

Cake

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*...under the ribs. What lasted is what the soul ate.  
The way a child knows the world by putting it  
part by part into his mouth.*  
—Jack Gilbert, *The Great Fires*

# I.

*We were holy places there.  
And we would keep  
repeating that.*  
—Ralph Angel, “Kapparah”

## Topography

Of the heart, I read pericardium: cardamom.

Epithelial: epithet, & call you honey. Squamous: squall.

Back home, we hollow the prairie, tongue open that sore too raw

to touch, to tend. We live in mountains, now, so curve,

contour, ridge, & pass. Those too ripe peaches tore

open; juice gone crystal in the drawer of our fridge. When your heart  
takes ill, when the lining tenders & swells, I will come again

from behind & knead, clavicle-down, through tendons in your chest.

When we fucked in the cemetery, I hoped those sleeping into dust

beneath us felt the way you make me: knees & elbows

in the dirt, palms pocked with pleasure & bark.

How, like opening doors of water, I'm reminded suddenly,

of my own heart's propensity for sorrow, seeing all that arches

with surrender, what sparrow turned into the wind.

## Ode

Here's to smoking in the sun of this late August morning.

To the sorrow that mounts my boy's heart,  
though he's no longer a boy. It's easier to keep  
on believing our eternal youth.

To the firefighter who saved that fledgling, laid her in the heat  
on his dash. To the ash that falls from this cigarette

& to ash forever falling somewhere.

To Mariela, Syrian refugee, who knows she will never  
go home, again, plays Mendelssohn on violin over the phone  
to her mother, not leaving Aleppo.

To Mendelssohn, a Jew who changed his name to mask origin.  
& here's to going home, again,

to the Sweet Autumn that today begins its blossom  
along the fence, to the tired hands that tend it, my father's.  
For one who has always been fond of broken things, wing  
or otherwise, that splay out before us, opportunity is endless.  
Often, we went to the back roads to see  
the snakes' great migration from swamp to hill,

& often, we missed it entirely, saw only paths in the dust.

Because to watch for a thing to happen is to expect, & to expect:  
to be let down. But here's to doing it gently. Give  
us four o'clocks, day lilies, O give us moonflowers. See, that crescent  
will be here tonight, behind clouds or not. To silence:  
the songs we're not singing, though our fingers are thumbing

at strings. To this song. Now, I'll go lay beside him, hear  
his heart murmur, which I've come to know as normal  
in listening for a difference in the pattern. The one truth of the body  
we cannot quiet. One day, a forest will grow, again, from the heart,  
& all that will be buried there, our own sound.

Girl-love

*“For whither thou goest, I will go;  
and where thou lodgest, I will lodge”  
The Book of Ruth*

Ruth stood, near perfect, amid the rotting stalks,  
red-lipped & gathering stolen corn. Boaz gazed, unaware  
for whom she gleaned the crops. Naomi urged

by the field’s edge: *Find him asleep on the threshing floor.  
Uncover his feet, & the land will be ours.*  
There is a hunger only woman can yield: sacrifice

of some bushel bruised, a making good of harvest seconds.  
Sweet-brine & heady, I know my girlfriends by their scents  
& if they haven’t washed in days

a smell like dampened sugar, illusion of forgotten oil: hair  
separating as though wet. Growing pains when muscle would  
stretch the bone, our bodies racing out beneath us

—too fast. The ache’s still here, always, though  
now we manage on our own. I obsess over peaches,  
learn to taste them in my sleep.

When Julia had tissue from her breast removed,  
I held her gentle as the wound leaked through  
her cotton bra: all night rain

on the room’s small window.  
The lump on her chest was only fat:  
that blessed & benign—what we prayed for, still

we pray for in the moon. Nights she would pull me close to her,  
the spoon of us on her twin bed. Her breasts  
into my back, my back into her belly, & salt

sleeping in our bodies quiet: we were saving up  
oceans, steadying tide for yet to come.

Aubade, Sarabande

Late morning light through  
the blinds stripes the floor,  
the wall, our bodies in white gold strips,

especially me, my side of the bed  
closer to the window, where beams  
bend at the curve of my breasts.

I wake & ask you to hold them a while  
like the last of summer's fruit, peaches  
already vanished. I remember the feel

of their fuzz on my lips, like the fine hair  
on a girl's cheek or on your inner arm  
where sunless skin is white like salt.

Last night's startle was the blue  
lights of a patrol car from the highway that shone  
right through the window—the wall of pines

that borders our building & the road not much  
of a wall. I dreamed last night of another man,  
imagined him hardening in my hands.

I tell you of this dream, my loneliness,  
& we make of this sorrowing desire a dance  
in the living room, leave space between

us for silence, which echoes, somehow,  
motets we've sung together: Victoria, Palestrina,  
sacral sounds—the overtones you'd wring

with your high tenor voice. & as you spin  
& tilt your head back I almost forget how sad  
you are, the waves of salt that wash over

your body nightly, leave you dried  
& drying, shored. I remember watching you swim  
your first ocean, the Mediterranean Sea

off the Costa Brava in Spain, cold March water  
soaking your underwear, tide rushing your strong  
legs, tingeing their black hairs with brine



& pulling you, alkalescent, back—tethering  
you even then to an impossible distance,  
to some unreachable moon.

## Bell's Theorem

As her back lowers to the bed,  
a shadow unsews from her skin  
walks to the doorway & fingers  
the lightswitch off so she doesn't have to  
watch her body pretend this is love.

How she does it: white pills in her upturned palm  
the bell-headed lily of the valley. These days  
she eats them like candy,  
her favorite nonpareils, tiny snow-covered  
hills she presses to her tongue.

He's working hard, sweat catching in his thick, dark hair.  
She's trying, but as clouds try  
to hover until bursting's done,  
then emptied of water, dissolve.

Defenestration: Leaning  
*after Bohumil Hrabal, 1914-1997*

I.

