

Leaving the Island

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# LEAVING THE ISLAND

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# I

## LEAVING THE ISLAND

I grew so long next to the fields  
I thought I was one of the corn stalks,

stubborn & crowned  
in golden floss, weathery spears.

I pushed the dirt with my palms,  
shucked kernels to taste their sugar,

crush of pericarp on my tongue.  
I stood sentry where mowed paths met

& spun to see each horizon  
unfold: tree & barn latched

to sky. Near the dark grass  
below the dike, I practiced names

all night, so I might one day tell of this:  
how at dawn a dozen herons

winged over stone-frost ground,  
the Willamette stopped & flowed backward,

& one car carved a path of light  
away over the bridge to town.

## JANUARY AT WAPPATO LAKE

Without knowing, we go looking  
for something not there. Mushroom hunting

in the boroughs under the trees,  
in leaf & lichen dropped & decaying.

Ferns & fern-dust, dark mineral earth  
gone for days without sun, bullet casings

dropped by a hunter who stood here  
in thick-treaded boots, a heavy cotton bag

dropped & then re-slung. A knife  
clutched & then discarded, bright silver

on the moss. Kinglet with its flash  
of red. Chestnut shells long empty.

Hunched & waiting out a rainstorm, the geese  
tuck their heads on the pond, fold

into their oil. Brown blackberry canes  
& the boards of the hunting blind rough

with lichen, slick with rain. Summer tucked  
like a seed between teeth.

## CRADLE OF SILT

When blue rose out  
from the horizon & purpled  
into copper, dusk,

that hour when sunslant  
illuminated each thin  
stick & fenceline,

I'd walk surefooted again  
to the end of the dock  
where the burned plank

hid a small dead fish  
& stare out toward the water  
swirling with petals

some house-boater had dumped out,  
roses the color of milk  
tinged with blood on the green

solid sheet moving turgid  
with oil, where once  
they'd found a car, gone under,

mother & child caught  
on metal, kept from the river's  
gentle carrying, muck's keeping—

there I'd stop & stand,  
the unstill part of me  
crawling in the skin of my jacket,

toes pressed against  
the single two-by-four,  
curled space of my body's

lean returning & returning  
to this kingdom of clay,  
of under-water wire & roe,  
mess of aluminum, algae & ruin.

## WINTER BIRTH

Lean-to in the field grass,  
away from the house. Small goat  
my father gave breath to, named  
Star. The other, Jack Frost.  
It was early, dark. The ice still  
in needled patterns over the doors.  
Up the hill the vanished lane  
held no light, not even now,  
not the thin owls trilling goodbye  
to what they've named. Over & over,  
incantation of breath into her throat,  
my father's haloed lamp.

## CROSS QUARTER DAYS

When I was ten,  
sadness took my mother  
like a frost does the field.

After, the fall came on  
with no meaning at all. Closed door,  
mornings pitched toward rust,

the needled key left sitting  
beside the lock,  
withered garden bowled over

with leaves. Still, I carry it in  
me: what the tin-can lanterns  
pricked with screwdrivers

used to prophecy onto the grass.  
That earlier world  
when winter bloomed

into nuthatches and we all  
played with fire.



## ANT SEASON

Sauvie Island, mother of weeds  
and morning glory. On days when summer  
heated the bricks of my childhood patio,  
when ants streamed

toward the apple cores I'd placed,  
I'd scoop them on fern-haired leaves,  
tip them into the bucket of rain water  
where they floated, Jesus-like, denting the surface

until they began to sink.  
Then I'd return them to the concrete steps  
to dry. I loved to watch  
their antennas stir again,  
bodies unflatten and reshape.

Maybe it was rebirth I wanted to see,  
or the power of the sun  
buffing those August days clean  
while cucumbers grew bulbous

on the vine. Bees drank from the split  
apples under the Gravenstein tree—  
and I began to grow tall,  
breaking off new limbs  
and gathering pitch into amber balls,

setting out flowers to sell  
to the neighbors for thin coins  
that I saved in a glass jar under my bed,  
counted in the evening.

## FATHER'S NAMES

All summer I learned names  
dried into creek beds, shaped in the mud  
like the figurines I'd sculpt  
into turtle or spider,  
leave to sun on a rock. Each tree bore  
a different seed: Ambrosia,  
Pippin, Paula Red. Tuft  
of titmouse or stand-out nest,  
liquid cry that meant *thrush*.  
I knew which berries were good—  
tiny native blackberries and their engorged English cousins;  
huckle, salmon, and thimble  
on drift-boat leaves above the stream,  
acid sweet only in June.  
Not the blood-drop belladonna,  
red-splotched hemlock, or ash's waxy globes.  
I knew the types of boat horns, clouds,  
what to plant when. The voices  
of thunder, shades of light  
in rain. The particle haze of dusk  
that descended rapidly, giving in to the trees,  
leaving me only shapes.

NEW SECTION??

## DEMETER SEWS

Press the paper pattern to cloth and trace.  
Take sharp scissors and cut straight, fast;  
for squares simply rip along the weave.  
Pin each piece before feeding into the machine,  
then whisk pins out of the way of the blade.  
Demeter can sew a blanket, a shade.  
Flip quick stitches across a hide. Demeter  
can sew a pot, a candle, a flame. Can patch  
the crack in the wall. Turn a dead bird  
back alive. But she can't stop  
the grass from growing longer  
or slow evening's fade.

## DAUGHTER

Above the circling grapevine, moon as round  
and soft as a dab of butter. I'd eat the globes  
and spit the seeds in the grass 'til my fingers were sticky  
and my lips stung, 'til the night clung  
a little more loosely to the stars, and one screech owl  
trilled its vacant call—one daughter  
out beyond the square of lamplight. Don't leave  
her there. The grasses will purr tall  
and October will be a smattering of rain, undoing  
all of summer. A loose balloon  
coming free of its branches and heading for sky.

