

City of Imaginary Numbers

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Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps.

—*William Blake*

My God, this is a funny way to live. My god, how did this happen?

—*Jean Rhys*

## THE TIME I DIDN'T SPEND IN FRANCE

I was in Pennsylvania, walking  
across campus in the cold  
with you.

I'd prepared to go for months,  
keeping a journal *en français*,  
marking new *vocabulaire*  
in a small yellow notebook  
as I read Colette and Baudelaire,  
practicing those full-bodied  
sounds aloud until they rested  
like red wine on my tongue.

I spoke to you in French  
as we walked to and from  
the art studio, although  
you couldn't understand,  
and you learned to say,  
*en anglais, s'il vous plaît?*

Then, just before the planned  
departure, I found myself  
crying on your soft blue  
couch in grey light like smoke  
as outside faded to evening:

how could I go when I was so  
sick, losing my hair, memory, shape  
of my face, sense of my own  
voice as my echoes hollowed?

*Can you hear your body—*  
you said—*how it's trying*  
*to heal?* Then you held me  
in quiet, so I could listen.

We were so new, it was  
the first time I saw you  
seeing me, curled and dormant,  
the first time I heard the shifts  
in the ways we spoke.

The day I would have left,  
I said, *I would be boarding*

*my plane now.* You said,  
*I know.* It was early January,  
our boot soles crunched  
against new snow. Then you  
grabbed my mitten-hand  
and we entered the familiar  
warmth of the studio, blank  
space where whatever we  
imagined took shape.

I thought about all the strangers  
I would never meet in Aix-en-Provence,  
how I would miss the lavender fields,  
listening to French curve around  
fountains, markets, boys on bicycles.

But I knew you. And although  
Pennsylvania was mundane—shadows  
of silos, stretches of slush and mud—  
and I gave up taking French courses,  
and knew every street corner,

I had never understood  
the expanse of the world  
until that spring, how  
joy could stretch like empty  
canvas across the salt  
and wind of the oceans.

## CALIBRATION

I always loved dresses, but was not always  
sure about being a girl. Sometimes, playing  
with kindergarten friends, I was Jennifer,

sometimes I was Mark. Jennifer stayed mostly  
in the pretend kitchen over the stove burners.  
Mark was an artist, painted neon fish,

and kept fish, too, with bulging eyes  
in a glass bowl, and studied their scales  
under a microscope. That was biology.

\*

I drew in crayon with a boy  
named Ray. He said when he  
grew up he would be in the army.  
He drew tanks and bombs, so I  
drew tanks and bombs. He drew  
men with circle bodies, so I drew  
men with circle bodies, except  
I added skirts, scalloped edges.

\*

I wore dresses so often I thought  
“to get dressed” meant “to put on a dress.”

One morning my mother picked out  
jeans and a cobalt sweatshirt.

“I want to get dressed,” I said.  
“You are dressed,” she said.  
“No, *dressed*.”

She sent me to school. I writhed  
on the green carpet as Mrs. Lolly  
led us through the alphabet, then counting  
to twenty. I leaned toward my neighbor.

“I don’t know why I’m wearing these  
pants today. I wanted to wear—”

Mrs. Lolly had snuck behind me.



She stuck her finger into my shoulder blade  
like a wasp sting. “No talking.”

I burned so hot I felt steam hiss  
off my skin. I couldn't  
remember what came after eleven.

I would never break a rule again,  
I decided.  
I would be quiet.

\*

I had questions,  
    *Why do I cry when you cry?*  
    *What does it feel like to give birth?*  
but I did not know  
what “to question” meant.  
Whenever anyone said the word  
I imagined a building like the Taj Mahal,  
and flying overhead, a bird.

## AFTER A SOCCER GAME IN NEW JERSEY

He said he wanted to be  
together, but not *together*,  
if I knew what he meant.  
I didn't, but I said okay, since  
I liked the touch of his hand,  
its masculine angles, and  
holding it made my stomach  
flood heat. As he drove us  
home he tried to explain  
how to use a stick, but I didn't  
listen because I was watching  
his hand around the gearshift,  
muscles and knuckles moving  
in synch through first, then up  
to second, third, his sunned leg  
depressing the clutch. Back in  
New York, I asked him to stop  
at a bookshop I knew, and as  
we sat in his car in the parking lot  
it started storming, and he met  
my lips beneath the rearview mirror  
until he was in my seat, somehow,  
his hands pressing against my lower  
back, his tongue moving mine.  
I opened my eyes and saw people  
walking by in dripping jackets  
through the fog of the windshield.  
I said, *Stop, not here*. He said,  
*We could move to the backseat*.  
I was happy for the rain sounds,  
tapping heavy on the windows,  
and for him, although I wished  
he might be excited by something  
other than soccer, maybe wanted  
to hunt hardcover spines inside. *No*,  
I said, and he sighed in a moaning  
way, as though waiting were anguish,  
as though an organ would burst.  
It was the same moan later  
when I stopped his warm hands  
from unclasping my strapless bra  
after we parked in the brush  
down an empty side street. Then he  
pulled me tighter, it thundered closer,

we kissed harder, it was easier  
than I'd thought, like reading,  
one word at a time, words growing  
into a sentence, a paragraph, then  
fingers reaching to turn the page.

AT THE TWISTED BRANCH TEA BAZAAR IN DOWNTOWN CHARLOTTESVILLE

Jack & I leaf through the expansive  
menu, our eyes catching Ti Guan Yin—

the same tea our father used in his  
ceremonies, spooning the curled leaves

with a bamboo scoop into his hand-crafted  
red clay pot, absorbing more flavor

each time he brewed. We came to love  
its taste, *like baked grapefruits*, I say.

*Smokier, like incense*, Jack says. I think  
of winter afternoons in our cold New York

dining room, trees bare out the picture window,  
our thimble-cups burning between our fingers,

the four of us circled around the table, murmur  
of boiling water, bowl of oranges between us.

This Ti Guan Yin, the menu says, is “Monkey Picked.”  
*Does that mean monkeys approved this tea?* I ask.

*Nine out of ten monkeys choose Ti Guan Yin  
in blind taste tests?* Jack says, *No*, pointing

to the fine print. *Monkeys pick higher than humans,  
reaching* “the best leaves from the misty peaks.”

We order, then wonder if there are monkey  
labor laws, established days of rest, and how

sanitary little monkey hands could be. When  
we pour out the ceramic pot our tea is dark,

not the usual color of wildflower honey.  
Our server is sorry, she gave us *Golden Monkey*,

not *Monkey Picked*. Soon we have two pots  
of monkey-tea. *Golden Monkey* was our

mother’s favorite anyway, so we drink in  
her absence too, alternating between its rich,

full-bodied storms, and the mellow, roasted tones  
of our father's choice, until we get so caffeinated

we feel psychedelic, the walls shifting, steel drum  
beats echoing, our eyes quick, unfocused, and we

are unsure of our place in the Twisted Branch  
so we stumble down the steps and outside,

steadying our saturated bodies, blinking into  
daylight like newborns. I am thinking about

round things: teapots and bowls, small  
clouds of steam, Venn diagrams, globes,

how the world goes on without considering  
its speed, how even as we think we

move forward, we are one step closer  
to returning from wherever we came.

