

# Illuminated Body

Julia Katrina Aguilar Cariño  
Norfolk, Virginia  
Baguio City, Philippines

BA in English, Old Dominion University, 2005

A thesis presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia  
in candidacy for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English

University of Virginia  
May, 2015

~

*For all things made  
more luminous*

~



## Table of Contents

### Mother Tongue

Umbilical.....	1
We Named Our Dogs After Liquor.....	3
Rituals.....	5
Transmission.....	7
Mother Tongue.....	8
Hungry.....	11
Beacons.....	13
Climbing Chuyo.....	15
After the Earthquake.....	16
Pusoy Dos.....	19
A History of Solitary Confinement.....	20

### Storm Song

Zero.....	25
Sweetgum.....	26
Meridians.....	27
Train Song.....	29
The Idea of God at the Midnight Karaoke Bar.....	30
<i>A tempo</i> .....	32
Dama de Noche.....	33
Rosemary for Remembrance.....	34
The Drowned World.....	35
Blood Moon Over Siquijor.....	37
Matchsticks.....	39
Long Creek Trail.....	42
Tidewrack.....	44
Storm Song.....	45

### Illuminated Body

Windmills.....	53
Tremors.....	54
Honey Locust, .....	56
Strandbeest.....	57
Bortle Scale.....	59
Philosophers.....	61
Illuminated Body.....	63
Tearing Bread.....	64
Impression of the Shore, Memory of the Sea.....	65
Bare.....	67
Lake Water.....	68
Aubade.....	70
A Card of Yellow Celluloid Stuck Loosely Into A Book of Poems Long Forgotten on My Shelf .....	71
Vespers.....	72



*~ Mother Tongue*



## Umbilical

Baguio City, August, 1983, for Mama

*What echoed there, if not me—tiny body  
Afloat, akimbo, awake or at rest? —Tracy K. Smith, Interrogative*

I was born in 1983, in the thick of monsoon,  
on the August day the brains of the president-  
to-be splattered against the dark

of the tarmac. He stepped from the plane, was felled  
by an assassin's bullet. I came in the morning.  
They raced to the hospital

in my grandfather's burgundy Mitsubishi;  
hurricane on the horizon, all power out.  
Amidst frantic sterilizations, the sound

of generators whirring to life, doctors ran down  
the white-tiled halls and nurses made jokes  
at my mother's expense: *This one's fully delighted!*

In the womb there is no time but the dark:  
no numbers but my feet  
pressed against placenta, kicking

against the insides of my mother's walls  
to find their secret openings, depressions,  
the meanings of rain. What I remember

is the shape of my mother's face as she pushed,  
the crinkling of her eyes as she speared me  
into the world; the way they cut off

a measure of cord to lay in her palms,  
to gray with me through the years,  
age with me by her breast. That August,

the assassinated senator's wife wore yellow  
at all her rallies—the signature that meant  
a people's hope. We stood in the rain,

in the streets: men, women and children—to catch  
a glimpse. Does memory betray me?  
I know I passed through earth,



was born on the cusp of summer heat,  
then plunged into seasons of rain. Each new year,  
I saw the blistering of fireworks over the rust

of corrugated roofs. Afternoons,  
I walked home, calf-deep in street water. I drank  
at the gurgling showerhead, the way lizards

licked nectar off the broad leaves of hibiscus.  
When I turned seven, I decapitated  
my grandmother's favorite statue of the Virgin Mary,

playing ball in the house. That same year, I knew  
the shock of my grandfather's blue-grey eyes,  
the clean gaze he bore till his death bed,

the smoothness of his skin, his body  
a white sail we carried out  
into the streets on our shoulders.

## We Named Our Dogs After Liquor

Whiskey and Scotch, Bourbon and Brandy,  
Blackie, after Johnnie Walker Black—a dark  
and snarling Doberman who growled  
beneath the chicken coops at night. They snapped  
at our legs and choked against chains, biting themselves  
when they couldn't reach our calves, hind legs bleeding  
with flies where skin burned red in the watery sun.

I hated them all.