Wind whips & the thicket  
    responds, girls tighten

their scarves as they walk the streets of Prague  
    below your hospital window:

it sometimes reminds you of Christmas,  
    reflecting the intersection's red & green lights.

I rest my cheek against  
    the double-hung glass

on the first floor of this house.  
    Yours is the fifth.

Last winter, it was so cold  
    I often woke to frost-etched lace

on the inner pane, despite plastic wrap  
    insulation & my prayers:

what wouldn't I have given  
    for just a little sun on my hands,

my neck? Did I offer up my first-born  
    baby, the earliest berries of summer

or the last? Spring came & I forgot  
    my sacrifice, my lips washed in warm juice.

Is it harder to approach a window  
    when you can see your own face?

II.

The boys back home  
    seed fields of sunflowers. At first,

I thought the act for beauty's sake  
    alone, but the boys look down

the barrels of their guns, take aim  
into the small feathered breasts of doves

lock & pull. Pigeons flock outside  
your high window.

I never thought them dirty  
during visits to the city,

their necks iridescent like oil pooled on asphalt.  
Never mind the taste of game.

What will you feed them  
from your meal tray?

Where to keep crusts of bread  
so the nurses won't see?

III.

Isn't it something the way we come  
to an answer?

I am trapped & suddenly  
on the page: a window.

Today, the ground is covered  
with thick white snow.

It looks like cream, milk brimming—  
I want to dive into it, feel its weight

in my mouth, my upturned palms, how the courtyard  
statue catches it, too, lifting exaltations.

It caught in the hats of soldiers, a flake melting  
on the tip of a bayonet. You were just a boy

when they came in rows, symmetrical  
& sharp. Just a boy

watching lines work across the pavement,  
across the countryside. The rock doves are

hungry. They swoop & coo. They remember  
the bread, your whistling. I see the soldiers, too,

violence embedded in the breasts  
of men I love; like buck shot it spreads

its small red pearls, piercing muscle,  
filling thick brow & jawline.

I've seen it in hands raised to my sisters, to me.  
I've caught a bloody fist

like the dove my father rescued  
from the cat's mouth. Nothing to do,

but lay it in the row of dead sunflowers, heavy  
heads as though bowed in prayer, the bird

bleeding slowly from its side.  
I cannot save them.

IV.

Go to the window. Rest  
your forehead on the glass,

look down. Extend your arms,  
knuckles clenching leftover bran.

Lean harder—you're almost to them,  
spiny, oil-shocked feathers, mouths

opening. A small rectangle of your back exposed  
where the hospital gown ties loosely,

your skin holds the February chill like stone.  
Give your weight to the ledge; I'll do mine.

Take

In the low hills, my mother  
performs Reiki on the hives,  
palms open soft meditation: *Bees come  
back. Wax moths stay gone.*

She got into poison ivy once, kneeling  
to weed at the foot of those small white boxes,  
didn't name it until her skin was covered in bruises,  
systemic. All she was trying to cut away  
found in her a second wind, new field for growth.

These days I write to wrap a thing in praise:  
to tongue the autumnal dogwood berries  
that cluster at the center of the bracts,  
turn them round with my teeth until bitterness  
is sweet. Offer them up to you then, saying  
*Here, taste*—what ache has left me wanting.

## Gathering Wild Persimmons

As girls, my sister & I used the plywood top of my father's archery target  
as counter space. Twigs for pestle, bark for mortar: we ground the fruits of the yard.

The sour & woody taste of crabapple; small disappointment of wild cherry  
that only bore hard undesirable fruits we left mostly for the birds;

slight peach tree the groundhog ravaged when under-ripe.  
In autumn, encircled by baring silver maples & oaks,

the persimmon tree swelled her pale orange fruit like sweet, fat rain drops  
& let them go onto the ground or into the hands of my father,

who popped them into his mouth like candy, as he still does all things wild & edible.  
I can see him now, eating a soil-covered turnip from his winter garden like an apple,

or offering me blackberries in summer, which I eat unwashed, too, & barefoot.  
He taught me, always, that the small, spotted fruit that comes up from the root

of the garden or falls from trees we didn't plant is a gift—to watch it ripen  
in the sunlight of our shared space, bend to the same strong winds as us, come

off the vine or branches when ready. We gathered persimmons on our knees.  
Before the deer, in rut, had the chance to nose them off the ground,

we brought them in palmfuls to the target's tabletop, its underbelly stuffed with straw,  
which we plucked & used as instrument. We peeled back the flesh, sucked & sorted

the meat, for science. It was for science, too, a lover once told me, that he traced  
my ribs & named their scaffolding, me vaulted like a cathedral; that he pressed

into my hip sockets with big thumbs to see if I'd come undone—for science.  
The tenderest fruit we found under canopy of loosened leaves, sometimes skin

bruised, near translucent, & buggy. But even when it was full in tact  
all it took was a fingernail's gentle tear to expose the inner flesh.

I peel the skin back from my cuticles, now, like I did persimmons, then.  
They bleed & split at the corners, where the nail-bed begins its half-moon.

All it takes is a mouth & crush to get to the juice that floods  
the hearts of things. Some days, that memory recants my body:

to believe in the sweetness of my own insides,  
dropping to my knees, gathering wild persimmons.

## Distance

So now the cold has come again  
to our small Midwestern farmtown,  
wrapping it up in the threat of snow,

adding new sorrow to the sound  
of trains that make their way, whistling  
through the long, thin night.