## ANOTHER DEATH IN SPRING

My neighbor's death looked  
like a sun-frosted morning, a field half-plowed.  
On an island that's swallowed every five years,  
where oaks are lost, signs are lost—  
everything named after what used to be—

I grieved the only way I knew how,  
mouth stuffed with puff pastry at the funeral reception  
in my elementary school cafeteria,  
wearing my best dress. I was afraid

of my body, and his body, living, how  
he'd gotten thinner and more lined, then hooked  
through with tube. But he  
had sheared rosemary, repotted bamboo.  
All winter, he'd replanted the island's oak savannah,

baling each tree in wire  
to keep its leaves from hungry mouths,  
send it into blue. I danced on his terrace  
again that summer, surrounded by the gardens  
he'd labelled and weeded, the triangle pluck

of succulent leaves, square stems  
of Juniper's Bonnet, Ingrid's Knot.  
I held out hands I didn't know I had,  
smudged with ash and dirt,  
hungry at the cottonwoods' knees.

## MAINLAND

Remember, for a moment, how you walked down that path  
come darkness—how, your father gone somewhere, your mother  
had taken you and your brother to see the symphony  
in the park. Wild drummers hitting body-sized drums.  
Violinists sending notes sweeping over the firs.  
Remember that this was it—mother, back in the world,  
walking the shadowed path to the car, and how  
you knew to know the danger, how it required silence  
and pressing your field of force out, into the trees:  
how you kept them safe, held your breath in the small car,  
kept the world steady, its single dot shining on a string.

## BABYSITTING

I'd walk him through the cherry orchard,  
balanced on my hip, a branch leaning heavy with fruit.  
Each tree we passed would smear his fingers red.

Late summer, ripe, all of it to go soon.  
When his eyes drooped against morning's freckled sun,  
I'd walk him through the cherry orchard.

I'd lug him up to the purple attic room  
and dance him to sleep to the tape his mother'd given me.  
Each tree we'd passed had smeared his fingers red.

Hot on my chest, his face would go slack  
into somewhere I couldn't follow,  
even though I'd walked him through the orchard.

I was twelve and out the clicking window  
neighbors' grasses waved like lions' tails. The afternoon  
pulsed like fingers smeared with red.

I was twelve and already knew to count the sunshine in pies,  
how many watts would widen the hips I carried him with.  
I'd walked him through the cherry orchard's blood.  
More than anyone, I loved his fingers smeared with red.

## DEMETER WATCHES

The grass falls down again in heaps  
as her children bang on the screen door  
of fall. Deceptive, how bounty pushes  
into winter, vines dying while squash  
remain sweet inside. Across the cow pasture  
a patch of smoke still lingers  
from the neighbor's burn.  
Each tree cut down to sticks. She looks out  
to where property lines hem her in  
and clouds silt the land with rain,  
gray sky down to brush and limb.  
The red smudge of mushrooms coming up.  
The gathering roar of the bus  
coming to take them across the river.



## II

### FARM DANCE

When I was thirteen, a man tried to teach me to waltz,  
placed his rough hand in mine, his blue eyes

better than anything I'd seen. I had just burned  
herbs for my birthday, wilted flower heads

and every twig I could find  
laid in a circle of stones beneath a shrinking sky.

In front of the flaming tomatoes, peppers  
with spots on their skins, long rows

of basil, the man put his hand on my waist.  
I'd never been touched. Even now

love seems like a stranger's watch  
I picked up on the roadside, still ticking. My friend

waited six months for her lover  
to come home, placing the cards

on the table every night: sword, sword, cup.  
He showed up facedown in water. Still

some flowers grow in disturbed places. Tansy  
and pineapple weed on curbs and cow pastures

where tire and hoof have trampled. Tonight, again,  
twilight polishes everything to shine:

ankles, ribs, the spaces between firs,  
fingers that have traced steps

and cut meat, taped boxes shut.  
These days, I keep; I don't burn anything down.

CRESCENT (ISLAND TIME)

Sometimes in late summer  
the low river flows backward, taking its tides  
of cottonwood fluff and cut flowers  
back off the dock, churning the lures,  
fish guts, sodden frames  
toward Portland. Cottonwoods watch lazily, all sap  
and stickiness, tumbled bark. Like it should be,  
our entire life was waiting. One long  
childhood of afternoons, always four o'clock.

## MULTNOMAH

*“Saturday March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1806: This inlet or arm of the river extends itself to the South 10 or 12 M. to the hills on that side of the river and receives the waters of a small creek which heads with Killamucks river, and that of a bayou which passes out of the Columbia about 20 miles above, the large Island thus formed we call Wappetoe island. On this inlet and Island the following nations reside, (viz) Clan-nah-min-namun, Clacks-star, Cath-lab-cum-up, Clâh-in-na-ta, Cath-lab-nah-qui-ab, and Cath-lab-cam-mah-tup.” – Meriwether Lewis*

If I write this place I have to write the death  
behind it: summer when lively island  
became ghost island, summer

when the white men had quinine and knew  
how to use it, to stay inside when fever hit—  
summer when Hudson Bay Company

burned the abandoned settlements to ash.  
As a child I collected broken pottery  
smoothed by water and washed up to shore.

Chunky oatmeal-colored pieces with fluted edges,  
rimmed stripes of paint stuck in the drying mud  
under the salal bushes, where I'd crouch

at the lake's lip, its close murmur  
of reflected gray. I took the pieces home and labeled them  
and still didn't know where they came from. As if

the island had been built for us:  
a playground of buried maps and keys.  
The surface seemed so solid: where I'd walk

on our neighbors' farm, the rows of new zucchinis'  
fragile wings gathering to points up the hill  
where the Multnomah once scored fins

from fish, heaped scales on the middens.  
When the medicine man told the chief's daughter  
that the illness might be stopped

by sacrifice, she hiked to the top of the falls  
and threw herself off. O Island, horizon  
I thought I knew.