## SELF-PORTRAIT AT FOURTEEN

I saw the moon bleeding. It was going to die, I knew, but kept quiet. I could not save anything, I was so miniscule in the order of the universe. This was the ordinary: tiny vortexes of destruction gnawing whispers in the skin. The bus came, and I got on, and the bus pulled away, and I rode on, and when it stopped, I got off, and the bus drove away again. Then came the day I realized there was nothing I wanted. Not for body or marrow or thirst, not material, not ethereal, not warmth or touch. I tried to dig deeper, sifting through layers of void like shards of broken glass, and at the center of myself I found a stump of damp, rotten wood, and it crumbled into dirt, disintegrated in my raw hands. And the bus came, and I got on. And the bus pulled away, and I rode on.

## ARE YOU PREGNANT

*or is there any chance you are pregnant?*

The x-ray technician asks mechanically,  
already lifting the lead apron over my  
head. I get caught in his words,  
their unnerving monotone striking  
hard against these clinical white  
walls. I want to ask how much  
of a chance are we talking about,  
because isn't there always? And he said

*any chance, which is, by definition,*  
unexpected: we met by chance, we took  
a chance with the condom and a zygote  
formed. It was by chance I fell on all fours  
in gym class when I was fifteen and here  
I am years later, still getting wrist x-rays.  
*What are the chances?* We ask about

love, winning lotteries, plane crashes.  
The answer, like a newborn: small and real.  
I am trying to remember my math  
because I want to calculate this,  
since chance is just probabilities—  
rows of permutations like little  
gravestones for the might have beens.  
And this month, as it is with some,  
twenty-eight days has become twenty-nine,  
thirty, thirty-one, as my breasts swell,  
and my stomach bloats and I think  
well, this could go one of two ways.

I tell the technician *no*, and I think  
*you never know*, I think *of course not*,  
but *maybe*. After all, I've had dreams  
where I give birth in a white  
hospital room like this one,  
and I didn't know it was coming,  
and I never see the baby's face.

MARY SPEAKS WITH THE ANGEL GABRIEL

*Wake up, Mary,  
and don't be afraid.*

It's 3am, there's  
a strange angel in my room—  
of course I'm afraid.

*Rejoice! God has sent me.  
He is pleased you are a virgin.*

So I'm a virgin. I'm twelve  
and I make daisy chains  
in my spare time.

*You have been selected  
to receive holy conception!*

Wait. What?

*Congratulations, Mary—  
this is the womb's grand prize.*

Pregnancy is God's  
reward for abstinence?

*Paintings, feasts, Saint Cards,  
impossible standards—  
every girl will want to be you.*

Couldn't I be recognized  
for something not quite so passive—  
has God read any of my lyric poems?

*Listen, Mary,  
God's son is kind of a big deal.*

I don't have  
a choice in this, do I?

*In heaven  
we don't really believe  
in a woman's right to choose.*



Shit. Fine.  
I guess God can sow whatever  
He wants to reap.

*Could you say that  
with a little more gusto?  
This is for the record books.*

I am the handmaid  
of the Lord. Let it be done unto me  
according to your word.

## TWO MORMONS COME TO THE DOOR

and ask if I believe in God  
and I say *yes*  
for the first time in my life because

rain is turning the world to mud  
and they have such earnest faces,  
these Elders, freckled boys only

nineteen, stiff white collars  
peeking through hooded black  
rain cloaks, two grim reapers

coming to save me,  
foreheads stippled with sweat.  
I want so much

to please them. All morning I've been  
replaying yesterday's gynecology  
appointment, the doctor's

deadpan face. I've been staring  
at the desolate beige booklet,  
diagrams with thin black lines that slice

curved folds of skin, thrust  
labia apart: here's your opening,  
where you'll lather ointment, numb the pain.

*Can you describe how you see God?*  
one asks, smiling. I falter—  
this is not a simple *yes*—so easy to fall into—

but deserves something full-bodied,  
perfumed in faith. When it comes  
from nowhere it doesn't even feel like a lie:

*I see God everywhere*, I say—  
out in the soaking front yard, bare  
tree branches, candle flames, dahlias.

They nod. They *see Him, too*—we are sharing  
something on the cusp of holy, though  
I am careful to avoid masculine pronouns.

*And have you ever read the Book of Mormon?*  
they ask, but I want to keep expanding  
on their last question—

I see God in the urethra, vestibule,  
vulva—vessel of vulnerability—  
the ways we love the self and other selves.

I see a smudge of God in these boys  
trudging from house to empty house,  
catching me without make-up.

I tell them I don't need a Latter Day  
today, I'm happy as I am. It feels good  
to say, although they deflate,

a little wounded. I gave them too much  
hope. They offer me a pamphlet  
and I take it: picture of a white woman

by a pool, another of an Asian father  
playing soccer with his son, then  
a black man with a gap in his teeth,

and on the back, the church's number  
scrawled in pen. *Call if you*  
*change your mind.* I look beyond them

at the skeletal muscle of a sky  
torn open, the anatomy of storms.  
*Sure*, I say, as if tomorrow

I'll slip out of this body and into  
that sky, as if all I have to do  
is ask, and become endless.

## MATINEE

I take my ova to the movies. It is Saturday  
and raining. I'm not sure where they're tucked,  
but I cradle my soft stretch of abdomen. I say  
to them: *You haven't seen a movie, but*

*we're in a dark room, suspended in the pull  
of a projector: sound, color, the world in motion.*  
But they haven't seen the world, so I say: *It's full  
of cities and farmhouses, trains and oceans,*

*acorns and the trees that grow from acorns,  
milk from cows and almonds—but how to explain  
thirst. They seem more whole than I do, saying  
and wanting nothing, become instead of became,*

always hovering in the half-possible, between  
body and oblivion. And how to explain tongue,  
its history, floating slice of lily unleashed  
in the dark like a first thought, a first lung.

IN PRAISE OF THE MOON AND EARTH AS TIDALLY LOCKED BODIES IN  
SYNCHRONOUS ROTATION

Your period came today—yay!  
When you saw the faint stains  
after your evening jog, you thought,  
*This calls for a celebration—*  
and commenced the festivities,  
donning traditional garments:  
your favorite nude bra  
and pink cotton underwear  
for comfort and ultimate feminine  
exaltation. You love the sound  
a fresh pad makes when you peel  
off the wax paper, unwrap it  
like a birthday present, the one

you asked for. You stuck it  
snugly to that lining strip  
as if to say *Come forth,*  
*here's a soft spot, I'm ready!*  
Now you bask in your half-  
nakedness, leave the backyard  
window-shade open for the late sun  
just pouring in, and you've bought  
new daffodils, like fallopian tubes  
spreading wide from a glass vase, wet  
stems trying to soak up what they need.  
How wonderful to be prepared

like this—you could've almost guessed  
it would be today. As you jogged  
you felt your pulse quicken, heat  
in your abdomen. Still, part of the fun  
is not-quite-knowing, an advantage  
of not being a twenty-eight-day  
kind of girl—that slight surprise  
jolting you back into your touchable  
flesh, those cryptic little happenings  
inside you've learned about  
in fragments, like catching glimpses

of your life in Tarot cards. You rode  
an Icelandic pony when you were  
fifteen and yes, you were afraid  
of horses, but you wanted

to know how it felt to straddle  
the back of another beating animal,  
then get off and stand again,  
that vast other-breath still a quiver  
in your legs like the ocean's throbs  
echoing you into night.