I try to find new things to say,  
but come back to bare sycamores  
dressed in hoarfrost sewn so delicately

like lace on white-barked branches—I worry  
it will tear in the breeze of my walk,  
swift & purposeful, moving only

from building to building, season  
to season, it seems some days.  
Last year, I told God if only I could survive

the winter, I'd give up anything.  
But now another December's come & I  
can't remember the sacrifice I named:

a cut of the year's first daffodils  
gathered from neighbor's yards  
or the first bowl of blueberries in June,

rimmed with purple juice. Maybe  
I said I'd offer up the soft, dewy flesh  
of my hands, made new by humidity,

freed from chafing air.  
Did I say I'd leave it at the base  
of the sugar maple behind

our old house? I can't remember all  
promises I've made in prayer—  
desperate lips at the end of a cigarette

smoked in the basement for fear of frostbite.  
For fear of tangling power-lines,  
the next-door neighbors cut that maple



down, though it made good shadows  
on the driveway, gave good shade.  
When the wind blew against the walls

of our little room in the Northwest corner  
of that house, it was almost like  
it came right through, & though

we toiled to keep it out, with curtains & blankets  
& sealed cellophane, some mornings  
we woke to frost rimming the inner pane,

grown overnight like weeds at the mouth of a pond.  
My lover lets me press my feet against the backs  
of his calves—he sighs as I settle them into

his warm skin—then relaxes back into a heavy sleep.  
I want to believe that there will always be  
another body to relieve mine from the cold.

I know how winter changes physics:  
I've seen a pot of boiling water flung  
into open air, molecules made crystalline

pop then send icelets falling, like the sparked rain  
of fireworks that willow down the sky.  
But winter logic is the only logic

we have in winter. I've watched & know  
I'll watch again the bright sun spreading  
yellow light like butter over the snow,

while still, our side of the earth is no warmer:  
the snow un-melted, the source of light shining  
from billions of miles & years away.

## On Wintered Honey

My mama's hands, ungloved for precision, flush pink  
in early January wind, while on her knees she packs the hives

with hay & some dark dressing to call & keep the heat.  
The bees are boarded in for long months

by the blackberry bush & the rose bush planted in death  
for the dog my family couldn't name, who came when called.

How my eyes draw in to the boxes, light among dried & dormant sweet grass.  
Inside their cream apiary, bees encircle & shiver to warm, drinking muted amber.

When we first found the mutt, my sister & I were playing on a big pile of coal,  
which stuck black & shimmering to the red meat of his paw. He limped

as he climbed up to us through shifting cinder.  
What a thing, memory. The dog never cared for roses

yet persists in the dream of buds. This is what makes love  
impossible to leave. All these capped hexagonals saved to eat.

## February

Yesterday was warm & the air reeked of spring,  
the bamboo a sickening lime-shade of green, flowers nearly  
budded & burst open before me in their yellows. But today,  
you have left & the icy prairie wind toward which you go has come  
east in your wake to lick my face a rose, where once you lay  
your palm. The dead red oak is still dead, though its bark looked brighter  
in the sun. It's going to come down soon, by will of landlord or will of wind.  
For now, reeds of bamboo bend & sway, lending their form to motion.  
The tall oak tree stands—is bare, is proud, though its long & many-ringed life  
is over. I dreamt the moon fell from the sky, the stars turned off constellations  
at a time, my beauty-seeking mind unable to stop seeking beauty. All dream-long  
I tried to learn why, then understood they went out with a long, slow hiss  
like a damp blanket over fire, like my love for you. I looked up, again,  
& there they were—every one lit, white hot still dying so far away.

Girl-love

When Kate miscarried before the scheduled termination,  
the wash was first blood, then beer.

We sat around her table drawing women: rounded  
bellies, full breasts. Kate drew her baby color caught

in a gray web, said *I'm sorry no one wanted you; how you deserve  
to be wanted*. Said then, without saying, *Come back*.

We don't talk, some days, about what it is to be born  
with a room in our bodies, instead take up that empty

for each other, whisper *Give it to me, love—give it all to me*.  
All a woman's eggs are formed when she is a fetus,

so too we once lived in our grandmothers,  
witnessed the birth of our mothers as cells.

We used to joke what it would be like  
for a kid to come to that room too early—

the smell of weed, cigarette smoke,  
empty bottles of whiskey, a dim buzzing light.

All we know of the color red,  
it never leaves us.

# II.

from *The Merope Poems*

*. . . Tugging the world to fruit.*  
—Sylvia Plath, “Stings”

About Merope:

*In Greek mythology, while there are various interpretations of her story, Merope is one of the Pleiades, seven sisters. Merope married Sisyphus, the wise-fool who spited the gods and was punished with the task of rolling a boulder up a mountain in the underworld for eternity. Merope was born a goddess and traded her immortality when she wed Sisyphus. So ashamed of her marriage, it is said that when Zeus cast the Pleiades into the heavens, Merope turned her face, so she appears the dimmest star in the constellation, if visible at all. She is also known as the bee-eater nymph.*

## Portions

The man on the street tells M. she is  
a goddess: beautiful, tall creature.

Her mother tells her to *watch out for sugar*.

*Sometimes*, she says, *take everything*  
*you want to eat & cut it in half*.

Once, a man told her if she went outside in the rain,  
she'd melt. Her mother makes fondant cakes

for the bees in late winter: candy that looks like the small round  
cream of peppermint patties. M. recalls *all the bees eat is sugar*.  
When they begin to forage in June, they land on her thighs  
where her jean shorts cut off & her mother says it's because  
they think she's a flower. She imagines a thick peony: her tongue  
one petaled fold. If a bee lands there, she'll swallow.

Sisyphus' sheets aren't made of silk

To be mouth-stung, swelled shut  
with fury—I have tried loving less.  
I only wanted him once, but could not  
be sated. At times I don't care  
so long as his tongue remains  
to un-hive me. Sometimes  
it's easier to get there, my sister says,  
if he can't see your face. I pull  
the navy top sheet to cover my eyes,  
ball the cotton-jersey, overwashed & pilled  
as though with snow, with small stars, into my mouth  
& bite down— then, like I'm swallowing  
the sky, I swallow the sky.



I didn't know about the boulder.

I didn't know about the boulder.  
Back then, all I knew

were the dark brown planets of his eyes,  
irises emerging like shined pebbles,

like the barely-seen silhouettes of rocks  
at the bottom of a shallow lake.

