That November

Overdue

How You Heal

Prophecy

Let It Be Like You

Mother's Mother

Haircut

The Pinhook

Mayapples

Origin Story, Age 6

John 21

Before Waking

Queer,

To Be Neither, To Be Both, To Be Whole

I Sing the Block Electric

Law-abiding

Reckoning

Eulogy for the Schoolyard Robin

The fallen knob that
whacked the Plexiglas wall

above the cubbies,
above the coat hooks

with the primary-colored
sweaters. The towering

body in four-inch heels
leading singled-filed

five-year-olds. This
reverence more expert

than that of Friday morning
service. The curiosity

growing, blown up
in balloons. Each head

reeling. Each set of plaid-
shrouded knees locked

straight, the wings:
lying in the red dirt.

Splayed.

Rest now,

mourn now. For all
the dead mounds, for

beaks and fingertips
pointed skyward, and

for the waiting. For children,
still and waiting.

Tunnel Vision

We are blind on all sides,
except straight ahead

where there are mountains,
and Kentucky mountains

move for nobody. I learned
there is so much prayer

in these mountains. There
are some people who get born

out of boulders,
whose chiseled noses

are actually stone, draped
in cloth. You see it?

Pores, thread count.
Each child's lost tooth,

a rockslide. Bloody noses,
sap dripping from pine.

The tunnel mouths given
life from dynamite.

We are blind on all sides,
except straight back.

Alta

Driving, I'm a sunflower at night,
neck bending toward the last bit of shine:

pinpricks in the great black veil.
The peaking through. You

taught celestial navigation to sailors
and servicemen while missiles

were dropping on kids in older countries,
when lucky Americans hid in bomb shelters.

When the unlucky joined up. You
in burnt green, dark curls falling softly

at your shoulders, neck curved back,
up late like this. You'd just look and know

where you were. Where you stood.

She's Praying in the Shower

for the world not
to end by the hands of men
splitting atoms

that may or may not form
a black hole
that will swallow Earth just

to prove they could. The sharp
pellets scald her skin and
the steam is trying

to get her clean again.
She can never seem to get
clean. She keeps confessing

to false sins —begs for mercy
for things she's never done.

Alice, at Dinner on the Night of My Uncle's Funeral

he was probably five
or six maybe

one day Freddy
came up the street

Jackson Avenue
walking real slow

I thought something
had happened

maybe he soiled himself
he got over

to me at the driveway
and said

How'd you get that color?
and I said I told him

*Your mama left me
in the oven too long*

and every day
after that when he came home

he'd hide
in those bushes

the ones
on the side of the house

for thirty
minutes or so

so I wouldn't come get him
turn him brown too

Holidays

The man with the ax
in his hands, the ax blade
slipping through trunk,
catching the stump,

the man yanking
back up. The man
not crying. The children
ringing on the stoop,

the man answering,
scowling at monsters
and fairies. The child,
a skeleton shaking

in her sneakers, the
man giving handfuls
of stale lollypops
and lifesavers because

this night glorifies
death, and the dead
are not happy.
His cigarettes burning

through an esophagus,
cigarettes singeing holes
in his thinking back,
the mother making

candied apples. The mother
weeping in the kitchen.
The mother leaving
—snuffed out,

the candle in the hollowed
gourd grinning and
burning, the man
smoking from holes

in his head, swinging
an ax through
the shaved smile
and the rot.

48 Hours in LA

a pick-pocket of a place

transplant palm trees do not
equal paradise
cannot save you

sandpaper wearing everyone thin

money's being sucked
from bodies
with bendy straws

City of Mosquito Mouths

point me to Venice Beach
and I bike there
single-gear—

toddlers shrieking at the shoreline

I dive in the roads like veins
splay
run themselves

tired here

I'm an old car running out of gas
in five o'clock traffic
sitting in my own exhaust

there's a dead opossum

on the other side of the metal door
I could reach out
and touch it

but I'll look ahead and won't

For the Opossum, on its Side in the Middle of the Road

Was it a quick strike or a loud
slow easing out—and what

made you do it? You've lived
a whole life knowing

your own earnest pace, watching
as those monstrous things

move much faster. What sat
on the other side, so worth

the risk? Or was it just a bit
of fleeting confidence that came

quickly from the rush of some
momentarily required affection?