IN THE HOSPITAL FOR JOINT DISEASES

nobody lets me sleep, so high on something  
I sob and a doctor, a stranger, says *Stop it,*  
*nothing's wrong with you.* My bone  
gone, everything we'd worked to have happen  
done, the TV laughing.

## THINGS TO DO ON ALCOHOL

1.

Start alone, taking wine in tiny sips.  
Notice tinges now: a soft flush  
deep in your hollowed  
insides, a rush in your warm ears.  
Dance ballet on the carpet. Let go  
of your voice, its low echoes.

Visit the guy down the hall. You don't  
really like him, but after you finish  
each glass he asks, *Another?*

Sashay to the bathroom sink at two a.m.  
Stream the faucet loud. You are fertile  
soil. Irrigate. Stretch your mouth  
as wide as your face can hold.

2.

Let the boy you think you love  
pour you a red solo cupful  
of Fruit Loops vodka at a house party.  
Lean closer. Speak in secret tones.  
Recognize all time as one block  
of dark matter.

3.

Take eight double shots of tequila  
with the boy you might definitely  
love now. Let him hold you  
upright as you walk back  
from a poetry reading, where  
you fell backward in your chair  
and stared at the ceiling  
to catch a metaphor skimming by.

Relate a forty-five minute epic  
about the dynasty of your tank  
of childhood carnival goldfish  
in a flawless New Jersey accent.

Run across the road when cars  
are coming. Lean over the balcony  
at the jazz concert, waving  
to the tiny musicians.



On a Monday night, sneak into  
your boy's closet because he leaves  
his door unlocked. Find his Juarez Gold.

4.

*You want a shot? It's for my birthday,*  
some guy you've never met offers.  
Your boy gives you a look. He knows  
you're already gone, watched you  
drink a whole glass of wine  
like you couldn't get it down  
fast enough. Shout, *It's for his birthday!*  
throwing your hands in the air.

Require birthday guy to walk you  
home. The concrete path and dimly lit  
hallway, all an abyss. Holding a key  
beside a doorknob faintly evokes  
some connection between  
two objects. Green slips of paper  
fall from your wallet. Laugh, hand  
the key to the guy. He takes care  
of getting you inside. You think:  
*we're apples*, as you're chewed  
to your core, seeds swallowed.

5.

Throw up bile all day.  
Promise a friend you're done.  
She takes you seriously, will  
help. Regret your promise.

6.

Last three weeks, counting  
the days. On a Wednesday night  
drink again, chardonnay  
from a box. It's like your religion  
came back: you are one  
with the Dao. Whisper, *I missed  
you. I missed you putting me  
to bed like my mother. I'm  
sorry for neglecting you.*  
She says, *It's okay.*  
*Have another.*

## ATTENUATION

I face the quiet  
of you  
not calling. January,

and I keep the lights on  
low. In the dimmest  
corner of night,

it's just me and you  
not talking. My head  
stacked with empty

ice cube trays, craters  
where I used to hold  
the frozen vapors

of your voice, where  
I sometimes  
catch some thought

of you still burrowing.  
These hollows  
make me think back

to that neuroscience  
class I took years ago,  
that man at the front

of the room who said  
he didn't *give a tiny*  
*rat's ass* if we ever

showed up. Every  
electrical impulse firing  
along my axons went

into getting an A. I did  
the same in high school  
biology, chemistry,

physics: infinite hours  
smoldered in the heat  
of a Bunsen burner,

just to prove myself  
to science teachers,  
like I needed them

to know I could play  
in their hypotheses  
and control groups,

that I could  
choose microscope  
and *C. elegans*, and

didn't. I still remember  
all the body systems  
from when I was fourteen

and wanted my body  
to die. Test me.  
Skeletal, lymphatic,

endocrine, nervous.  
I didn't die. I got  
another A. I want you

to give me a report  
card now. I want  
to crystallize us,

so if I turn back  
some night and try  
to listen, all

that's left of everything  
we ever said  
is a single letter.

## ODE TO THE LIBERAL ARTS MATH REQUIREMENT

The morning of my midterm was maybe  
the happiest time of my life—the asphalt  
slick with freezing rain, everyone crouched

under everyone else's umbrellas, three girls to one,  
everyone surprised at how slippery the normally  
mundane paths were, people squealing

at their new acceleration, even one girl who fell  
over and over on the same spot each time  
she tried to get up, her friend reaching out

a useless hand, her face sliding the spectrum  
of emotion, unsure of how to react, like when  
you can't tell if someone is laughing or crying.

And I knew they would be going inside  
the warm dining hall for coffee and bagels  
and to wipe their smudged eyeliner clean

in the bathroom mirror, but I had to hurry past  
to take my math test, and I loved taking that  
math test, arriving in drenched rubber boots,

arranging my clinical island desk with my lime  
green pencil and the plastic calculator from  
seventh grade, when I'd made these pen

drawings around the buttons because I was bored  
with abstractions. Now in this basement classroom,  
I loved connecting the lines of a regular polygon

into a dodecagon star, calculating the distance  
from one five inch fence post to another along  
the line toward the vanishing point, a simple

proportion, how clarifying. I loved writing  
my name in the blank line at the top  
of the Xeroxed sheet of computer paper,

my small mark on the world, claiming my place  
in the Fibonacci sequence. I finished early,  
just after you, and you were waiting

in the hall for me like this was high school.  
We walked through the wet February day  
to eat corn chili smelling of cumin and rain,

but we hadn't even finished when you looked  
at me and our eyes widened and you said,  
*Do you want to leave?* and I said *Yes*, and I loved

saying yes, because I knew you meant we  
were leaving together, as if we could know  
where we were going, traceable lines we'd walk,

and we had other places to be soon—we knew  
we were going to be late, and I loved being late,  
I loved whatever time I arrived.

## PRAYER FOR STRANGERS ON THE NORTHEAST REGIONAL AMTRAK TRAIN

Not to make it safely. We can't understand our own movement, that rush of northbound and southbound trains slicing the space between themselves. Passengers are exchanged at Union Station under the cold glass buildings of Washington where David is working two Metro stops away in a windowless federal office above a Nordstrom Rack. I am going right past him today. My stomach constricts as we wait in the dark railcar while the crew changes the engine from diesel to electric. When we rattle out of the station, a man in a blue flannel shirt asks if he can sit next to me. *My wife's sitting right there*, he says, pointing vaguely across the aisle. I give a faint nod. *What's your book about?* the man asks, and I say, *It's about a marriage breaking up after thirty years of relative peace because one day the wife suddenly realized she wanted the rest of her life to be different.* Then the man gets on his phone to make a business call. We speed along towards New York, the conductor announces over the loudspeaker to keep our shoes on at all times for our safety, and I have this sadistic yearning to chuck my sneakers at the close-shaven head of the man, shock my feet with danger, above high speed wheels sailing on the metal tracks beneath us. Just yesterday I was telling David how sometimes I'm scared of investing more and more time in a relationship if there's a possibility of it ending unexpectedly. *Everything ends*, he said, *that's why we love.* He was talking about *we* as in all of humanity, but for a second I thought he meant *we* as in *him* and *me*, as though the collapse of ancient civilizations and summer leaves crinkling to brown brought us together. In Baltimore more people get off, new people come on,

passing smoothly between realms of existence.  
David is wrong—nothing ends,  
only changes. I close my eyes and turn  
to the glass, as dulling noises of steel  
pulse my body forward in measurable  
space. I ask: *How can we know if we'll arrive  
at the right destination in all this shuttling  
from one connection to the next?* The Amtrak gods  
already answered: *If you see something, say  
something!* So when I open my eyes to the sky  
washing Philadelphia in flushed light, sun  
exploding behind a cluster of clouds just above  
the stoic art museum, the whole scene shifted  
and stretched in its reflection in the Schuylkill,  
I turn to the man beside me and say,  
*Look at that.* He says, *Whoa.* And later  
when I tell him, *This is my stop,* he gets up  
without a word, he lets me go.