When I was a teenager, I jumped  
from a forty-foot cliff into a drought-plagued river.

When I broke the water, I bent my knees  
& crouched fast to the bottom where

the pads of my feet found black sheaths  
of slate, then launched up to the surface.

Breathless & throbbing adrenaline  
I re-scaled the bluff & leapt again.

*Baby*

In the movies, when a girl pierces another girl's ears, she holds a lemon  
behind the lobes then drives a hot, clean needle through—steel into sun-rind.

At 21, I pierced my upper left ear, thought to chandelier a feature  
my older sisters scorned: *wolf-ears*. How with their big girl hands

they'd fold the cartilage in, pin-tuck the soft flesh like a quilt they'd mark  
but not stitch: me undone, for years. Then laughing, remind me how I almost killed

our mother—swelled her body until her calves split like a crack of pink sky mid-storm,  
like melon left in heat; how I came a month too soon & they had to carve me

from her in the hospital, where she nearly bled me out—bleeding out, too,  
mother of many already-girls—for parasitic me with my father's eyes.

I put lemon in everything: scrub of sugar, honey, & oil I grind into my thighs  
& pestled white chamomile blossom that's strained into tea. The wound

of the piercing never properly healed so each night for years I awoke  
from the pain of the silver stud pressed against my pillow until enough—I tore it out.

Merope, Stomach Aching

My sister tells me grounded  
bees pepper the asphalt driveway  
back home like yellow scattered seed.  
They breathe, but cannot fly,  
having gorged themselves—bellies leaden  
with gold they'll burn slowly inside  
until flight is possible, again, take off.

My mother tells another story:  
that their queen died, & all who were left  
clung to the bottom of the hive.  
She thinks my father gutted it too soon,  
this one—three years in the making.  
In anticipation, they drank & drank.  
*So they were frightened, I ask, of hunger?*

After he drinks

*“Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain,  
in itself forms a world.” -Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”*

Empty bottles of vodka & bourbon rattle  
against each other in the bag I walk to the dumpster.

Is glass a stone, blown clear? Mineral sanded  
into translucence? Each night as he takes his shift

at the foot of the mountain, I imagine  
his wide-fingernails, so recently clean & inside me,

begin to cake with clay—half-moons clotting with clouds  
of soot. Sometimes, before he leaves for work,

we smoke in the bedroom: asses clinging  
to the edge of the mattress, chests yearning

toward the open window where we mouth grey billows  
into the wet spring air, where fumes from the amber candles

I’ve lit escape. All night, I sleep with the armpits of his dirty  
undershirt to my nose. All night goes on forever.

# III.

*If all the lamps in the house were turned out  
you could dress this wound  
by what shines from it.  
—Anne Carson,  
The Beauty of the Husband*

Re: Tulips

*"Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds."*  
— Sylvia Plath, "Tulips"

The cheapest bouquet  
in the storefront's damp window:  
petals lapsing inward— sepulchral.

Within a week, they begin their journey  
arching away from pistillary obelisk.

Was it this part of the honeysuckle  
I took in my mouth as a girl  
tugging the stigma out gently

like threads of silk?  
I dropped to my knees  
before the vines,

all for a bead of nectar.

\* \* \*

I've been watching the tulips shed  
their sepals. A slow & anxious motion  
like a girl peeling off each gelled nail of her manicure

in soft red shells; they fall  
to the counter, the floor  
empty boats, rocking.

Those that remain in the vase  
yearn further, curl— flower head,  
stalk, & husk

like the drying legs  
of a dead insect, chandeliered.

Draining of moisture  
their color goes mute.

\* \* \*

O my body, quiver-lipped & logical:  
the color of blood is deeper under skin,

brightens like a bell when it meets  
the air. I dream of giving

to the surface like that:  
a sting, a kiss, a quiet cut.

Defenestration: Jezebel

I.

Think of the man you love,  
    how you wanted to make him,

got close. Honey in a glass  
    jar on the sill, light caught there.

Remember when children  
    thought the moth a bird, cornered

in the bathroom of the public swimming pool?  
    They poked at it with sticks

till you carried it to the grass, velvet  
    dusting your fingertips.

Jars of water from the river mouth  
    bloom algae,

greening above the kitchen sink.  
    Dream in austerities, woman:

a week without salt:  
    no tears or kisses. As a girl

you used your wrists for practice.  
    Think of all the sweet fruit

your mother put it on: melon  
    & slices of oranges,

how she hid  
    her third pregnancy,

suspecting another girl.  
    It took her years to get out.

II.

He asks to photograph  
    your bare chest, worried

you'll go. So you ready, heavy head  
    & dab perfume



behind your ears. As a girl,  
    you believed the miners,  
  
soot blushing their cheeks,  
    had been searching for diamonds—this  
  
when you still believed a beautiful thing  
    was to be unearthed that way, when you forgot  
  
the thick clouds of ash as soon as they broke, rejoiced  
    finding pyrite in the creek bed.

III.

He's curled in the closet, now,  
    the skirts of your dresses a canopy,  
  
dotted & laced. His head's split open where  
    he used a candlestick as a weapon  
  
against himself to bar the door.  
    The linen shirt you pressed  
  
to his forehead, ivory damask stripes  
    bloodied, drying to brown.  
  
You'll take the window from the third floor,  
    fall through wet winter air  
  
to the sound of strings of metal beads  
    tied to branches suspended  
  
from an oak tree in wind:  
    more dull than bells, but not  
  
silent. How can there ever be love?  
    You'll choose the mouths of the dogs  
  
over a life like this.

## Defenestration: Enshrouded

All day, the January sun throbs the damp sky like a bulb  
wrapped in gauze, dimmed a watt or two.  
From my balcony, I watch a small boy wade  
the snow, as through a frozen sea—think not of shards, here,

but of cold foam, of what comes to the surface. Let it be  
soft for his small boy thighs that mark its wake.  
Above him, the sky's gradient of blue & purple.  
Let me be brave & say it could be the color of miracles:

slow brightness mid-storm, luminous even at night, when the tree branches  
thrust shadow capillaries onto the snow—the suggestion of blood  
& blood in shadow means blood in light.  
I'm trying to put the blood back in the body.