## SUMMER JOB (SAUVIE ISLAND FARM MARKET)

Pete from the corn stand  
drove out to the beach after work  
on hot days, stripping his corn husk clothes,  
ash from his skin, butter from his fingers,  
the coins of the day rattling from his pockets—  
letting the murky Columbia  
swallow his freckled shoulders  
like the back of a turtle. Pete  
was better for me than last year's corn boy  
because I wasn't in love with him.  
He was gay, lectured me on politics,  
cursed our boss under his breath.  
We'd meet outside the boiling port-a-potties,  
sun already cascading down the gravel drive  
to the fields and hills beyond,  
where U-pickers slid out of vans  
with bright dresses and yelling children.  
Pete couldn't believe there was an island  
beyond the tourists, that people lived out here.  
At the barbecue stand  
Jake and Karrin shared heat-filled glances,  
his tan skin glistening with sweat from the grill,  
hers pale beneath her hat, her small mouth teasing  
above her swaddled newborn's head. I think  
I was a little in love with her too.  
It was summer and nobody cared;  
Ray, the mechanic, disappeared for a week  
and Farmer Don let him back on.  
He bought a cold Coke  
and wedge of sharp cheddar cheese to share.  
Sometimes it would rain, and we'd sit lonely  
under our tents, look at the grey sky,  
the few stragglers. Those days the donut hole man  
wouldn't open his truck,  
wouldn't spill the smell of cinnamon-sugar.  
And Don would pace and shake his head, saying  
it must be La Niña, that it would be sunny  
soon. He worried enough  
for all of us, while we were lulled to sleep  
by the bleeding flower beds,  
the sunflowers and grasses  
limp and wet, leaning toward horizon.  
Pete dreaming of the waves,  
the sky like guava beyond them,  
and me thinking of the boyfriend

I'd kissed for the first time, replaying  
flesh on flesh until it blurred,  
arranging my small body under my apron  
like sticks for a campfire  
as twilight rushed in  
and transformed all of our faces.

## EDGES

First trillium, alive & laughing  
in the oak-hut of leaves, simpered up  
from long-fall rain, whole season  
of nothing dry, ash's vague whisper  
& thrush's throaty cry,  
mud around the pond  
where the mergansers play:

spring in full throttle. It rained  
into April, then May. We longed  
for just one day hot & bright & riven,  
for salmonberries soapy-sweet  
on the tongue. A trove of nuthatch  
& acorns hanging like ornaments

from dry-webbed trees, what might  
once have been food. Slick basalt sand  
& foam, river-kin, otter, loam—  
island's cool sides lapping briskly:  
a walk we too will take, lasting a season  
& seeming like longer,  
ending at the water's edge.

## BIRD CHECKLIST: SAUVIE ISLAND WILDLIFE AREA

What a gift, this list. More than a hundred names  
labelled by frequency of appearance:

everyday neighbors, wanderers-in. I keep it  
visible in my tabs like I might keep

the sky where we watched the water,  
an open rectangle of mind. Gadwalls and pintails stretched

toward another season, pulled longitudinally.  
Counted or not, they angle in at dusk

and when my father and I walk in December's rain  
back to the viewing platform, look out again

at what soon will be dark—they rise  
all at once in the gray so it seems

the water is leaping out of itself in whirring clatter—  
each anonymous duck beating its crisp wings hard

over the drum of its body, each knowing  
to bear its weight north, toward the woods.

## LANDFILL

Those blackberry-hedged  
meadows my brother and I rode by  
on summer mornings,  
watching for beach-goers  
around that turn, racing

the cyclists riding two abreast,  
bibbed and barred in red  
like cedar waxwings  
and yelling in the wind of flat island  
speed. We didn't know

that under bunch grass  
slag and sand settled,  
leftover from smelting steel:  
ESCO's backhoed plain,  
site of disappearance.

\*\*

Beauty was enough, they said. Pumpkins  
turned orange each year  
in fields fallowed and furrowed  
again into fertility, sprinkled  
with white dust,

followed by tanks of poison.  
They believed they could make things  
over. And yet: trace chemicals in wells.  
That year spring came so early  
that the cherry blossoms

fumed white in February  
and then crumpled in late frost.  
Plankton bloomed too soon  
and the salmon climbing the dams  
missed their chance for food.

\*\*

When ESCO wanted to pile  
another fourteen feet,  
turn meadow into mountain;  
a neighbor sold his Porsche  
and took them to court.



Protectors of island ladled marinara  
onto pasta and poured more wine.  
It wasn't the beginning, or end:  
their lawyer could find more technicalities;  
they could sell another stock and win.

Better elsewhere—*island* held out,  
preserved for a price  
in sun's pre-explosive light.

## ALMOST FAMOUS

Every movie is a tragedy, in the end,  
Penny Lane traded for a case of beer  
man to man one night. She swore to never  
fall in love. The real Penny Lane

now lives on the island I grew up on,  
traded the touring life  
for Sauvie Island's single road,  
connected the four Snyder brothers

to their movie deals at one of her parties—  
bonfire and beach, wild rice patties,  
the geese glazing over the mud flats  
on their way south. The island never changes

despite the river wearing at its edges,  
the lumber mill and its growing pile  
of pulp. A season for plump berries  
and stripping on the beach,

plunging into gray water.  
A season for forgetting  
where else she's been,  
any arms but island. My friend

dated the youngest Snyder brother  
before she realized he had another girl in L.A.  
He moved down there full time  
but come fall

he's back on the tractor on the family farm,  
the collar of his plaid coat turned up  
against the new cold—

and Penny's putting the hay up for winter,  
stowing tables and chairs, boxing tumbler glasses.  
She's walking in, her footfalls slow  
across the field grass, the sand

in peppery kisses on her heels.  
She turns her back to the beach, its clay banks  
and strip of blue. The geese pass and pass  
overhead, Vs that dip and linger,

but this winter she turns away  
from anything that moves.

ISLAND (I HAVE WANTED)

Winter is a mouth  
coming down hard. Winter  
frozen to the fence poles.  
Beyond the last barn and silo,  
electrical line singing with cold,  
small white house. The snow  
in her fever dreams, bright  
behind her eyelids every night,  
coats the field grass like a lover  
and leaves pockets of air,  
warm downs under ice.  
Beyond the curtains glowing  
with ghost-light, black snaked road.