## WAKING ON THE FLOOR AT THE BLOOD DRIVE

I didn't know you. I didn't know the breath  
I'd always returned to, didn't remember last night  
when after weeks apart our skin met  
as if for the first time and somewhere  
a city flooded in electric light. All that  
was erased somehow. But let me tell you, now  
that it's over: if that's what death  
feels like—whitewashed radio, blank  
and weightless as mist—then for what  
it's worth, the nausea came when the world  
emerged again, the shock of ice  
on my neck. In those seconds before  
when I knew nothing and heard  
a vague outline of your voice  
I was happy. I really was.



SECOND GLASS OF CABERNET, 8:46PM

Some old guy with a gray beard picking  
his acoustic guitar on the makeshift stage

in this dim little bar. He sings himself young,  
his eyes taking the world that way again,

song softening his every ache like a salve  
of eucalyptus. He asks the muffled crowd,

how did he get *here*? I look around: plain  
wood paneling, blue lights by the front windows.

*I'm so young*, I think, and ease washes over me  
like the taste of melon. Won't whatever's coming

always be coming? I was five years old  
the first time I realized I had a body:

lungs shaped like clementine sections  
breathing me alive, muscles working inside

my legs to cross them on the green carpet,  
fingers that could stretch if I thought, *stretch*.

Now the old man sings about his mother's death  
as his body rocks in a wooden chair. He speaks

the words at the ends of lines as though  
he can't hold the notes in his throat—they are

too much. Is that what death feels like,  
a quiet surrender? Five years old on the carpet,

a sort of heightened consciousness  
suspended above my complicated skin,

casing of blood and bone—and I guess  
if I was raised with a religion

I would have thought that was God.  
But as it stood I didn't have the language,

as it was I didn't know the meaning  
of many commonplace words. Or time,

how it moved in tight stitches across  
the moon face of a clock. I couldn't grasp

the particular weight of hours—*eight thirty*  
rang cryptic as ancient myths, empty as slush,

and what was a *half hour*? I didn't know  
what *half* of anything was, the way

one whole divided into sections when peeled  
open, tiny wedges breaking apart with a small

tug—the time between the hours a gaping  
expanse, and still I existed within them.

*Death must be like that*, I think, swallowing  
the last drops of wine, a little sediment—

minutes pass but I can't know why or how,  
or how many; I'm in my early twenties

nodding along in a dim bar until I grow  
old as the man strumming minor chords

that fall on me like hushed snow, fingers  
calloused, eyes wrinkled half-closed,

and my god, everything still before me.

## QUARTET IN *ALLA BREVE*

Inactivity is death.  
—*Benito Mussolini*

### I.

I chose clarinet when I learned my father  
had played it too, though he quit in early high school  
because his band teacher called him Mussolini

for being Italian. In wind ensemble, symbols  
told us which way to curve our sounds,  
the time signature how many beats in each bar.  
I kept up, my foot tapping the linoleum floor,

quick little metronome in my head counting  
*one, two, three, four*, as the conductor guided  
us forward, made certain our rhythms happened

*a tempo*, chords tuned to hover like clouds,  
even our wild syncopation a calculated dance,  
swells and dips notated in particular black lines.  
He could stop us all, turn back, slow us to a crawl

if we needed to perfect a sequence, one quick run  
of notes strung out like clothes to dry,  
mistakes drawn longer, each phrase repeatable.

### II.

The time signature can change throughout a piece,  
especially between movements—each  
its own civilization in the world  
of the song, like Europe in the Middle Ages,  
when every country marked the passage  
of time differently. You could travel  
to Italy, England, then Germany, and back  
and forth through time and dates depending  
on the drip of water clocks, etches  
on sundials, whatever phase of day they counted  
as the beginning, the length of intervals  
we call hours—none universally accepted.

### III.

They say Mussolini made the trains run on time,  
schedules precise as sheet music, locomotives

arriving on the steady down beat. Some kind  
of consolation prize from the father of fascism,

who played violin. His son Romano learned  
to love music from him. They practiced classical

duets together, when the father wasn't too busy  
conducting his militia and secret police. Romano

became a jazz pianist, jamming around the world  
with his band, the Romano Mussolini All Stars.

My father always wanted me to play jazz  
like Benny Goodman, but I struggled

with improvisation, clutched at the predictable pulse  
of finger drills, something sedative in knowing when

to come in for each slice of trill, each tiny measured  
increment running up and down the chromatic scale.

#### IV.

Mussolini's timely trains  
were a myth, propaganda  
of fascist efficiency,  
symbolism thin and ghosted  
as mist. While they  
waited in the cold wind,  
people clung to this belief:  
even as murders cut  
like scalpels through  
flesh and mind, at least  
things were getting done.  
They didn't know what  
was coming next, but  
at least knew when  
to expect it.

ELEGY IN THE CADENCE AND VIBRATO OF A RUN

Somewhere in the space      between  
one foot pounding  
   the sidewalk and another, I see  
my grandfather—      his skin taut and  
yellowing like leaves,  
   like these from the sweet gum tree  
I'm passing under,      dangling  
above my head like paper  
   cut-outs of stars. My legs  
unfurl into this autumn      afternoon, everything  
looking like it's lit  
   from within, me  
going faster, and I'm back      in that rush  
up the stairs to his St. Paul apartment,  
   1814, just beside  
the war of 1812,      high up and sun-bright,  
those last days I looked  
   down at the steel lines  
of winter cityscape      fading into dense sky.  
*Hey there!* he said each time  
   my mother and I walked in,  
the way he always had,      as if we were living  
the opening night of a play,  
   every expected thing  
some miraculous      happening, his voice  
now brimming over  
   his wire-body. I'm pushing up  
the hill, my lungs      working to get  
more breath  
   inside. One night  
I sang for him,      tuned the small  
room to the lilt of a 1940s  
   ballad, and as my voice  
swelled towards      that note I was  
always unsure  
   of reaching, I looked  
over at his face—hollow      breath held,  
eyes red and wide  
   for what he knew  
was coming.