Maybe, the joy you found inside
a perfectly ripened blackberry.

For the Cartoonist by the Pool

I swear, you're
the only one
who's ever made

I'm from Minneapolis
sound sexy. You dive into
chemical blue,

submerge a near-naked scalp
flanked by a tattoo behind
your right earlobe,

the inked outline
of a molar. You
wear a new tank top

that binds
your breasts
to your ribs:

your first time swimming in
five years. I think you are beautiful
and we are buoyant in

here. You say your disciplined chest
helps you stay afloat
like a rudder guiding your limb-sway

then, a kaleidoscope:
shards of the stained-glass windows
we shattered with rocks.

A Woman Still Living in the Same Town Where She Learned to Tie Her Shoes

will think of the staircase
looking down toward the dining room's
bay window and the backyard green
falling in bright and strong, painting
the room alive and swaying the wallpaper
of vines and grapes, every time
she thinks right or left:
her fourth grade neighbor showing her the
foot near the bannister
is right and the one by the cat is left,
so she put on the corresponding shoe
and tied the laces thinking left left left
right right right until the mother
called them downstairs to where
the pollen poured in through the screen
on the back porch, and the father's ash trays
were not yet there—before the bourbon
and both of the grandfathers' funerals,
before the woman learned some grandfathers
are not worth remembering fondly,
and others are worth the sorrow of each day's
waking-up as she ties her laces,
worth remembering how he hobbled
because of that bullet from Italy,
the year he never talked about—
worth remembering the irrelevance
of right and left in war, when shoes
were cobbled the same shape for both feet,
when you weren't turned down unless
you were a woman or your soles were flat.

Good Food

Dad's idea of good food—
anything cloaked in gravy.
Sausage and biscuits for breakfast
with country ham soaked in salt,

bacon that's more fat than pig.
If it doesn't leave oil on the plate,
how do you know it's cooked? Good
food is the kind good folks eat—

buttered rolls, roasted corn cobs, chicken
swimming in Campbell's cream
of mushroom, baked potatoes sliced open
to let the steam rise, which fogs his lenses.

His ribs, ripped apart with weather-torn
hands that have splintered
painting houses and pulling weeds
in other people's yards. Cuts

pop up on his legs. He says
he's sprung a leak, holes in skin like
the holes in every one of his shirts. Somehow,
he's still beating, still breaking bread,

still saying bread in an accent thick
as the poor man's soup in his bowl.
Good bread good meat good God let's eat:
the only prayer he's ever meant.

Autobiographia Literaria

title borrowed from Frank O'Hara

When I was a child
I made a video camera
out of a tissue box
and toilet paper roll.

I built doll houses
from index cards
and spoke honestly
to only my cats.

If my mother asked
what I'd done, I told her
I took a trip to the moon
in an elevator. Now

here I sit, shaking
like an old blender,
anxious as a fallen leaf
handed a pen.

Purity Myth

I was scared. No matter
which blue you paint my life.

I'm not saying I wasn't that
Holy Virgin,

but abstraction gets lost
in translation. Heavy hair

made my brow and neck
sweat in temple. My belly

growing, those feet kicking
my spine. What if

you could always get saved—
get born again?

I wanted a God
who forgave. I thought,

I could mother that God.
I knew I wasn't wrong. Lone

vessel. What would my mother
say? Then, an Angel.

send up kinder prayers

our god's good news:
safety in numbers

I Am Thinking About How Moments Pass Without Measure

or memory
attached no
matter how long

your gaze fixes
on the rambling
space heater, on

the poster-strewn
walls of your
tiny bedroom, on

the pine in the
yard with old
tupperware at

the shaded roots,
at the chicken wire
fence coming up

to meet the deer,
to confuse them.
No matter the mazes

or the strength
of the vines or the
inactivity of that

gaudy phone
beside you
on the mattress—

There is no guarantee
she's thinking
of you like this.

—no guarantee
she finds you
in her own

meditations or
stuck in branches,
in her loud

hunger at dawn.
You can never
be certain

these moments
will shift any
breeze beyond

the shallow
breaths that fog
the window.

That November

Do you know the number
of times I've seen cop cars
run reds? You ran reds too

until your roommate got hit
by a car on her bike,

skull slapped by pavement,
pebbles embedded in her soft
jaw, just a few scattered bruises.