## WARRIOR POINT (MY BROTHER & I RETURN)

*“A mortality has carried off to a man [Sauvie Island’s] inhabitants and there is nothing to attest that they ever existed except their decaying houses, their graves and their unburied bones of which there are heaps.” - Nathaniel J. Wyeth, fur trader, 1830.*

Gray grit sand of the river’s  
crush. Spawned rock. Tide  
pulled up to Astoria, funneled  
past this cove. Lighthouse  
a brave companion to drop-off,  
opaque blue of depth.  
We follow the familiar path  
out here, past homestead  
toppled to brick, field of cow patty  
& packed dirt. Underneath,  
scarred arrowheads  
of the Multnomah, village named  
*those toward water*. Like Augusts past,  
it’s easy to imagine  
that the light catches on the shallows  
& invites us in. We stay  
until shadow inks the pearled dunes,  
scallops the wind-waves of sand.  
Line of barrel & log  
stretch like strokes of paint  
on butcher paper,  
like the crude outlines  
we drew in Kindergarten  
of houses with mothers  
& fathers in them.  
Those days we returned to school  
in August, leaving the land  
braced against sky. We traced  
the grooved world on Columbus Day,  
not learning of malarial winter  
or that these footprints  
might leave our names.

## 91 DEGREES

*“Evelio Ramirez Moran, Mario Delgado and Apolinario Merida Herrera claim that they had been hired by The Pumpkin Patch to pick squash, zucchini, cucumbers and other crops. It was 91 degrees on Aug. 18, 2014, when they were admonished by a supervisor for trying to take a water break and told to get back to work, the suit states.*

*“The next morning, defendant fired plaintiffs for taking a water break” the suit states.” -The Oregonian, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

Silhouetted against sunrise, their covered arms  
slice cabbages from muddy furrows

& lob them overhead  
into the belly of the truck:

island of food, seeded, coddled, raised up  
ecstatic against sky.

I jog on the road; they pass  
in school buses & the backs of trucks,

heading out to reap leaves, drain root stock,  
move the veins of pipes up & down rows.

In early light, in white Tyvek suits & tanks on their backs,  
they spray herbicide between saplings;

at dusk, they heave white buckets  
of strawberries onto the industrial scale out back

while in front of the market  
a concert starts & beer lines form.

I work the counter, strip the husks & buttery silk  
from ears of corn, roast them

‘til the kernels darken, wrap the ends in foil.  
I sell them to Portlanders for \$3 each,

handle the money, the small talk, the salt.  
No one asks who planted, weeded, watered, picked,

or how much they were paid per pound.

## ANTHROPOCENE

*“So you see, as the righteous people of New England say, providence has made room for me.” - Nathaniel J. Wyeth, fur trader, 1831*

Sturgeon Lake billows  
like a sheet shaken away  
from the chest, setting long and low

along the horizon in shades  
of gray and pearl—cold  
sand, blackberry bush—

and below, catfish nosing  
the slicked weeds and silt-settled bottom  
of this slumped north island,  
shaken down in ancient earthquake.

Who made room for anyone?  
Who caught and carved these alluvial sands,  
gift of river, of glacial flood...

the arrogance to believe it's his.  
I turn to say I don't want any of it,  
erase my name from its green—

but there in elegy of oak leaves  
swaying in winter, portrait of oils  
in water... a long-wandered life.

IN THIS ONE (PASTORAL APOCALYPTIC)

Mud flats cave toward some other  
version of time, where the ants  
crawl in another direction, the lady bugs  
and box elders don't come to rest  
in the cupboards, the termites are not  
in the wood of the porch, and white walls  
stay rooted and shining forever, last sun  
a rinse of opalescent paint on a dying world.

The old lighthouse, having outlived  
its usefulness, stands solid cement  
near the river's rusty mouth. Firm  
in its trenched acres, its love of flood  
and winter beauty, its tower of cedar  
clapboard pulled from sap, drawn out  
and dried. Reflections will move  
like shadows and the geese will pass over  
the island's wide eyes, its pools empty  
and sky-staring forever.

INTERLUDE: CROSSING AT MOORE'S FERRY

They have been leading me, showing me the way,  
but when we come to the dark passage  
where the river runs beneath caverns,  
one rowboat to cross—they stop  
and I know I'll be going it alone.  
I take the paddle, dip it into the names  
of the dead, the well's cool slate  
casting a spare glint on the cave walls.  
Water slaps the flank of the boat. I can smell  
granite, the cool metallic run off  
thick with slick things that grow in the dark.



# III

## THE YEARS BETWEEN

At night the ducks bed down in the leaves.  
Someone's been living on the abandoned tug,  
riding a bicycle past our house and back at night.  
A neighbor says they're called *aquatic squatters*  
and move marina to marina every thirty days.

\*\*

I bus each morning and evening  
to and from Scappoose's corridor of gas station,  
liquor store, Quik-Mart. Old pickle plant, sawmill,  
weedy tracks that dream of distance.  
Sometimes we stop at NARA's low grey building  
for a quiet Native girl.

In the gym the headdressed Indian  
stares out from the wall and we chant,  
we clap and stomp until the bleachers vibrate  
with the sharp tenor of metal,  
neighboring bodies brushing us with polyester sleeves  
and whiffs of sour or Old Spice—

freed from European History, Geometry,  
we believe in this, claiming one-sixteenth Cherokee, claiming  
we too settled these hills and fought for our lives,  
as the football players run sideways  
to make the catch on the arrow-line floor.

\*\*

Years later, only those who have left  
share Misty's article on Facebook:

*As a REAL Native American...  
My three siblings and I all attended Scappoose High,  
during which time we were subject to the most  
outrageous degradation, ignorance and outright racism  
I've ever had to deal with in my life.*

We say, we had no idea.

A lunch they'd ask me  
what you do on an island.  
When rain burdens the land  
the puddles reflect sky. When  
it freezes, they become ice.

GENESIS (HIGH SCHOOL)

We were ready

to eat the sun. Entire evenings, asking—  
How. When. The burnt-edged clouds

caught in light and flamed like foil  
over the schoolyard playground,

splintered bark chips and concrete  
promising skinned knees

and tongues full of dust  
and bodies of quickening

light. We ordered the biggest waffle.  
The sky was too whole, a domed roof.