I can't unsee its summoning, but take comfort in the wound  
of light on the earth, flicker of tree-veins pulsing in the wind  
on the wet white blanket thickly bandaged with reams of linen  
saying life just dormant, life just needs a little rest.

& in Stafford County, a 911 dispatcher guides a father through his wife's childbirth.  
The blizzard's obscuring everything, drifts erasing roads.  
The dispatcher, Roy, unaccustomed to the possibility of joy on the other line  
like this, to the promise of pain. While she labors, the fire & rescue crews throw sirens

of red light onto the cream hills of Northern Virginia, which the locals call *Nova*.  
I think of what's to be seen in the word & let myself see it—beyond trembling hands virginal  
to this phase of life; *Nova*, beneath words I don't know the outcomes to  
like cataclysmic explosion, what feels defined: the sudden brightening of a star.

Precipitate, Cure  
*for Lot's wife*

I want the boulevard salt-crusted:  
dogwood buds not yet sprung

into pink blossom  
crystallized; everyone too thirsty.

Shut the town down.  
Let traffic lights glimmer thickly

through the glaze.  
& those marinating meat for dinner

set the dish on the porch, then pull it back in, roast it.  
Lutefisk, as well, vats of almonds

& caramel: leave them to the rain.  
See me making useful my grief?

If I go outside my eyelashes  
stutter with white flecks.

I am with you, wife of Lot,  
not even worthy of a name.

The angels are burning  
your city. The women you milled grain with

over stone—up in smoke.  
The plain's soot-sodden, now. & the scent

of burnt hair & cedar fills you.  
Store lemons in your palms for pickling.

Better to become the plain.  
Feel the fat pads of your feet start to callus. Calcify.

Tarsals & ankle-bone spur as the change sets up  
inside of you— already vast & calling

like the brine-laden sea.  
The Midwest is its own kind of desert.

I know the emptiness

of sun-scorched fields in summer  
turned penniless & tawny by drought,  
but filled with sodium-bloated feasts:

pans of yellow potatoes, catfish caked  
& fried, still tasting of mud,

ears of salt-rolled sweet corn.  
If you are bad for taking one last

look at the land where you coaxed milk  
from sheep & goat, fed husband

& daughters your own breasts—  
then let my body, too, gum up

& streams of sweat harden.  
Let the great man make mineral of me

for mourning sin, for wanting what I had.

In Genesis

*35 times Elohim. Seven times the sky.*

i.

As a girl during sacraments, I wanted to bathe  
in the chrism oil, its name comes from  
the latin root for cream. After being anointed  
I'd wipe my forehead onto a paper towel,  
then smell the cloth for weeks: drag  
on its sweetness, hold it to my face  
like a talisman. I don't know what  
the oil is made of: some balsam,  
pressed olive, myrrh?

ii.

I'm hungry. But I don't know  
if it's a god I want  
to fill me or a man,  
which makes me ashamed.  
Mary was filled with God—still, she wept;  
brimming with both Divine & human  
maybe she wept hardest. Seven times *water*.  
Seven the sorrows of her heart.  
I look over my home's small interior forest,  
sprouting beer bottles & half-empty coffee mugs.  
I am unfit even for myself, it seems. I could be  
re-baptized, I think, in the Jordan River  
like Christ himself & yet—

iii.

In Chicago last summer Kate unfurled a tight hand  
& in her palm little white pills, like the bell-headed  
lily of the valley. Ecstasy is honest in its presentation.  
*This* is what you want – try getting it. We got close, ran down  
the deserted street during a big fat downpour. Soaked through to our panties,  
we fell asleep holding each other in Kate's bed, our hair a tangle of wet braids.

In this new place, my God, how I want  
to be touched. Maybe that's why I held on so long  
just to keep him in my bed, to press the cold pads  
of my feet to the backs of his calves.  
Seven times *crawls*. Seven times *good*.

Borne

Shingles have made of my mother a blackberry bush.  
Add thorn, as she throbs from the inside out.

I pour her coke on ice. Keep her drugged on codeine  
& ketamine. Keep the cats from kneading the wet, open sores

that twist around her low-back like a vine. It's June  
& hot so I peel myself from clothes

at the end of each day, unpetaling the cups of my bra.  
When my sister decided not to nurse, she molded cabbage leaves

to her sore nipples that leaked as the milk came still  
to her body a faucet at her newborn son's cries.

My friend who miscarried, I see her now fisting bouquets  
of orange zinnias to the market in soft pre-dawn light.

Her young, blonde husband's garden: mostly onions.  
Her duty is to the flowers, as if she is still bent at the middle

from cramping, the expulsion. Sorrow  
is implicit. Blood, implicit. I don't know why

I am thinking of my mother as pregnant with virus.  
How to distinguish between vesicle & berry—in skin

or hunger? She nearly bled out after my birth, when they cut  
me from her, four hours of hemorrhage & clot.

My new lover tells me he's not sure if he ever  
wants a baby, that I deserve to know now.

My eggs sleep or shed. As I age, my nipples become more  
& more like coins blooming from my chest.

Not unbeautiful

*“His hands keep turning into  
birds, and his hands keep flying away  
from him.”*

-- Richard Siken, “Unfinished Duet”

Later, you punched the siding of our first apartment building,

the skin of your knuckles  
gathered like ocean foam,

whitened for circulation—until red filled in  
like the sunset behind cirrus clouds.

In my memory the blood takes hours  
to arrive. The route over broken skin;

not unlike a blossom. Even now, I swim

the river of your back,  
though the banks are brambled.

I am trying to give you wings. Your fist

in my lap like a variegated peony. Me  
washing with warm water & blue soap

the confused duckling of your hand. In my shut mouth  
my tongue a dumb fish.