We had 3 Margaritas—all poodles who ran away.  
You can replace an animal but not its nature,  
I learned, as they chased me up the stairs. I smelled  
their salt breath and limey teeth, felt  
their powder-white gone muck-brown curls  
rubbing against my calves as I slammed into the door,  
banging my fists as grandfather (from whom I'd inherited fear)  
shut me out of the house when he heard barking.

We kept dogs but were afraid of them, something necessary  
like bars on all the windows, precautionary as the dead bolts  
that fused us shut into our cubby holes lest we end up beaten  
and purple, hung from the ceiling fans like the neighbors  
down the street. You live in this country, you put up bars,  
you train your dogs to snarl as you laugh at their stink-faces,  
their short-wet breathing. You learn to love their teeth  
when they clamp their jaws around your wrists,  
to love the way they bite because they start out pure  
and only lunge because you've taught them, love them because  
they take the guesswork out of how you'd feel if you didn't have dogs.

For a month, every afternoon at 3, papa put Tequila  
into my arms—a wet puppy, golden sunset  
brown, beautiful and sticky-eyed, so still  
that I was scared and trickled yellow down my pants.  
Dogs didn't behave like this—quiet, that mute alien  
way she nuzzled up my arms as I trembled, breathing  
in her soft cheese and yeast smell, her pink paws. Later,  
growing braver, I flicked off the ticks and fleas  
from her scruff into the grass and fell in love.  
One afternoon, I saw Tequila penned up in the neighbor's yard,  
already growling as the man who took a liking to her swatted

at her yapping face with newspaper. That is how  
they train them for the dog fights, said my uncle. Fear is a thing  
you can give away, I learned, like beauty,  
like dogs and every other goddamned thing.

## Rituals

1

We woke in our separate beds at 6am, body clocks  
 flickering our eyes into wakefulness.  
 Father would come into the bathroom  
 adjoining our rooms to peek through the slats  
 cut into the top of the door, and there, the morning  
 complete now, I'd wiggle my fingers, *hello*, to let him know  
 that I saw him, that I was safe in bed, as little  
 movement as possible to keep the moment secret.  
 But all this is gone now—small brown room  
 with milky breaths of sleeping sister  
 by my side, mowl of kittens in the attic, the hens  
 scraping at the ground underneath our window,  
 their claws on the gravel sounding like matchsticks  
 birthing flame. These things I'd listen for, lying  
 in the light, in that room where my entire world began.  
 It's all gone now, we are old but still licking  
 at those tiny orange flames.

2

Mang Bruno, the family chauffeur  
 would pick me up after school and we'd tune  
 the car stereo to afternoon soaps  
 on Philippine radio, waiting for my sister  
 to be let out. When the station buzzed,  
 and the voices dimly flickered out into  
 a white static, he'd ask me to choose—  
 random numbers, *for luck*, he said, to pool  
 them in the illegal lottery. Or  
 a number for the dog he'd pick at the fights,  
 or the cock he'd place his money down on, numbers  
 like water slipping through my fingers, numbers  
 to buy the thick rice wine distilled  
 at the corner store. Even this is sacrament—  
 rules to follow in case bad luck befall us, coins  
 disappearing, slick magic silver  
 slipping into another pocket. *Do not choose  
 the number 2*, he says. *See here—how she bends  
 like a mother kneeling over her sick child, her head  
 cowers over a bottle of gin.*

## 3

We improvised Ouija Boards—used coins  
and overturned glasses as scryers, drawing circles  
with the letters of the alphabet in them, muttering *Our Father*  
under our breaths, eliminating the *Amen*—the undoing  
(we told each other) of all things holy. Behind the school,  
snickering about the nuns in grey habits, the ghosts  
in the restrooms stalls, itchy in our green and beige  
Catholic schoolgirl uniforms—we asked questions  
of the gathering spirits: *Who are you and where have you been?*  
And we wondered, but did not voice, our own rosary  
of fears: Is there light within that darkness growing  
in my sister's hands? Is there a shadow holding  
the hem of its black skirt over grandmother's head  
as she grieves? We make wishes, burn strips  
of notebook paper over matchflame, send  
our wishes flickering into the dark.