The sky was full of the constellations of our childhood.  
On Highway 30 they whirled

like a man turns time backward  
with a wooden handle. We kissed strange lips

beneath them. Car lights sliced darkness  
like ripe fruit, lit stop-sign ghosts.

Every first dream began and broke  
there in the cracked lava of the sky.

## THE LIMITS OF THINGS

*Scappoose, Oregon*

All summer we found edges:  
spines pushed against the rusted Mustang  
in the shop smelling of spilled gasoline

& dust, faded pin-up girls  
staring over the dark barrels  
of shotguns—up the hill

where the road ended in clear-cut,  
in a sun-blistered Caterpillar shedding  
yellow paint onto the dry grass—

curve of highway at night  
where he drove steadily toward my island  
& I leaned back against the window's cool glass

to watch the constellations  
slide their painted fingers  
above the firs.

Then in quiet parking-lot dark  
he'd run his hands along my sides,  
breast to quick of hip. I'd pretend

to be my body, wriggle myself smaller  
in the pastel t-shirt  
my mother had picked out,

pretend to be someone  
who would love him, less slipped  
& more fixed

& not already becoming  
something else. Each time, at night  
or in sun so bright it blinded,

if you looked closely  
it was everywhere: silt dust  
gathering in the crook of my arm,

glittering the moles on my neck,  
stitching a glinted aura  
against the plain afternoon.

## DEMETER REMEMBERS

Little socks wadded up in the wash.  
For years their cries created spring.  
Seeds sprouted of their own accord.  
She didn't ask for wheat, but was handed  
tomatoes bulging, red and shine.  
She stoops to pick at the spot on the floor;  
she'll wash it, soon. Scrubbing  
after their muddy footprints.  
Digging the rocks from the treads  
of their shoes. They run the mazes  
worn into the floor, their footsteps echoing.

## FIRST BOYFRIEND

In the basalt sand & bee-haze  
of Sauvie in late summer,  
we ate pink sugar cookies

at his family reunion, sprayed Cool Whip  
on strawberries & cracked Budweisers.  
When his uncle started cursing,

we walked out to the waterline,  
dark clay mud buzzing with wasps,  
distant roar of motor boat,

smell of gasoline & tree sap. Weaved  
around foam & bottle-cap, tossed diaper,  
used condom, the sand sticking to my thighs

& wind pulling up from cottonwoods,  
separating the light. Where we came from  
it was a blessing to leave, & I craved distance,

watched the jets arc over invisible earth-lines,  
their contrails linger & feather out. I was there  
because he was already a departure.

I was there because I would let him go.  
I breathe back into my small self  
& tell her to walk on,

head now toward the last spit  
of land, peninsula guarded by lighthouse,  
white walls shining noon after noon in heat.

## SEVENTEEN

A man from Belgium sits on the farm bench  
and asks me about antioxidants.  
His hair is metal, eyes smooth water.  
Antioxidants? Cinnamon. Cobbler.  
This island? Water, blackberries tumble to secret places.  
There's dust coming in slats of light  
straddling picnic tables.  
Plenty of fields to lie down in.

He listens with his grey pants tucked and folded around his hips,  
still fingers. He is stillness  
and all around the farm moves, shimmering.  
Old hay clamors, dizzy in the shed of pesticides  
and dead machinery. My boss interrupts with  
*soak that stain in gasoline* and brings me a tuna sandwich.

All day I bag blueberries but I'm dreaming  
of places I haven't seen. His eyes  
are in the haybales and peaches, orchard of lopsided fruit.  
The island mud grasps me like hands  
but I'm learning to be slippery.  
I'm in the back splitting open HoneyStix.  
In the field filling my mouth.

STILL LIFE, 2010 (DRIVING HIGHWAY 30)

Past where Jacob pounds nickels  
into rings in the rain, a hillside dripping ivy,  
thistlecone, little blue stars

I don't know the names of; past alders  
and a bench seat woven from thick plastic,  
the view to Washington marked in river—

past a sign-scored road  
lined with crosses, Tajia resting in the leaves  
at the bottom of the ravine

and Kerrigan just up the curve,  
where again her car tumbled from cliff  
into branches, too heavy to hold:

past where my mother and I held our breath  
on an empty tank, last-ditch deadends and gates  
scraping open to mud,

past where I say I left, rain creaking softly  
toward a new decade  
when a Scappoose girl will be the first

to die from a drug new to America,  
what she'll think is ecstasy:  
and the giant candle from the old factory

will burn its fake flame  
along the highway's flat exterior—  
some flag furling, some whisper of West,

some salt air that floats in from Astoria,  
tumbles over all of them—  
and my name tacked up on the list of *left*,  
with a note: never really was.



# IV

## SAMHAIN (URBAN FARM)

*Eugene, Oregon*

That whole fall, walking home with fruit in my hands,  
muddy and ripe. Withered turnips,  
tomatoes turning gold. Beets unstuck from mud  
under the wall by the parking lot

where the soot of days gathered in the moss.  
Apples from the angel-hair grass in the orchard,  
from the woman who said she could eat sunlight,  
who cupped water and poured it over skin,

twined pea vines and opened seed to flower.  
I washed them in my dorm bathroom, took the wild  
ugly things to my wood-slatted window,  
kept the apples—their scabs opening into webs,

bugs slowly departing, skin withering  
into sweetness—on my desk.  
Outside the leaves, wind-drunk, pushed sideways  
as they had when she pointed in the four directions:

north, east, south, west. I took this map with me  
all year and looked to where, upstream, my island  
slipped like mud. I was lucky enough—or did I make it so?—  
for another town to learn my name.

## AGATE STREET

Revise again: maybe those were  
the happiest four years, coasting  
down Eugene's streets at night,

pushing the buttons of my bike lights  
with half-drunk fingers.  
Evenings my roommates and I drove slowly

past the bakery to see if they'd put out  
their old bread, watched the alley  
for the lone, aproned shadow cutting the lights,

bringing armfuls out into the rain.  
The four of us would sit in the dark car  
as if there was something bigger

we were waiting for.  
We never got bread. But how to account  
for that whole summer shouting

into the heat? Leaping into the lake  
like we never worried that our bodies  
would stop bending like flowers toward light.