## Getting There

My sister, the nurse, fingers tiny swollen nodes in her neck,  
as we sit across from each other at the coffee shop.  
They've been there for months. She knows they mean  
nothing, just the body's quick start, wrongful  
naming of infection where there's none.

Once, I watched her pet the horses  
on Allen Road, the first time I thought her bottom lip  
looked like a caterpillar, soft cylindered, had climbed into it to sleep.  
I marveled, wanted to juice her like a nectarine.  
It was nothing so abject, just teenaged & pink, & she  
said, when I named her perfection, we have the same lips.

My ex-boyfriend used to jerk me around in the car,  
my body fastened into that constant, fail-safe light.  
I ride in cars, again, flashbacks subsiding. For now,  
only the normal steel layer of danger. What does the wound  
say but wound? I've been listening, ears wide & wax-ridden.

My father's hand is blistered between index & middle fingers.  
Tomorrow, he'll go to work, change out salt-water for salt-water  
in tropical fish aquariums at the pet store, opened skin flapping—awash  
& submerged. I'll wake at noon & eat honey on toast.  
My sister will care for an eleven-year-old boy, poison ivy pustules glistening  
jaw to toe. She'll say, we pumped him full of medicine he didn't think he needed.



Where are you now

so far from me? Across the ocean, even.  
In my mind, it's populated with hunks of ice,

sharp & sparkling. Inside my chest  
is a city. It looks kind of how our small city looked,

white Christmas lights strung year-round  
over the storefront awnings, across the street:  
netted low-hung stars. We coveted

those apartments, lucky windows  
the strands were fastened to.  
In my chest's city, you still work

at the bakery, still smell like yeast & bring home  
bags of cinnamon rolls at the end of the day.  
The glaze congeals & the lumps

of dough become a sweet singular mass,  
but we don't mind. I heat it up & we eat it  
with one fork & two glasses of very cold milk.

Let me have this:

we got some things right. Our bodies

in the smallest spaces. On a twin bed  
in your neighbor's cabin, abandoned for summer,  
which was pitch black at night. It was storming, I knew

there were spiders, found their webs in the shower  
but who could worry over spiders while

your arms worked  
above me & outside  
fell so much rain.

## Not looking for hope

Today in the deluge of rain dragged in  
from the coast, from the hurricane,  
I was waiting for the bus with a stranger  
& when the bus passed us,  
without even a glance from the driver  
to the shelter where we stood,  
the stranger & I started running  
to catch it at the next stop  
down the road & when I fell back  
with exhaustion in the pouring rain,  
raining harder, the stranger slowed  
to see if I was beside him  
& when he saw that I wasn't,  
he turned back, swooped his head  
through the thick air like a C,  
as if to say *we can make it*,  
& we did.

Trajectory of longing from Canada to Southern Illinois

Smoke blankets the Midwest, carried  
southward from wildfires in Saskatchewan.

In Iowa, people are advised not to exercise outdoors.  
I can't smell the smoke, here, just see gray waves

in the atmosphere, its particles scattering the light,  
so instead of the usual blue, longer red wavelengths are visible,

& rising, even the moon is blushed. Perhaps my lungs  
have gone gauzy with the damp June smog.

Perhaps the upper-level winds have gotten into my eyes.  
I spin the fat orb in my mouth,

picture you there instead, swelling.  
This is no blood moon, love,

or harvest. This is my desire projected  
just above the tree line, or the skyline in Chicago,

where you are & where I think you might see it, too,  
though pollution often mints your night

so it appears sometimes lavender,  
sometimes a color like milk added to orange oil.

How many ways do I have to say I want you?  
Here, if I wreath smoke around hives to bewilder the bees,

they'll let me have at the honey for a while.  
I pump the bellows, keep the flame.

# IV.

*I'm sorry for still loving you this way.  
... and yet, maybe I am not so sorry for still loving you  
this way.  
—Richard Jackson,  
Resonance*

Satsuma

You say you miss bringing sweet things to me  
from the grocery store,

where you worked long hours  
carrying fruit in your apron pockets, often

the cold-hardy Satsuma, weight of small mandarins  
bouncing at your groin while you walked the aisles.

You'd drive the long, pine-bordered road home at night  
that always surprised us with its darkness.

Tired & careless, you'd forget the citrus for days. By the time  
you remembered, the oranges had taken to mold, small worlds

shunned under grey-blue powder. I still have not mailed off  
your things: boxes of books, gloves, & health insurance forms. I pitch

objects I'm most attached to: the fraying belt you tightened  
at your hips, those sockets I loved to press my thumbs into

& watch you writhe. Some things I burn immediately: sheets,  
towels, silhouettes of your henleys in the give-away pile

that once opened the pale V of your chest. When I went back  
to the apartment for the first time after you left, among your dust

& articles, a rotting Satsuma in a blue ceramic bowl.  
I held it in my hand. I threw it into the forest.

Defenestration: These days of swallowing moon

I hear that it's snowing in my old hometown & I remember  
when I lived there—how pills were plentiful,  
    & the snow, too, as it fell in  
        luminescent mounds at the beginning of winter.

*Who could blame you, a friend says,  
for wanting to find a way out?*  
    & I think, only me & the guilt-bird,  
        maybe a sparrow because it sounds like a sorrow,

who sits on my shoulders when sometimes I still  
want to leave myself—not every day, but, today—  
    & I want to tell you what I mean, but only come so close:  
        maybe it's like wanting to sleep with my eyes open

because I think I only deserve so much rest. These days I fall  
asleep often with the round yellow lantern still lit above my bed;  
    I fall asleep sitting up & stay like that for hours,  
        as though even in dreams I might need to keep walking

these hundreds of miles I've been walking.  
When I get the urge to leave I feel  
    like I'm walking the miles backwards, moving slowly  
        out of frame, erasing myself, again.

These days the Sugar Maples are on fire,  
& who could tell me they aren't—who would I believe?  
    These days I think of him less & sometimes, only  
        when light comes through the red branches at the right time of day.