## RAIN

Monday and the world feels microscopic, as though I will reach the end if I keep walking. The sky is so dark it looks green, like tornado weather my mother described from her childhood on the Illinois prairie. I've lived on the east coast my whole life, never seen a tornado start small on the horizon and loom up wide like hours. I know the sky though, the precise lines of astronomy my father taught us, hauling the white telescope down to the dock to see the moon's ashen crevices. One summer Mars was close to our orbit, so the four of us walked down the steps to the lake each night for weeks to see it again, and again—burnt red, sharp and small as a raindrop—until it slipped beyond our magnified view. Those nights we swam in our underwear in the warm water, let it carry us on our backs beneath the charcoal sky, square frames of light from our house growing small as pinprick stars, our ears submerged so the whole universe was quiet. This morning rain woke me slowly like sorrow. At the bus stop, the conversations of strangers evaporate as soon as they're spoken. Where do they go? Our sound waves must linger as some kind of vapor in the atmosphere, or beyond. They are cyclical, returning as memory and filling our book pages with printed words just as rain collects in the gulley of the street. I take off my hood and lift my face to the storming sky, close my eyes. I can still see that speck of planet smoldering above our floating bodies, the space between us too expansive not to understand.

INFORMAL EUCLIDEAN PROOF OF DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE'S  
*ARCANE EGYPTIAN ASTRONOMY*

*Q:* When in our lives are we going to use proofs?

*A:* You will need them every day, I hope, without knowing it.

—*Marilyn vos Savant, Geometry Regents Exam Prep Center, FAQs*

1.

In these curves of copper and blue paint,  
I'm fifteen again, in geometry, that morning  
infinity passed by me like a glance  
and I saw those straight lines going on  
forever, not implied with arrows in the sliver  
of a notebook margin, but shuttling along  
theoretical planes, everything whizzing  
invisible, secret, able to be tasted  
like weather, and when I tried to prove  
my textbook theorem, the angled words  
I had thought I would use scattered  
like pigeons on a city sidewalk.

2.

This painting submerges me, and I let it,  
I drift inside this light. Am I pulled by its current  
because of mathematics, ratios wide, ancient,  
wheeling across civilizations? That past has collapsed  
into density, but we still have their hieroglyphics,  
harmonic intervals, still calculate and explain them,  
flow towards the same precise and cryptic distances.

3.

When I was fifteen, I saw a young black woman  
in news footage crumple to her knees  
from so much joy, watched crowds of black  
women and men parading the dark streets, so late  
in Washington, overflowing a night that couldn't  
contain their expanse, how the body could make  
condensation, rivers filled and stars born,  
atmosphere rising as music.

4.

A star's death feels too close  
to what I want. After the explosion, after  
the last quick burning that flames it brighter  
than every star in its galaxy, it fades. And later,  
its remains, oxygen and iron, is strewn  
through space and forms new stars and planets.

5.

The peppering of copper specks suspend  
like the cobwebs my hands collect  
when I sweep the floor, clusters of dust  
like galaxies. As a child I thought stars  
were as small as snowflakes. That if  
they dropped, I could clutch them in my fist  
until their pinpricks seeped inside me.

6.

As if this painting is a map, I want to point  
to a spot in the blue speckled rings like eyes  
and whisper, *you are here*. I want to know  
not what I am, but where. So when America  
winds its shroud and lights it on fire, I can explode  
the scope of my own geography. It's terrifying—  
that morning in geometry, when my dimensions  
snapped back to plain limitations, I barely paused.  
I hunched back down and kept making mundane,  
imperfect shapes with a broken protractor.

7.

I want to find some disjointed sequence  
of self in this painting, so my mind works,  
makes the strange holes of light  
turn to sinks draining tap water, my hands  
washing dishes in these basins. Then the holes  
are mirrors, and my hands wipe circles  
that cloud, erase themselves. In the streaked  
glass, I can almost trace the peculiar logic  
of my face, a broken guardrail.

8.

I must be blinded by artificial light.  
My whole life I've made such ordinary  
patterns, compressing expanse into tiny  
rectangles. In these layers of shape and sound,  
color and thought, I see now only the small  
bent path I walk each Tuesday morning  
down the driveway to take the trash out,  
my hands full, my feet bare and  
turning numb against frost and asphalt,  
the sun, as always, burning.



## PANTOUM FOR CLEANING UP

I don't really mind doing dishes.  
The warm water's like a bath for my hands.  
I lose myself in the rhythm of soap and sponge.  
I can wash, and wash, and wash, and

the warm water's like a bath for my hands.  
It seems David never had to do the dishes.  
I can wash and wash and wash, and  
David meanders to the couch to read.

It seems David never had to do the dishes.  
He had said he would help, but instead  
David meanders to the couch to read.  
I stack white plates on the drying rack.

He had said he would help, but instead  
I remember how at eighteen I knew, somehow,  
as I stacked white plates on the drying rack,  
I'd better start not minding doing the dishes.

I remember how at eighteen I knew, somehow,  
even though I'd never had a serious boyfriend,  
and I started not minding doing the dishes.  
My mother warned me dishes were constant.

Even though I'd never had a serious boyfriend,  
*Watch for families where sons do nothing,*  
my mother warned me. *Dishes are constant.*  
I'm on vacation with David's family, and

watch for families where sons do nothing.  
After dinner, the men get up, one by one.  
I'm on vacation with David's family, and  
they all meander to the couch

after dinner. The men get up, one by one.  
I run the faucet hot, soaking the pans.  
They've all meandered to the couch.  
David's mother dries, and thanks me

for running the faucet hot, soaking the pans.  
I lose myself in the rhythm of soap and sponge.  
David's mother dries, and thanks me.  
I say, *I don't really mind doing dishes.*

## SONNET TO SAPPHO

I watch him eat cereal. I won't see him eat anything  
for a while. We live in the ever-temporary, a body of cold  
water that holds us half-submerged and always bobbing.  
Sappho, to survive, should I forget him again? Endless road  
we drove through New York back to my home, only two  
radio stations coming in, both oldies, static, the windshield  
glaring, knowing he'd go farther and we'd say goodbye soon,  
which is nothing new but turns grayer, as if yielding  
to speak, pinned by the throat. Last week, he pulled out  
a largemouth bass from the dark lake. It thrashed and gaped  
in the cut of oxygen, desperate last try at living made somehow  
wildest. Sappho, help: the train's coming, he's washing his face.  
I study it as I've studied you. On its way to decay and backward  
in the mirror, impossible to translate, every arrangement, cracked.

## CLOSE TO HOME

*For my mother*

Peak of summer's heat, we pick wild raspberries  
in the abandoned backyard across the street

and down the road, the shaded alcove just before  
the beach. We have this one week every year

and we seize it, our return knee-deep, complete  
as leaves. Berries ripen wine-red, plump garnets

falling into our hands and baskets lined in napkins,  
full as this July's Buck Moon, Hungry Ghost Moon,

the one taking up such a wide piece of sky  
and lake. If snow slows life, then raspberries

thicken it, the waves of days simmering in this juice,  
our whole bodies sticky and scratched, wanting

to be soaked as we plunge our bounty into cold  
tap water, drowning tiny green bugs, draining

dirt. Again, this year, you tell me about leaving  
ones we're too late for, or early, as if I haven't

picked most of my life: the premature ones, color  
of low fire; the passing ones, engorged, that will

break at the brush of a finger. You tell me you forget  
I'm not ten anymore, that each reach into bramble

isn't my first. You tell me someday when I have  
a daughter, I'll understand. This daughter is only

the shadow of a projection, unaware of this world,  
these dimensions. In the tangles of thorns, I know

which fruit to take. There's enough to choose  
those just ready to taste, perfect only today.