Who can say anything about happiness,  
the way the planet grinds  
and if we count the seconds, the afternoon is long.

## CAPE PERPETUA

### *Oregon Coast*

From high above on the fenced bluff: ocean pounds  
its ending song below. I could name anything here

and be brushed off into stillness. Broken  
rock, sandstone fissure, charred stick. Coals

coiling into roses, gripped in dreams of water.  
Here where salt mist pours

through the trees, I'm the happiest I've ever  
been, pretending fire and pine needles

grasp at sky, pretending ocean

is a long-lost mother  
rocking me to sleep at night with such fierceness

that the whole continent listens,  
that a seafloor crept by lava burns

in the moon's pulling, and far away the planet's whisper  
begins to recede.

## SOMEWHERE EVERYTHING IS BURNING

We climb the butte on a whim,  
you wrapping your face in a gingham scarf. Again  
we are the dark leaves, slipping.  
I always have to find out. The light  
leaves the cone as we trek up  
and at last come to the flat top,  
banked in feet of snow, frozen trees  
glittering. The fire tower sits cold  
on its metal stilts, and below, tanks of gas  
buried in drifts. No footprints here—  
no one's been up since this snow—  
and we're only warm enough  
because we're running, you reaching your hand  
for mine, the land falling away  
as if we're taking flight  
while sun burns every last surface,  
burns in the spaces between our gloved, uplifted fingers,  
starred with questions  
we'll leave here, we'll scale away from,  
turn over on our tongues  
later in cabin dark.

## PORTRAIT OF US

What of it, having made something? I've never  
not been lonely, so I paint that in too, a tall poplar,

rounded on top. I paint in love, a streak of color  
binding sunset to sunset, one empty apartment to the next,

a candle flame glimpsed through crystal glass.  
I stay with him on his twenty-first birthday

and we take nips of his roommate's Grey Goose in bed,  
his first drink after his father's daily jug.

Later he'll have four beers, stretch out on the floor and say  
*I feel like Jesus*. I'll drink four cosmos and bet everything.

FLORENCE, OREGON

I'm parting my lips. The sea sets  
beyond the shells clinging to the rocks.  
Like fool's gold in a wave, salt  
crests an old wall and leaves itself  
sticky and wet. Our shorts stain the seats  
of your car white, wet from running  
in the waves. We drive to town,  
my face crusty, your hair a mess.  
Order clams and mussels in broth,  
butter and wine. Out the stained glass  
the sun sets, an amulet sinking into a bath  
of watercolor, indigo and cadmium...  
the day widening to fit us,  
the river glistening toward the ocean pass.

WIDE IS WIDER HERE

*Osprey Bend, Idaho*

Four hours into wilderness,  
nothing breaking but scatters of deer.

Even now, I arrive only  
at a few signs clustered

like veins on the back of a hand:  
gas station, ranch house, road

where I can see trucks approaching  
for miles. I walk out, get lost

in aspens. Hill after hill  
like petals curled in mourning

on a poppy withered with day.  
Sun lays its palm on my back.

At the cabin, rusted lantern,  
watered garden. Riversong, rock.

This land chopped out  
by power lines, interrupted only

by the drone of a car gunning the straights,  
leaning into the turns along the river

that've eaten a truck or two. In winter  
the hot springs send vapor for miles.

AS MUCH OF A MYTH TO ME

*Clayton, Idaho*

Here even the clouds don't move but sit  
like soft snails along the ridge for hours.  
How far it is to anywhere. We climb all day and only  
find boulders, pulled down by gods. *Garden  
of Giants*, some long-ago fall. River the only  
route out, riffles and rapids for miles.  
On the hill someone has planted an American flag,  
past where we've gotten to, an until-now untouched  
bulb of rock. At night I watch its striped wave  
before dark takes its detail, turns it to silhouette.



## CASTLE PEAK

On a hill just before the slag heap  
of an old mine, just past  
a pile of gravel & mine shaft  
spanned by two-by-fours,  
where the river rolls down the mountain's  
white noise, silent watching,  
someone built a planked tub, fixed a tube  
to funnel cold water from the river  
& another to bring hot water  
from the springs. We strip & slide  
on the wet boards, then lower icy limbs,  
the mineralized water taking each slip of skin & dirt,  
goosebumps fading in the soak  
as the snow slides off the mountains.  
Here everything is as it was  
before they started: only these ghosts  
remain—*Keep Out* signs, toxic waste. Some falling off  
from a world of untouched light. Some DNA  
twisted like copper wires  
into a necklace of star-stuff  
that became us, by accident, a triple turn  
& the world landed us here, in yesterday's  
tomorrow, a pool glowing with algae & all  
the single-celled organisms from which  
this came. In silence we thank some sleight of hand  
for this cold mountain  
& the stillness that surrounds us like a torch,  
this space that forgets us, turns us inside out.

A WEEK ON THE SALMON RIVER

Last day. Leaving, & what does it mean:  
his thin frame in the cabin window. Gathering  
light.

We searched for Survival Lake  
in the valley of death,  
bones of scattered ribcages, one hairy hoof  
still intact & yearning.

In the folds of the hills, creased valleys,  
dry gave way to wet. We followed the trickle  
to a stream, hoping the stream

would empty into lake,  
but it only led to a marsh  
of small yellow flowers. Tubers, aspens,  
& beyond, two carcasses under a tree.

Unchecked & unbalanced, out here,  
the sage filling us with ticks & envy, the sky  
bleeding on as always, nothing watching  
two humans trudge up a red hill.

Below, two trucks gather speed  
on the highway, their lights hurtling  
toward each other & then away  
toward separate towns.

FOG LINE

*after Tom Andrews*

Half-moon in the camp dish.

Which dark night is this?

Bar of soap in its plastic bag.

We forgot the salt.

Gas station tea again.

This nylon breeze.

Fishing lure like sun on rocks.

Blue-faced mountain.

Was it Wyoming with the gas-station flags?

One thousand miles of corn.

Quick: the stove canister's rattling gas.

Peas in the camp dish.