I say branches & hear bandages. I wrap my mouth  
around each hour like a prayer I can't stop praying— I don't  
    have any pills with which to break  
        out or go deeper inside, shrouded, so God give

me the courage to stay here  
on the blue, breathing planet of my body,  
    keep its spin, even while winter, even as  
        we're getting farther away from the sun.

This is the last time I will see you:

I return to our apartment, packing what I need for a couple more nights  
on a friend's air mattress, where you can't find me.

The scarf from my sister, navy with white bicycles on it,  
light wheels in the blue cotton  
stars I can wrap around my throat.

Maybe another sweater, I think; it's the beginning of February, so cold.  
You're asking me questions, am I coming home?

Just grab essentials, I tell myself, a couple pairs of underwear, all pink

that dumb blush. *Please don't tell them what I said*, you say,

& your eyes are filling with water mottled so dark I can hardly tell  
if you're even swimming behind them anymore, barely treading

the black ocean of your own sorrow that's choking you  
& you've all but disappeared.

I remember, suddenly, that there are knives in the kitchen, sleeping sharp  
in their little wooden block, a Christmas gift from my mother. I can almost see

your shadow rise from the chair to reach them.  
I forget the sweater. There are knives.

What you threw in your last fit so fast  
flying by my face lay where it came to rest,  
Vitamin D capsules that burst from the bottle: tiny golden spheres  
nest in the carpet like the hundred suns you've buried.

In the aftermath

The persistence of boxes  
of his shoes, a winter coat,  
grief's small empty vestments.

I don't know how they'll get back to him, if ever.  
I'm pretty sure, some days,

that everyone I love will leave me this way,  
in their dust or anger, leave me

with their heaviest, most boring books,  
& it won't be by accident or natural disaster,

but they will choose to walk away,  
to break the small, precious things first.



Defenestration: Crush

I used to take Prozac. Now I light the Happiness chakra candle,  
which is blue, which seems funny, because blue is a name we give to sorrow,

also funny, because blue is the bright, clear cradle of the sky  
that holds the sun. Patchouli, labdanum, frankincense.

It smells better than the Love candle; better than the Healing candle, too.  
Still, I think dark thoughts— that I'll probably die of smoke inhalation,

fallen asleep with the bullshit candle burning.  
I think of asphyxiation every time I light a candle,

bullshit or otherwise. I didn't always think about death this much,  
but now I'm certain each plane ride is my last:

I learn the name of the strangers I sit by on a flight, not because I'm friendly,  
but because I'd like to know the name of the person I'll die next to.

I observe the aerial view of cities at night— their streams of light chasm:  
webs of the distance-smalled electric flames of pilgrims

who go on bearing torches—lamps & streetlights, headlights— & I know  
they're not pilgrims, just people, but sometimes it's religion just to keep living.

Threats are sometimes worse, my friend says, because they're never  
realized & so, some days all day I'm dying

the way he said I would. *Would you like to spend your life with me?*  
I asked once & he said *I want to die with you.*

I don't care so much if my possessions melt down,  
come into ash— if the pink fish of my own lungs suffocate

in the alien air, but I don't want to hurt  
the immigrant families who live in the boxes

that surround mine. How we've all traveled to get here:  
the ocean a mouth & the mouth an ocean.

I worry about the boy in the apartment below mine.  
Last fall, from my window I watched him awe a cicada—watched, then,

another crush it & listened to silence in the space of *why*.

& I worry over another boy who smashed a glass bottle in the parking lot

then looked up & met my gaze, the only other person around

to hear the magnificent sound of someone

who only wanted to feel what it was like to break something,

not the shock of it broken.

*You Passed Out*

after pulling down the shower curtain,  
& the shower, too: metal spout, silver spine

now on the ledge, wrapped in plastic.  
Swan with a busted neck, crooked like you—

just a towel around your waist,  
curled on the floor, ankle-bones against the tile.

You got a raise yesterday after your year-end review.  
Your father left your mother a long time ago.

Does faith make us stupid? Is it like  
when you're drunk & it's your ghost

I'm kissing? Or you reaching out & naked—  
the dark hair in whorls around your nipples,

celestial patterns. Or like tearing down  
the stars, too, from their high bed;

not unlike you thought you needed  
to put out the big lights, & so did.

## Girlhood Strip Pits

So much of my girlhood an attempt to get close to boyhood. A doe runs across the yard, then stops in full, & we stare at each other. Her strong flanks, twitching ears like filling cups, her black eyes wells. She bounds into the wood where earlier I saw her twin fawns

playing in puddles where a strip pit once was. A strip pit can never be was, or once. It opens from underneath, tries to swallow our houses whole. This always makes the news with some shock, but my grandfathers, all black-lunged & sleeping in the dirt, would

shrug. Last winter, I went to visit the old farmhouse where my family once lived. I hadn't been back since the coal-company in Thompsonville mined under it, & the foundation fell eight feet. The company settled by demolition. I've no words for such unstructured

longing: blueprinting *here*, *rhubarb* & some feet away *cattle shed*, *clothesline*. The field untouched where my eager father mowed over a pair of fawns one August, thinking they'd have been grown by then, un-bedded down & flitting somewhere in the deep forest—

thinking it was safe. I come home from visiting my lover with a bruise on my arm & my mother asks *where did that come from?*<sup>2</sup> As a girl, I aimed my empty toward the sky. I learn now of chasms underfoot. Why did no one tell us, then, the soft grass was settling over

caverns. Shame? It rapes the land, a man once said to me, of strip-mining. Landscape strip-poker. You take off your hilltop, I'll do mine. You peel back your earliest layer of dirt, & I'll slice the foothill so open-mouthed beautiful you never even have the chance to miss it.