I sometimes still believe in miracles.
I sometimes still deny we shared a bed.

Do you know the number of times
I woke up in the dizzying dark
knowing from my stomach churn

that you were lying
on the wrong mattress?

Overdue

The quiet is hard enough
without the fines.

The red-sleeved graphic novel
on your desk, the one you finished

a month ago, before you stopped
speaking to me. Please,

return it to the slot.
I am not your mother,

but if you don't speak to me soon,
I'll call her, tell her

you haven't left your house
in three weeks.

Alison Bechdel won
the MacArthur Genius Grant.

I didn't. I don't
have the disposable income

to hemorrhage a quarter a day
to the town I've always lived in.

So when I see you at the co-op
I will hold out my cupped hands and

wait for your quarters. *Are You
My Mother?* I'll wait for you to pour

the heaviness into my palms,
and I promise not to touch yours.

How You Heal

White flecks beneath scales
inch up three of your nail beds,
gradual and careful. A vitamin

deficiency
from the week you barely ate:
tiny, snowflake reminders

now, nearing the end. Fingertips
and clippings in a can,
the finish line.

Prophecy

I think the nuns will swim in the back pond
like cod. I wonder how I will grow up to do this
different from my parents. How will I not take
a husband's name? Hard to say whether

my mother will still pay attention in her pew.
She will sit there. Still. Will visit, her affection
wrapped in tin foil. The fridge will be full of her

and we will take her out when we can't do it
by ourselves anymore; sit on the patio, bowls
balancing between our holy thighs; flick bits
of jambalaya to the occasional flustered fish.

Let It Be Like You

an erasure, for and from Grace Harvey

I.

Yesterday, the way a match
sheep and the sea. in the middle

I could stretch my arms

touching farm and

You never see that never

together

one peripheral

swoop

imagine bleating mammals washed

in brine a shipwreck

lost like echoing

like

moon. The moment

the closest I've come to losing

I've arrived.

II.

a place

saved me. Maybe

home. Not to minimize

myself, or anyone

bullshit.

Maybe the

word

fear

has become

sacred

never thought I'd forget

all the people

how to miss people

to think

about you

That's nice, right?

I'm sorry

I just get

in the habit of

tiptoeing.

III.

letters

stay safe.

“ kisses mingle souls.”

I believe that

that's not

Catholic

I felt guilty

I you

strange

people

didn't know how to be alone

IV.

a pact

And

locking

Learning how

to be

anyone

how to

smother

bond

shackle

has made me

less

pretty

what I

mean is

a panic

something insane

V.

feeling alive

was demanding

toxic

now,

I think of you often

feel inclined to

apologize

I'm better at being okay

to phone

to chain smoke

drive 90 mph until

I

yell

VI.

bodies

brains

content to

sit

watch

eat yogurt

read books

hands

on

faces like

children

7 p.m.

dark, but

lighter than afternoon

that

doesn't deserve

a gold star

But

the pavement is so warm

you

okay? To be

honest

I

think about you too

little.

I'm

stronger these days

lifting weights

being vulnerable

VII.

measure.

Impulsive

doesn't count—

self-destruction

lacks

lacks the control

I guess

everything

was courage

being gentle

courage.

your tongue

you

you

more brave

I have so much left

to learn

slowly

sloppily

rambling

VIII.

Giovanni's Room

chamomile tea

you

next to me

our elbows

bumped

IX.

notecards

misspelled words

blessed

efforts to combat

words

Erykah Badu

. Fuck

you,

small-talk

jokes

real conversations

letters

into the thick of it.

folklore

fresh honey

full of fireflies

we are not proud

but

embrace

a new

swelling

X.

I'm

sort of like

the

Holy Spirit

Mother of

I'm going to quit

I've

been

more vocal about

the questions

in September

heavy

I

enter into

communion

How lucky are we

to see begonias

a zone of

preparation for

ripening

Mother's Mother

I just have to tell you, this morning I saw
the most

beautiful sunrise.

It was all pink and purple
with some red

like at sunset

and I've never seen

a thing

like that—not in the morning.

I almost got you all up

to show you the colors

in the window

but I didn't want to wake you.