The soft pocket of a pack.

Look, I don't want to start something.

Lakes unfolding like gloves beyond the dash.

What's next?

Thunder on the river.

One hundred carefully said thoughts.

His hands drowning the gutted fish.

Its worms like tubes of mourning.

My eyes at dinner.

All the lake tonight.

The impossible cream of mist.  
Here, wade out to the stone.  
Osprey!  
Toes like meat gripping bone.  
Dull moon in the camp dish.  
Awake?  
Another half-dressed morning.  
I don't want to put on clothes.  
How Eve must have felt.  
Bathing in the river.  
What's another city dressed as God?  
The water...  
Ribs poking through flesh.  
His curved toes.  
Heating water in the camp dish.  
Another blurred Saturday.  
What day is this?  
Silence stretching across all four states.  
No, not those.  
Hot breath.  
No road!  
The ripe hand of God.  
Stars and mesh.  
I smell like sour wine.

Wet spot on a stone.

Do we look like fish?

Hair laughing in the wind.

A fist full of sand.

Another peanut butter sandwich.

My hands smell like fluorescent soap!

A kiss?

Bear-scented night.

## RIDING THE EMPIRE BUILDER

Progress makes its white way  
through hills chiseled out to tracks,  
the long history of the double-stack

bringing everything we need, everything:  
*listen to the night, O wise ones, sleep is coming,*  
a woman mutters as we pass.

There is no church here  
but I see steeples, I see bones  
and burials, all that is America

in stumps and the shimmering miasma  
of the reservoir under the dry hills,  
a speed boat's single wake

rocking the water  
like geese in motion, the water  
we all must drink, or die.

The same train that took me  
from Portland to Chicago when I was young:  
ticket to the metropolis, to follow my ancestors

back the way they came out,  
when passage was protected by army  
and treaties nullified where they found gold.

Through the window the summer sun  
tears the color from the wooden tray  
and leaves it sandy, bleached bone:

America is in these rusted spokes,  
white-peeling trailers. Fire  
in the sage brush, a mattress

propped up backward, catching flame—  
America, you'll die trying. Railroad tracks  
and hand-ties. Some inheritance

passed from the men before me  
to the man in me, a singular desire  
that burns this land down.

## THIS UNLIVABLE PLACE

Across the lake, stream steadily empties  
from snowpack. Deep turquoise of perma-frost  
under ice. We sit in shorts on the bank,

lucky to have arrived, to have been pointed  
in the right direction, up and up the hill  
on granite gravel that slid under us,

roots we picked our way up like ladders.  
It's hard to say what's up here, what's coded  
in the rock we sit on, why we take off our socks,

dip our toes and watch the sun slide off the glacier. Why  
we climb to this slick melt, cut-crease  
of alpine wind, snow-saddle and beyond it

nothing we know. Why you and I are here  
in our twenty-sixth years, scouring hours  
on the scree of mountain goats,  
chasing some other way out.

## GIRL WESTERN

I scale up the wolf-bones of the hill  
where no one's been, look out toward mine road,  
pick-ups, blue river. (I'm only saying

what I see. Trying to be better.) Taking  
my body through paces, then doing it all backward.  
I go to town, shake down the man-poet for coins

and mine some femininity from the mountains:  
or maybe I could just be a shadow  
hopping over the tracks. No one's trying

to be beautiful here. River guides' eyes  
hold the whole of it as they drink coffee  
outside the café. What I'm saying

is that here newspapers fly on the wind.  
I let it be a photograph  
with no caption—no story, no end. The Western

hills buck up in rude tectonics, ready  
to slip. You can sit and watch  
the birds circle their tops,

read the sky's every minute. You can wait  
as earth's curl takes the valley into darkness:  
first the source of the river, then its mouth.



## BADLANDS

Ghost of far-off wind  
& lightning in staked forks  
on the horizon—  
then a few fat raindrops  
pounding cracked earth,  
dry in seconds.

We wake to hot blue sky, dawn  
& the cairns on the hill  
stretch higher. Stumble out  
to rim of field & road,  
stopped by a snake basking  
in brown coils. It's a morning

to snap the tent poles again,  
roll plastic into bag  
& check the dry grass  
for keys. We are lucky to leave,  
passing on like ----.  
So dry that little lives.

A pack of mountain goats.  
We gear down to gas station,  
iced tea. Far from our mothers.  
Too far from anything  
to be anything but wind  
or memory.

It's the leaving  
when things are cemented  
in the eye: red cones rising

in air so thin, so dry that little lives,  
that sage & grass are lucky,  
grasshopper & cicada,  
a few mountain goats.  
We lean on toward other maps,  
a gas station to buy iced tea

that tastes like blessing,  
like a mother holding  
out her hands.  
Kiss when we get to lakes,  
their blue a new afterimage

caught in flash of photograph.

NEAR WILLISTON, NORTH DAKOTA

Oil rises from cracked earth  
& men wipe down pick-ups daily, roll out

& back again, haloed in grease & country,  
rolling cigarette papers.

In the back alley an old porch  
turns its back on the sun,

setting auburn. Upwards  
toward slaking shingles

a girl watches the light slink across the fields

as the moon rises  
over the constellations of oil towers

& reaches into her room  
with cool fingers.

Her dad said the towers would be her bedtime story  
so she leans out toward them, counting flares

like Morse code, like a lonely operator  
tapping out messages to the other side.

She leans & leans until  
a dozen moths come

to perch on her mouth—  
moths she inhales like darkness,

their velvety wings rustling at the back of her throat.

## JOYRIDE

We sail through Iowa  
as if it is meant for us, for our passing:

miles and miles of corn  
a canvas to be painted against,

Jesus thrown into relief  
on the brick drives, flagpoles

calling out against the radio noise.  
We push through rainstorms

flattened on our windshield,  
through six tanks of fracked gas

hauled up from dinosaurs, mastodons  
pressed into carbon,

turned into speed. Signs urge us  
to choose life. We're sure we have:

grocery stores amazing  
again, Spanish olives stuffed in jars

and bright whoopie pies. At night  
we sit under the ruined stars

as if we still belong  
to their myriad pings of light.