FAILED SONNET WITH IMPLOSION

Behind my brother's Baltimore row house last night,  
a man was shot ten times. At daybreak, firemen hosed away  
the blood before the children walked to school. Searchlights  
seem to find me around the grocery store. I've spent all day  
carrying death inside me like a baby or a song. Pomegranates  
overflow a wooden display basket. I realize I've never touched  
one before, so foreign and distant it feels like pulling a planet  
from the night sky. It fills my palm, makes it whole. It must  
keep seeds clustered like a hive, bright red juice sacs that cling  
to fleshy insides, all soft membrane and sleeping womb. I  
don't know exactly what *inside us* looks like, if anything  
catches light like cut glass when we're opened—

(I see a body  
flap and shudder like a moth with every  
shot. As a child  
I believed in numbers,  
the way one summer deaths  
followed one another like footsteps,  
until it was me,  
counting, who led the walk—  
at least in those dreams,  
the ones I couldn't draw or talk about.  
My mother is flying alone  
to Florida now, to her own  
mother,  
her life dropped  
like overripe fruit. Let planes  
land, our world is nothing  
but an accident. Each time I say goodbye  
to my mother, I see her  
as a cloth flour sack tipped and emptying,  
and I'm the white dust  
falling from her,  
ghost trace making my way to the floor,  
gathering the room  
like sunlight.  
I'll be a child forever, unable to hold  
another row of unknowable  
gravestones—)  
and so I buy  
the pomegranate. I want to see it sliced open, to feel, invade,  
dissect its layers like an animal heart. At home, I become the blade.

SUNDAY, 5PM

My roommate leaves for evening mass  
and I watch her walk away  
into this late light like she's already

headed to heaven, as if the path there  
is just our sidewalk, the hallowed air,  
this air, April, the breathing easy.

I've made no space for faith—  
no white church or varnished hymn,  
no shaded grove of orange trees,

not the inside of an envelope, not  
a matchbox, not even an outstretched  
hand, a fingertip. I was hours

away when my mother had a stroke.  
She didn't tell me until she was  
home from the hospital, after

she knew she'd be okay. I'd gone  
on living my separate day to day,  
drinking cold milk from glass bottles,

making notes in book margins—  
*yes* to Blake, *possibility* to Dickinson,  
*beautiful uncertainty* to Keats—

praising the dead poets. My mother  
gave me the gift of not knowing,  
and it lasted for a few days—though

I didn't know—and so I never tasted  
facing the unknown, fresh and whole.  
Instead, I got a paper cut-out,

a faded carbon copy, of what I might  
have felt, a shadow of who I might  
have been, wandering that in-between.

Wherever my roommate walked tonight,  
beyond the bend in the road, lined under  
the cherry trees' new pink blossoms,

and wherever she is now, kneeling  
in a pool of expectation, sinking deeper  
with every *amen*—whatever that space

becomes—high rafters, dark tunnel  
of a narrowing artery, the arms of a man—  
that's what I missed, what my mother

kept from me. I sit outside on the porch,  
alone, my scope of world closing in  
on itself like a shamrock at night,

the tiny roars of passing cars  
each a distant river  
on its way home.

## DAYBREAK OUTSIDE THE SANDWICH SHOP

I want to be you, pair of girls chatting softly  
at the patio table beside mine as the ice  
melts your white drinks, such sweet coffee.  
You talk about lost sleep, last Saturday night,  
how you can breathe now you're not around  
your mothers. Girls, you probably won't  
remember this, so you'd better write it down:  
it's so warm for November, and you don't  
know why but one of you starts crying, then  
the other, open, with no apology, as the shops  
unlock their doors, offering themselves again,  
and brown leaves fall on a small boy, who stops  
eating. His mother nudges him. "They'll all be dead  
soon, yes. You want another piece of bread?"

## THE UNDERGROUND TRANSFORMER AT THE FEDERAL RESERVE

It waits until one a.m. on a Tuesday, when no one is around,  
then catches fire, thick swaths of flames rising like interest rates.

When I hear this, I feel it can't be a coincidence—something  
was looking out for someone. David tells me on the phone

you can watch videos of the combustion online, his voice  
creeping into twelve-year-old-boy-excitement-for-explosions.

He's been off work for a week and two days because of it,  
waking and praising whatever deity or tossed salt caused

his luck. This morning my father calls and says he burned  
spirit money for me at dawn, then sent me waves of good *qi*

during his bell meditation, all because I taught a poetry class  
for the first time. I say, *That must be why it went so well*, though

my memory of the hour is one swift motion, the slap of a knife  
against a cutting board, a little slice of bell pepper left in its wake,

and I walked home in a daze and changed into pajamas, the rest  
of my day exhaustion, my mind like the inside of a vacuum,

whirring its own dirt. As I wander my empty house, David calls,  
no hello, just *The Fed is back on*, the phrase wilting like a dirge.

In the morning, economists will carry on their fun house games,  
David will examine spreadsheets. *You should quit tomorrow*,

I joke, but he sighs and says, *Yeah, maybe*, his voice small  
and frayed. I don't mention the cold ashes of the spirit money

burned in my honor, surely balancing his fortune back to steady  
mediocrity, and when we hang up I feel more alone than ever.

My brief wisp of lucky smoke, those crisps of thin white paper  
writhing in the heat of my father's matches, must've already drifted

past my aura and onto somebody else—maybe my student  
who sat facing me in my windowless classroom, leaning

forward, nodding, her canvas sneakers bouncing up and down  
against the floor like a pair of eyes trying to blink back tears.



## PLAYLAND

I want to take you. So much, for me,  
was learned there—

four of us girls floating the shaded cement  
paths, alone in summer. A space

we were free to wander without parents,  
trying tank tops that showed our bra straps

to the world for the first time. August before  
seventh grade, a teenaged boy looked us up

and down, then up again, edges of his lips  
curling. We rode the Dragon Coaster over

and over, a stocky man with half-closed eyes  
always taking too much care to check

our seatbelts. One visit, just before school began,  
we spotted two of our classmates making out

in the Ferris Wheel car opposite ours, steel spokes  
of the wide circle like arms stretching us apart,

our distance constant, precise. We stared in awe,  
in disgust, we crowded to one side to get a better look,

their movements the ebbs and flows of tides.  
We shouted their names into the wind

in some desperate need to let them know  
how openly we gaped, in some hope we'd make

them stop, that they'd look up, dazed,  
and remember themselves. They didn't hear us.

I didn't know this would be our last time  
here, as we followed them around and around

and I couldn't look away—two bodies balanced  
on shapeless breath, always reaching

the top first, always missing the view. And me,  
watching them, missing it too.