I don't know where to go so I go to the river

to cast my sorrow out. On the beach across from me  
winter gathers her things: menagerie of dried bramble,

bouquets of ghost flowers with ghost heads—  
silver once-blossoms fractaling like the skeletal arms

of stars that reach for nothing.  
On the bank where I stand, strung from the bare bark

of an arched oak branch: a swing, cobbled from what  
some kids could find in summer. Blue & white rope & a metal bar

it hangs now out of place, knotted, fraying:  
trapeze with no knuckles to grasp its slender shape,

no ass to sit atop & press into, spill over & around it—  
O grief thing, emptied of purpose.

& me, my love's not dead, but he's gone.  
I have no body to anoint: no big hands to balm,

torso to wrap in linen, nor any of the body below  
the torso. Let me speak with reverence here, not desire,

though I'm not sure of the difference—  
no body to see into the earth but my own.

Yesterday & hundreds of miles from here my hunter brother  
& his buddies emerged from their duck blind,

walked a few yards west on the shore  
& found a local girl, who'd been missing a week.

The police said she was pilled-up when she wandered  
into the cold night alone. Her cause of death: hypothermia.

I hope it was gentle when they unlimbed her from the weeds  
at the lip of the lake where she was curled, elbows & knees

tucked to hold onto the warmth at her center—  
her body a small blonde star closing in on itself.

## Small flags

Caught in the empty winter arms of trees by the river,  
bits of paper made bright against the barren sky:  
blue, yellow, & white receipts tatter in the wind

& grocery lists, notes left by the coffee pot this morning,  
yesterday morning, a hundred yesterday mornings ago, now,  
saying what? *Be home late, dinner in freezer,*

*shirt ironed & hung up.* How can I loose  
this yearning from my pockets, unbind you  
like a wax wrapper or napkin from my use?

Let me let the branch  
pierce your effigy—you corrupt everything  
I see. No tree innocent, even though they are beautiful;

even though it is not their fault.  
When the woman who walked the narrow path  
between the woods & the river got to the store

& discovered she'd dropped her list,  
did she stand in front of the many heads of lettuce,  
arugula, feathered celery stalks,

small green leaves of parsley  
that gave slightly when the false rain  
kicked on— did she feel

the cold wet on her hands  
as she reached for what  
she thought she could remember?

Failed Haibun, *Kojiro*

Darling, I am breaking the rules. It may mean little to you—but I've decided to try to love the cherry trees, again, to imagine that each time you made a fist you were balling up the tiny blossoms in gratitude. You are not a country; I understand this. But also I fail to understand this. We fell in love in old churches then, when I bent over in front of you every morning in the shower. Your hair grew long, *bishonen*: the strands of it thick smoke I wreathed into a tight bun, pulled into a braid that garlanded your neck: *beautiful boy*—you are not a tree. I betray the old masters; I cannot be in this form & not think of yours. *Mono no aware*. A year later & I still haven't made rice once—still dream of milk roses that bloomed to the surface when you poured water over the dusty grain. After you stirred, film coated your fingers off of which I would have eaten anything. The last time your mother went back to Japan she was six months pregnant with your older brother & for a week on expired visa, customs wouldn't let her board the plane back to the states, to your father. You never quite knew where you were, your name *second son*, straddling the sea. But you lived there inside of her long ago. Do we ever really leave? She told me once

*after the rain, little  
ghosts come. As now,  
after pink drops in Virginia.*

Cake

*For Jess*

Even after I got off the bus that had been hurling me forward into dusk,  
the minutes-away nightfall, where the exhaust was thick  
    & I didn't know where it was I was going—

Even under the weeping pine, that should have perfumed fresh autumn rain—

Even while my neighbors were settling down to eat their just-cooked dinners  
& there was surely the smell of garlic & baked chicken & soft, wet rice—

the air smelled like cake; the whole sky was sweet.

J., if I stand at the edge of my apartment's parking lot I can see mountains  
    persistent on the horizon,

& before them, almost every day, I see one of my neighbors, a very old man, sitting  
under a tree, wearing a hat I want to call a prayer cap  
    because I want everyone to be always praying.

Today, you told me you cried in the donut shop, & I said your tears might be  
like sprinkles, maybe too sugary for anyone to want to eat, but J., I meant rainbow

sprinkles over chocolate frosting & I smelled the sweetness so strongly tonight,  
like the yellow kind my mother makes for my sisters' birthdays.

& earlier, I saw young girls laughing in their boots & scarves, swaddled together,  
    laughing, & I knew they were keeping the candles in their bellies lit.

& I saw both of us, as little girls, emerge from the houses where sometimes  
we were treated like small-handed ghosts, child-bodies as vessels for adult sorrow—

our faces were moons even then, reflecting back what no one wanted  
    to see or know & so didn't.

But I know, now, our pure hearts weren't magnets for shadows;  
    it is *their* shame.

Today, the tall buildings prodded the clouds, the pines wept, everything  
tried to throw back in our faces what has been done to us, & hundreds

of miles away we each got on our buses to cry in the in-between-space,  
between then & now & where we do not know—J., I thought of you the whole time,



starting this morning as I watched from my open window the toddler who lives below me  
stumble out to the curb, then stop before she got to the street,  
this time, no hand on her shoulder  
but the air, almost as in offering, the air smelled like cake.

Notes:

**Defenestration: Hrabal, Leaning** was written with regards to Bohumil Hrabal, 1914-1997, who was a Czech writer who fell to his death while feeding pigeons outside his fifth story hospital window in Prague. He often wrote about defenestration, specifically characters falling from a window on the fifth floor.

**Defenestration: Enshrouded** is interested in the color theory known as “The Missing Shade of Blue” that was proposed by Scottish philosopher David Hume, 1711-1776, that suggests when presented a spectrum of a color, for instance blue, the human eye will see a shade, influenced by context. An excerpt of Hume’s work: “It is plain, that he will perceive a blank, where that shade is wanting, and will be sensible, that there is a greater distance in that place between the contiguous colours than in any other.”

**In Genesis** is loosely vamping on the significance of the number seven in the Hebrew bible.