## 4

I used to count to ten. Under my breath,  
each time I passed a car wreck, each time  
the typhoons hummed over head, each time we heard  
the shriek of sheet metal peeling from the makeshift roofs  
of squatter houses in the wind. I counted to ten,  
when earthquakes rattled china in the cupboards  
and bookshelves flung their books clear across  
the parquet floors. I'd arch my back  
like the cats, teeth bared and breath  
hissing, counting until I was certain  
that I was still there. And now, long after I've felt  
such shaking, now living in a country  
whose well is bone-dry of tremors, I still keep that habit—  
rounding a corner on a bike, pouring water  
for my tea, numbers flickering  
under my eyelids as I fall asleep.

## Transmission

Grandmother sits by the window,  
buzzing teeth electric  
with the coming rain. She tells me  
she can feel her death

camped out beyond the edges of the house,  
a vision of grandfather the way he was, slouched  
into his orange chair, blanket  
tucked around his waist,

water bottle warmed  
and resting beneath his feet. And her fingers  
press, trembling into the bread  
that I have brought, as we sit and watch the news.

There is nothing left to predict ourselves.  
The TV hisses about the latest kills,  
broadcasting wan faces  
of missing boys and girls. Some murderous stones

have leveled houses on a mountain side  
near by. And we watch the drops  
in currency exchange, release them  
with our breath. She is lonely, I know—

all the children flown and learning  
to divine things on their own.  
How to teach them what the old know?  
They who sit on sidewalks

by open doors, certain that an ache  
behind their knees, or a left ear twitching  
means no drought: an almanac  
of tongues and limbs forecasting rain.

## Mother Tongue

The first poem in the world  
is *I want to eat.*' —Erica Jong, *Where It Begins*

Mother says I lifted myself up,  
pulling on the lip of my white-  
and-yellow-checked playpen.  
It was in the aftermath: my splinter-  
shocked and rheumy-eyed body wracked  
from seizures that had shaken me  
into a sleep so deep, I dreamed  
twelve hours straight.

And waking, having never before then spoken  
a word more than *ma* or *pa*, they say  
I proclaimed in one long, unbroken sentence—  
I was hungry and wanted something to eat.

\*

I don't know if I believe it all,  
but what do I know of the mouth?  
Doesn't it shape its hungers out of absences it names?

Even now in my kitchen the simmer  
of ginger on the stove—a broth  
that swells the celadon  
slices of *sayote* into sweetness,  
a slow softening to chasten my impatient mouth.

The small hungers unclench here:  
I can hear my grandmother  
mumbling in the shadows, conversing  
with her afternoon radio shows...and then the waft  
of lemongrass and sprigs  
of purple-tufted chive blossoms,  
floating.

\*

In her kitchen grandmother picked the meat off  
the fish bones for me. Her hands etched  
from fingertip to base of palm—a jagged herringbone  
pattern, jumble of lines, furrows

I could follow with fingernail, each line thin like the edge of knife.  
 The fish reduced to carcass picked clean, she pressed  
 the meat into white mounds.  
 She lifted each one up to my mouth and I bit  
 into the body cleaned of barbs.

I could not decipher this language she knew—  
 how to lift and slide the flesh from the frame, to dismantle  
 a body into a heap of glistening.  
 I wanted to live  
 in those bones, their clean  
 and faceted glaze, my grandmother  
 saying *Eat. Just eat.*

\*

The body is the word made flesh. Not the word  
 of some shadowy god spitting lightning  
 from his mouth, but my word and my mouth;  
 my hunger and singing. It is the bread  
 risen and the curl of my tongue  
 around the wedge of a mangosteen's opal pod.  
 I spoon and lift it from its puckered, damson bed.

The body is the broth, the soup  
 that sings. I press the garlic's hidden spaces  
 I slice the onions from their skins. I peel  
 the carrots in the sink.  
 I want and want.

\*

In my kitchen, grandmother's shadow  
 adjusts the dial on the radio. She sets a glass  
 of iced milk on the counter and I drink,  
 watching it sweat in the half-light  
 of the room. I am waiting for my broth  
 to be done. No words spoken.  
 Just me and grandmother  
 humming cradle song.