Haircut

scissor shock
your jagged shag

snipped straight
he didn't listen

did he?
that's bobbed

you wanted pixie
boy-cut short

shorter than this
keep going please

all done
scissors in the sink

wait please—
please keep going

The Pinhook

“Carpe Noctem”

the giant pandas
drinking PBRs
and spewing
rainbows
from painted
mouths. she
lifts both fists
up by her jaw,
the bob and
weave weight-
shifting, her
dance, the
punches, the
bobbed hair

with both sides
shaved clean
off, tucked
under a gold
blonde wig,
the black-and-
silver stringed
bikini top
glistening
above her bare
stomach, her
back: serpentine
smooth and
strong as tire

rubber. two
women, two
tongues shoved
in the other’s
black mouth
block the back
steel door.
peeling stickers
plastered and
‘QUEERS REVOLT’
with the anarchy
circled ‘A’
sharpied on
a beat up

bathroom stall
inside the red
room, no
geometric man
or woman
marking the
outer door, no
mirrors above
the sinks. bits of
stray shine
flicker off
pulsating bodies
below the cheap
plastic disco

ball dangling
from thick
beams. a soup
of sweat. caldron,
potent oils and
the stirring. the
floral smells of
tired bodies,
of bodies who
don't buy the
bullshit. one
getting finger
fucked in the
alley outside

—and don't forget
this is still the
goddamn South,
the booze, the
fake dicks, trans
girl geeks, the
hairy armpit
freak show. the
kill cops and fuck
your friends, the
kick and scream,
the kiss here and
now, the boots, each
fagbulldykewhore,

each eaten cunt,
the love love *love*
and *say it so loud*—
the coming home.

Mayapples

Those popping warm green
mushroom-shaped things
like little umbrellas: adorable,
we call them, and you

rush toward the grove of
a hundred or so arranged
in a cluster at the base
of a white pine. They look

prehistoric and you say they
are quite old, evolutionarily:
drooping leaves that seem fit
for some dinosaur to trample,

flat and by accident. You say
the leaves are used to induce
vomiting, not knowing I
am afraid of vomit and quickly

fixate on the thought. Later,
I look it up: the Latin name
means “foot leaf like a shield”
and not only do they rupture

stomach lining, but the stems
can also be made into drugs
that attack testicular and lung
cancers, as well as brain

tumors and infancy leukemia.
These plants are so potent
some tribes even consumed
them as a common method

of committing suicide. But
perhaps most interestingly,
in late summer, toxic fruits
resembling limes start

sprouting and hang heavy
from the stems, and by August,
most begin to turn a deep yellow
with wrinkled skin—finally

ripened and sweet. When the
ends get cut off and each seed,
picked out: the ripe fleshy innards
are safe—delicious—to eat.

Origin Story, Age Six

My parents went nowhere
together if they could help it.

Once, I sat for an hour,
confused in the ballet studio.

Both thought the other had come
to claim me. Me in scuffed slippers.

Me crying. Mom saying I'm sorry.
Dad saying not his fault.

Two sinking ships.
My two forest fires.

The same week I learned
what dying meant. That there

isn't anything. Heaven, maybe.
But no bodies dancing. I counted

everything, like animals
for the ark. Place settings for

the table. The spots on a beetle.
One Two. Three Four.

Counted each porch step.
Tapped the door knob.

Five Six. Seven Eight.
Stray pills by mom's bed.

Boat paintings on the walls.
The breaths in a minute.

John 21

elders whisper hymns from
our cabin way up
the river bank. we sit on rocks.

watch the rushing
past our small legs,
our small
bodies, hold tight
to fishing poles.
we cast out: shiver and sing
about jesus
doing the same thing: fishing for followers,
the body of christ,
bodies to servesicker bodies,

to serve fish to the people,
to multiply loaves. (semantics
lost in childhood games)

we fish for trout. then wailing downstream
someone caught one. fishbody.
the arm of the eight-year-old neighbor boy

hooked through, eyes bulging.

the preacher uncle pokes
the hook back through, sprouts up, skewers skin
from the inside, cuts off
the caught tip. the glory of god catching

another one —the awe. this, here:
how you clean a fish.