## THE LAUNDRY ROOM

Praise to the laundry room, in the basement of that little house  
on Main Street where twelve of us spent a year crammed together,  
  
writing, or trying to, bogged down in Norton Anthologies, semiotic  
studies, useless rhetoric. Praise to the night in December I returned  
  
from work so late the whole house slept, except Mara and Blaise,  
who I found in the kitchen in the dark, playing a Paul Simon album  
  
on a laptop. Soon we were dancing, diamonds on the soles of our shoes,  
which we slipped off to slide across the cheap linoleum in our worn-out  
  
socks until someone stumbled in and griped at us to keep it down.  
But we couldn't stop, we found ourselves creaking to the basement,  
  
which we'd never cleaned even after months of talk, our imagined  
speakeasy-grunge-garage-band-esque venue lost in our long lists  
  
of ambitions. We put the laptop on the lid of the washing machine,  
Paul Simon's voice straining above the whirr of someone's  
  
load of darks, taking on a new vibrato. I'd never sweated so much  
in December. I mean, we were jiving, jumping, conga-lining  
  
across the filth of the cold cement floor coated in mysterious stains,  
building worlds of ballrooms, peeling open the tight layers of ourselves  
  
with jazz standards, bunny hops, shopping carts, feeding-the-pigeons.  
Praise to Mara and Blaise, who fell in love. Their first kiss  
  
wasn't for many months, but I want their lineage of emotions to trace  
back to that Wednesday night—how beautiful to fall in love in that  
  
laundry room: tinny acoustic guitar, wide spectrum of artificial smells  
from twelve bottles of detergent, heaps of clothes cycling the space  
  
in various states of cleanliness. Although it also wasn't for many months,  
I want that to be the night I began to forgive myself for the man  
  
who followed me home sometimes, the sidewalk frozen, the scrapes  
of his footsteps catching up with mine, the blank, white thaw of his  
  
whispers on my neck. How poor we were that year, how little we knew,  
down in that mildewed, unfinished basement, strips of pink insulation

stuffed between beams in the open ceiling, wires and bulbs dangling,  
a closet we couldn't unlock. Praise to the moment when our knees

grazed the dusty floor, and our arms flailed, and we forgot everything  
besides our own shaking bodies, undoing themselves, starting over.

## SUNDAY MORNING, IT'S STARTING TO RAIN

And I feel faith in this archetypal weather,  
thick clouds releasing into cold drizzle. A man  
about my father's age is perched on the bench  
at the bus stop, eating a banana. He's visiting his son,  
who's a music professor here and still sleeping.  
He says his son plays clarinet, and I say, *Oh, I  
played clarinet*, and our eyes widen together  
as we make plans for the sleeping son to give me  
lessons. *I stopped so I could focus on writing*, I say,  
and when the man asks what I want to do, I trust him,  
I tell the truth, open the small pocket of my heart  
I've kept snapped shut—*I want to be a poet*,  
scuffing my sneaker against the sidewalk  
to show I've got reasonable doubts, but he's  
beaming, his face opening like my father's did  
last year when I told him. The man says,  
*I think you can do that*. He's serious.  
He doesn't know me. *Here's your ride*,  
he says as the bus pulls up, and I get on, surprised  
he doesn't follow, since this is the only bus  
coming anytime soon. Last night, in the hazed  
woodsmoke of a bonfire, a friend-of-a-friend  
asked what I was studying, and when I said *poetry*,  
she made a sound almost like retching, then tried  
to take it back, stammered, *Oh, I—I didn't  
expect that, I mean, I'd never expect that  
to come out of anyone's mouth*. On the bus,  
an old man carrying a battered trash bag croons  
off-key, *I'm on my way, I'm on my wa-aay*,  
turning to a young man with a young son  
from time to time to say, *My son's gone  
but he'll be back, he'll be back*. The young man's  
trying to ignore him best he can, his arm tight  
around his four-year-old's shoulders, pointing  
at things out the window as they disappear  
from view—*There's the football stadium*, and,  
*That's the library Mama and I used to go to*—  
the boy breathing small *ohs* that crest up at the end,  
as if everything we're passing is in question,  
open-ended. The old man gargles verses  
of his broken song while rain drums heavier  
against the windows, and I can't tell if it's  
the man or the weather that falls in line  
with the rhythm of the other's music.

## THEORY OF EVOLUTION

I love to watch you  
step into your pajama pants

like you're stretching  
over a rain puddle

with your grasshopper legs.  
You can't stridulate,

but your movements—  
your slight stumble

from a far reach, your flat  
feet pressing into the floor

toes-first, the way you finish  
this simple task in near-collapse,

like the world's work  
was given to you,

and how you sometimes  
let me catch you, how after

all that, one of us ends up  
grasping at that soft cotton

waistband, and we let it  
plunge—listen—

every little tremble  
becomes a song.

## THE FIBONACCI SEQUENCE OF DAUGHTERS

*one*

We are new bees pollinating in dry heat.

*one*

My mother tastes like ripe berries soaked in port.

*two*

Our mothers say to us: Here is milk, here is misery  
tasting of paint thinner, here is bread and dexterity.

*three*

A whole world waiting, a tongue to taste it.  
We need water. We need yellow flowers.  
We need matches and their tiny dangers.

*five*

At the ocean, we run to meet each next wave, as if born  
of saltwater, seaweed, and tiny crabs in thick wet sand.

Only our mothers can make us come out of the water,  
and the dark. Hear the 'o' that is the lost vowel of a daughter

sown in freshwater. Test her pH levels, all the long sounds.

*eight*

One generation ago, a three-year-old girl in my family  
played with matches in the basement. Her hair caught fire.  
Her baby brother watched her burn alive. Ten generations ago,

many women in my family burned at the stake, because  
of their powers, because daughters were afraid of mothers,  
because daughters become mothers. Some daughters burn

on display in town squares, some in basements, in front  
of a child so young he shouldn't have remembered.

*thirteen*

Fathers, don't leave us. Fathers, be the skulls  
in our heads, be the pangs of growing bones,  
leave us our space as there is space between  
the ribs but be the ribs, give our organs room  
to do their work. Be the crooked vertebrae, the nameless  
color of a moon. Our bodies are passageways  
from one world to another, our bloodstreams are tunnels.  
We can create what we once were, and what  
we create can create us again. In wombs, symphonies  
begin, mathematics spirals its ratios.  
We once waited there, curious seeds, to be completed.  
Fathers, when we want to run, acquiesce  
to our muscular stretch. Be the ones who let us go.

*twenty-one*

Dear soap cakes, dear rosewater,  
eucalyptus, lavender, chamomile:  
we believe in you, our only gods  
are your infinite powers, calming scents.  
Yes, we want the body and the cold-blooded  
murders. Make us open easily,  
everything wet and bathed in you,  
and we'll confess and apologize  
in the same, gasping breath. Oh, to be beautiful,  
to know another person  
wants us because of it, and not because  
we are ahead of our time in the field  
of astrophysics, or poetry. *Beautiful*  
is a caramelized atrocity,  
and we clamor for more. We lift the lids  
off our sealed jars and bottles,  
intoxicated by those colors, scoop our fingers in,  
coat our lips and cheeks.  
When we look in the mirror, these stains  
are not like war paint, but wounds  
from inside us, smeared across our faces.

*thirty-four*

We need a memory of our mother's womb,  
our first home. We wish we remembered

what we were like, then—were we goldfish,  
eyes open and unseeing? Or were we dark

breaths waiting to be taken, unformed thoughts  
small and cold as cranberries? All our lives

we try to return. We empty the shelves  
of the home goods store, let others inside us,

let them fill us. We name our daughters  
after Eve and tell them, *You can be the new*

*beginning, you can say something, you can save*  
*us all.* We hope she becomes the story of love.