# V

## POSTCARD HOME

Riding through Virginia, ginkos yellow and stinking  
into fall, everything falling to winter of bare sticks.  
On the bus that song comes on, one of the ones  
a boy said was for me. He used to drive out to my flat  
horizon, winter-faded fields, pooled worlds  
of reflected sky. Island girl—picked up and dropped off  
there where bridge angled down from highway  
into cool, stenciled darkness. Herons in matching blue jackets,  
clumsy wings. Wipers working fast against the rain.

## VIRGINIA

The drowned squirrel in the backyard waits.  
Leaves flash silver dollars, paving truck  
spells its warning ahead. Summer comes on  
like hot asphalt, sticky before it sets. A chance  
to mark the poison. Across the street  
they've attached ropes to the pines, pickups  
to pull them. Still, there's hope in what can grow—  
what will grow all summer, blooming into heat:  
spiders, ants, roaches. Flowers & weeds.  
At the reservoir we stare into the water  
& imagine the bottom swirling with seeds. All the old fossils  
turning to oil. Will the squirrel disappear, turn  
into quickening light? All summer I leave it covered.  
At night I see its soggy tail rising  
over the lawn, skin sloughing from its back,  
its restless body battering the fallen pines.

## CHILDHOOD

### *Bitterwater Lane*

Fall steals the light,  
grinding everything down to flame. A list

of things I miss: little ghostling  
of a different season, braided rug,

love bug washed out with the rain.  
How the rows of easter-egg-colored

townhouses smelled in winter.  
Ripe dense fog. And a certain house,

once, painted marble gray,  
and inside, blackberry tartlet

pulled from oven in company,  
more wine poured. I could see

a life there, even then—shiny and foreign,  
a scene in a snow globe,

where each thing tasted a little like another,  
slick custard joy and the elderberry smack

of illness, where the metal spoon  
fell into its slot by the stove, each thing

belonging in sugared stillness:  
gilded, filmy oranges preserved in a jar.

## ANOTHER O'CLOCK

Sitting in the chair next to the window,  
Looking at the back of his head on the couch  
I want to say *your hair looks like a bird's nest*  
or *straw*, or *waves*  
*all curled in on themselves, something autumnal,*  
caught in the overhead light and tufted to one side—

but I don't, I keep this small thought  
for me. He unwraps a foil candy I gave him  
and puts it in his mouth. It's Halloween  
and we're hunkered in warm, wet Virginia:  
different city, same flowered couch.  
It comes in quiet, fast—the soft tap  
of things we used to say.



## CLOSEST TO KNOWING

Flying east again at 200 mph, each quiet  
is my foot slipping back into the shape

of island: how mist crept up the field  
at sundown. There's no old living there, anymore,

just the new neighbors pulling out trees  
and knocking down walls,

their lights slicing the night,  
reflecting on white fences and waxed cars.

Farther out, farming families keep the Sabbath,  
watch Jesus in the grain, think the sky is theirs

to cultivate. My parents sit down again  
to an empty table. All of us act out stories

told to us long ago: *Your eyes shall be opened,*  
*and ye shall be as God.* Maybe—

my plane dips in and out of cloud,  
dull hum of engine, hurry toward dark.

There's no home to go back to. And yet  
I know that miles west

distance still carves and shines  
out my childhood windows. Fir and field

to cottonwood, geese carving paths  
through the pond's ice.

## NAME EVERYTHING

And know  
even on this mountainside, so close  
to some leaping-off, some unravelling  
into element,  
I'll never quite name anything:

the scattered skirts of how  
rock has fallen and been left  
to lie. The distance contained  
in blue, like the memory  
of the camp counselor

I fell in love with in fifth grade,  
who whittled a hole  
in my log-section necklace  
and hung it around my neck.  
I was truly anything then,

speaking swirling shapes  
into the dark  
above my cabin bed,  
dredging fool's gold with my hands.  
Even here

I can't conjure that feeling, can't unbraid  
myself into fibers again, pin moments  
like butterflies' eyed wings  
and write *Rhopalocera* under them,  
take them to the ocean to find more

beneath salt. Here I mouth  
*crow's nest, pyre*. Pry into owl pellets  
for skeletons.  
Look, this mountain speaks ancient—  
the stream white-watering its way down,

its eddies murmuring  
of its first travelers,  
bone and ash beneath my feet.  
It longs to hear its whispered  
true names, deep as gongs  
and slow as glaciers.

## IN PLACE OF WINGBONES

There, island mornings raised  
like cattle. Mother stringing a God's eye,  
dying melted wax red with crayon  
to make candles, looping the felt  
from the loom into ties, singing in the dark.  
I mixed concoctions in my bedroom,  
dug to find jeweled rocks and a spate  
of coal I thought was a mine,  
thought we'd get rich off of. Sunlight  
only a reminder of winter  
which would come with its shadow-  
monsters and sweet bells.  
Which would come again, with silence  
and wrapped toys. Those white rooms  
live inside me like a daughter  
curled in an egg, already fingered and toed,  
tips she'll touch the world with,  
perfect and pressed like the frilled christening dress  
in the museum, glass-cased  
in a valley of miners and rust.

## ISLAND: APOCALYPSE AT SCHOOLYARD HILL

Because nothing else can contain it:  
let the paint peel  
from the elementary school

and the cicadas multiply  
then divide, their bodies rain like pellets  
into the corners of the concrete playground.

Let evening take it—  
no orange lights flicker on,  
the booby-trapped woods by the church

(grow wild and abandoned,  
spit out their ropes and fill in their hidden holes.  
West, the Tualatin mountains watch,

dark except for the (glass) (abandoned) mansion  
beaming back the low light,  
playing at moon. Let water rise:

first over the bottomlands,  
pooling around the lamps of daffodils,  
joists of houses, cracked garden hoses.

Let raccoons move uphill  
to the gym; mountain lions swim  
the swollen channel and head

for the star-pines straddling the ridge.  
Oaks sneak saplings through the chainlink  
and the sun-tarnished drinking fountain

offers a low, waterless hiss  
as the edges of the track  
slowly slip into current.