Before Waking

You wind up alone in a huge greenhouse
the size of a basketball court at least

and underneath the off-white half cylinder
diffusing the sun's unrelenting stare

there was a field—an entire grove of purple
windflowers, dead nettle flourishing

and growing up around you. Tiny buds
popping open on lush burnt green stems,

sweet-looking like they might burst with
ravenous fervor. You sit somewhere

in the middle, have been there awhile
baring witness while out there

is a world rushing—people waiting for you
to show up, a concert across town that begins

in a few minutes, and your bike propped
against a maple. The tricky crux:

you have to read all of these flowers
one by one, like a book. This is a long story

that blossomed just for you, and what if
you missed it? You worry you won't finish

before the world calls you back out: before
you have to go tell what you have seen.

Queer,

you're in

the gumdrops my grandfather used to eat:

spicy and sugared. You're

haircuts

on front porches, accidentally

clipping an ear

because we are not good at this

and we do it anyway,

laugh as blood
drips from the scissors

into the splintered boards. You're

being stared at on the subway

for five stops straight. You're

hoping it's just staring.

You're uneven,

and you're sweaty.

Performance art barging into eight grade, abstinence-only

sex-ed class. You're

how to gut

a pomegranate. You smell

like Chinatown fish markets,

like lychee sold in crates

at the corner stand,

hot

and bursting through the skin. You,

thousands of us marching,

you,

after millions more never named your name

aloud. You're

never corporate?

Always friendly.

An alley cat singing praises

to the train track rat. You love
my mother's summer dresses,
my grandmother's asylum stint,
my father's rage. You are
the two of us
caring for an old farmhouse,
letting the paint peel with the steam that rises
from a pot of risotto, one day, simmering
on the stove.

**To Be Neither,
To Be Both,
To Be Whole**

“Me,” imagining a visual mnemonic
for this new language when KC said
“they” was the pronoun to use.
Pictured a pair of them swaying
to unmatched choreography. One
slow, winding their rippling limbs
organically as the wind might do
if it could be bodied. The other
whipping more quickly around
the twin image, leading some fight,
correct in each strike, long strides,
tall spine. Maybe
there were more. When I fucked up,
the first’s face reddened and flooded.
The other kicked the wall
of my skull. I saw it then: these two beings
there, in me, emerging from the nooks
with pipe bombs and pastels,
others with blankets for the tired among them
within the big black void shouting
“We’ve been here the whole time!”
Here: without spotlight or spectacle,
huddling in the dim warmth of a dream
brought out now—the applause.

I Sing the Block Electric

title inspired by Walt Whitman, but mostly Andrea Gibson

damp mattresses lean

 against oak mailbox posts
 sweltering grass blades

gospel hymns blow out from a brick box

 dark within—the whole wet organ
 the dew covered shingles

peeling and rising like the cavesongs rise

 out the windows that frame the old
 tree where the flood light hangs

from its orange cord

 slung over a branch, pendulum back and
 forth—gray breezes billow the black

street and the sleeping don't wake

 for any of it

Law-abiding

When a cop pulls you by the hair to the black street
kiss him hard on the lips.

When a cop slices your cheek open with a swift blow
hold his hand tight like your mother's.

When a cop takes the phone from your back pocket
say the photos look real nice—real strong.

When a cop tells you you did this to yourself
thank him for taking the time to say something.

When a cop returns your phone with no photos left
draw a picture for him on your forearm.

When a cop asks why you blocked the road
tell him his skin glows beautiful and gold.

When you overhear a man deciding whether
to become a cop, wrap him up in your thickest

knit blankets and in that voice usually reserved
for a sick lover—tell him he's never been enough.

Reckoning

The splash just off the riverbank, where something had been rustling leaves between the diving tree roots anchored in the red mud that drops off straight down from the path and boulders. From which the ground sprouts thorn-baring stems where finches perch and weave nests, by the empty clamshells strewn in the brown muck. The nearly still water creeps North. Bubbles wind through the brackishness, like the sloppy air a baby blows into bathwater, when parents hold their breath and hope. Or later, like the silly bulges on the surface of a glass of milk, through the bottom of a bended straw, then risen, show up one by one, a line swiveling just out of reach of the algae-draped shoreline. A pause, briefly, then a black end bobs up, leads the rest with streaked skin—fur like a clean oil, slicked back, front legs, a snout, two pooling marbles, deep and wanting: the whole mass paddles. A river parts to reveal the tiny otter—born into this world—this brand new thing, gliding upstream.