She becomes instead the story of millennia,  
the story of laundry, picking up pairs of socks

and tucking them just-so. She becomes  
the story of blue physics, of dark matter,

she becomes not a story at all—stories must  
enter the past as they are told, and this one

never passes. Slowly, she gives into the story  
of gravity, and as we let go of our old hope

we realize we have always been falling, we  
return to specks of dust, to our single-celled

selves. We make each morning sad and hollow  
as a birthday, that reminder of death delicate

as a sand dollar. The sound of the sea is always  
inside us, and trapped. It is unnecessary to break

ourselves open but we break ourselves open anyway,  
drown into the gentle whirr and pine of our white noise,

noise of the earth's first speckled egg, not yet cracked.  
And listen, when my mother cleans out all her drawers,



she finds a small green gift box and gives it to me,  
and inside are my baby teeth, chipped and tiny and

blood-stained. A small envelope with one tooth I lost  
at school still sealed in there, a note from the nurse:

*1.61805 ( $\phi$ )*

Place contents under pillow & check to see  
if any magic happens in a.m.

## SATURDAY ON 65<sup>TH</sup> STREET

On the carousel in Central Park, in January,  
the sky white. I was sixteen, the ride was empty,

Italian feast songs from my childhood drifted  
sweet and familiar as honeysuckle through the dark

wooden dome lined in light bulbs, and I closed  
my eyes and I opened my eyes and I felt the sting

of the cold, brass pole with my bare, chapped hands,  
and I finally understood what space was whole enough

to hold what can't be spoken, and I knew the ride  
would never end—I was Phoebe, and Holden was

the part of me waiting just outside the gate:  
sixteen, lost, wanting to die, glimpsing the eternal

and never growing older.

## CAVE GIRLS

In the days before I turned five, everyone kept saying, *This is a big one*, smiling as if they knew a secret, until I believed

that I'd be able to fly. What else could be as big? This was the story my parents sat me down for, as it was told to me at five years old:

my best friend, lured from the front yard and into the back of a man's car, driven to the airport terminal, and while they waited for the next plane

she found a policeman, who brought her home. This was the moral: don't let that happen to you, and if it does, find a cop. And tonight,

almost twenty years later, in the unknown way conversations sneak around, I learn everything that was kept from me then—small

body, quivering. Covered in sperm. Penis forced into mouth. Clothes torn. I can see her perfectly at five—oh, her bob cut of thick, brown hair,

her little teeth, one missing, the pale pink sweater her grandma knit. At recess we played Cave Girls, she was Crystal and I was Diamond,

and we pulled on our imaginary galoshes and when we went down the big, twisty slide it meant we were entering our secret cave, and how

did she slide into that cave, how did she come to school at all and run outside, laughing, afterward? The night before my fifth birthday,

I hardly slept. I could see myself pushing up off the living room floor and sailing out the open window, lifting higher than our apartment building,

higher than the distant blinking lights of Tarrytown, and there would be no secrets anymore, we would all talk freely, each knowing we could fly,

and I could reach up past the tip of the Empire State Building, if I wanted—but I wouldn't go that far, that high, not yet. I had time. I had my whole life.

## APOCALYPTIC LOVE POEM

In the end, we are left with only each other. We can't help it. Our lives are congruent. The first image of us is an over-exposed photograph, light so blinding we disappear inside it and live there, basking in our own absence. We learn one another's ancestries, and that is how we learn one another. Biology births anthropology. We are chromosomes. We tell the past *Come back*. What comes back is a snapped tree branch left to dry in a field without rain. We lock eyes at first because a newspaper tells us to, then because our locked eyes hold that silence of museums. We speak in bell tones. We kiss in papaya, tequila. We don't understand the fantasy genre because things more fantastical exist in the crooks of our elbows, under the nails of our pinkies. We watch each other walk away because our body walking lets us feel nostalgia, lets us feel like we are opening a window and smelling winter in all its crisp and broken songs. We are not afraid when we cry. We love to cry. We practice making one another cry by pretending we are trained psychiatrists. We are most afraid of stock phrases. Even *stock phrase* is a stock phrase and we're terrified that we're brainwashing each other every time we speak. We would never say, for instance, *that's the way it is*. We don't know what *the way* is, how *the way* can hold all possibilities of *it* and *that*. There is a danger in saying *I love you*. We think it is thin and monochrome as paper and when we say it we shred each other and leave the strips of ourselves all over the floor. So we invent new ways of saying: *you are the crispest cucumber in the cucumber patch, you are the sneakiest cat, I am a bottom feeder and you are a lucrative spot for a bottom feeder*. We communicate best by way of quiet pangs from everything that's ever left us. One day we are walking and we step into our origin, into the first pair of bodies warm and bitter as cloves burning. We're in the heart of a dark chokeberry and run like juice. We now know we are the most basic beings ever to be born, so we begin making things. We make love. We make grief. We make all shades of shock, frothing relief. We make cadence. We make \_\_\_\_\_ but cannot articulate this. It wheels into creation as devastation like hurricane or solar system. And in the space our making leaves behind, want wriggles onto land and fractures with breath.

## CITY OF IMAGINARY NUMBERS

We have no life plans & nowhere to be tonight, so  
David & I build a city of imaginary numbers. City of  $i$ .  
It starts at the 24/7-burger place, our blueprints, as we try to  
track the mathematics of the background music, then our  
conversation, then our hands, then the realization that if god  
is a number, how many goodbyes can pile up inside us until  
we rip like paper bags? So we create a complex plane, another  
dimension, we unhinge ourselves into it, sculpt a shapeless skyline  
like the sharp whistle of glass, fill a library with pieces of night,  
spiral a staircase in the ways our bodies turn, dig a graveyard  
& bury all bright electricity & hospital drug highs. Small city  
but like a wild stretch of land, but like a constellation of every  
*us* we've ever been a part of, but like a perfect line. At the center,  
David plants a garden of imaginary numbers. They'll take  
root, multiply  $i$  into  $2i$ ,  $3i$ ,  $xi$  bounty of imaginary floating  
the space like arias of honeysuckle & wintergreen, spring onion  
& summer squash, cloudberry billowing on & on—but for now  
just soil & seeds. David says *here, this is for you*, & we drop  
down into the vegetable beds, lying & crying from sleepy joy,  
& I say, *please, live here with me*. He says *yes*, & then how  
fast we fold into sleep, & lucky us, it's all we need.

RELEASED FROM PURITAN ANCESTRY

I untangle  
the wisps of smoke,  
still rising,  
from the flames that go on  
burning those fragile scraps  
of women. I make

this scene with you as honest  
as the spider web lines  
just outside  
and bright as yesterday, etched  
in white charcoal  
on the cracked sky.

I love the way you want—

like water clouding  
into steam,  
our bodies  
infinities of tiny,  
working cells, our breaths  
becoming atmosphere,  
becoming breaths. How

flushed and round  
and heavy  
we are,  
such strange fruit—

I've never known a thing  
that breaks  
open  
as we do

when you're moving  
closer  
into me.

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