Even now, I know few pleasures  
 more tender than this—milk



decanting into the stomach,  
    its long-slow trickle of white. The body  
brimming froth over the rim. Hear  
    the finger that tongues the lip of the glass and sings.

## Hungry

Papa sat by the car  
 smoking Marlboro's, red box,  
 cigarette foil creased  
 into a skinny makeshift toothpick,  
 tucked behind his ear  
 for the aftermeal, guitar  
 leaning beside him in the sand  
 while on his knee he balanced  
 his plate of food. The best meal I ever had—  
 with my papa rubbing his belly  
 by the fire, burning driftwood,  
 spitting fishbones into the flames  
 and singing *You can talk to me.*  
*If you're lonely you can talk to me.*  
 In this memory of song  
 all songs sung by the sea make sense.

By the sea there was no difference  
 between the sand  
 and the salt we grilled the milkfish with,  
 each bite grainy in our mouths, dissolving  
 by the time our fingers  
 lifted the next bite to our lips,  
 no time for anything else  
 but handfuls of buttery jasmine rice,  
 garlic and vinegar, diced tomatoes  
 and onions to steep in chili,  
 soy sauce dripping down our chins.  
 In this memory of food,  
 I could never be from the islands  
 until I ate with both my hands.

But the way we speak  
 is different by the ocean,  
 one breath as if the daylight  
 were running out. The things we do  
 are different—papa let me wade out  
 into the waves even if I didn't know  
 how to swim, so when I followed  
 a group of children around  
 splashing in the foam. I tripped  
 and for a split second rued

stuffing myself with so many  
halves of fish and rice,  
as I fell into the water, panicked  
until I realized the tide went out  
for at least half a mile  
before any visible drop.

In this memory of drowning,  
I am always looking for my father. I sprint  
up the shore, still feeling  
my sea legs, the sound in my ears  
is the hiss of fishbones hitting fire.

## Beacons

Back home, we set fires: threw lit triangles  
     of gunpowder into the streets. New Year and burning,  
 Papa kept them coming, shooting gold  
     into the night as the sky clawed a smoke-white  
 robe around its body. In answer he sent more firecrackers  
     up to touch. That bright burn, that bold show  
 and lightspray pouring down on us its flame coins—  
     Papa kept them coming. Oiling out more finger trails  
 of marbled smoke, greasing the hands  
     that showered down, as if to fill  
 the endless pockets he stretched out. Careful,  
     as if whatever they might catch would slip his grasp.

\*

Back home, I spent money  
     on cigarettes, smoking as I slouched  
 against the one remaining wall of the old and blackened  
     city hall that charred to a crisp when a wayward  
 firecracker set off the whole 2 blocks  
     where vendors spread their wares.  
 People laughed, and I took pictures:  
     the sky all Catherine Wheel, all Whistle Bomb,  
 all rosy with Roman Candles spiking plume after plume  
     of dragon tongue and billow stack. Still,  
 come New Year, I knew—that all over the city  
     there'd be stations: slapdash lean-tos  
 where they bandaged hordes  
     that brought their blistered fingers, bloody  
 from where they held too long those hissing fuses.  
     We couldn't help it—Because of the dark,  
 the window. Because of the dark, the candle.  
     Because of the dark, we spent  
 each thin glimmer of coin we found  
     on any light that we could catch. So singed  
 and stung, see our fingers asking  
     to be burnt: just to hold some fleeting flame  
 we've waited for all year. Hear—the sound of change  
     coming to us as we sleep—*release release*,  
 the clinking calls. See us raise our glasses up to toast.

\*

New Year, a father-daughter dance.  
Almost everyone asleep now, except  
for down the street—a sound  
of retching in the alleyway  
as Papa takes his holster off to sing:

a song from his guerrilla years, a song  
where he dreams of holding skulls as soft  
as peaches in his palms. He wakes among  
trees—so many of them, so little  
left of him. Holds his fingers  
to the yellow light  
of kerosene.

He tells me, he began to speak  
to that light, mimicking it  
to keep him sane, slicking his tongue  
over his lips, first left, then right with every flicker  
from the cup of lampflame.

*If you are at least one half of brightness,  
so am I, he says. If you are  
at least a flicker, so am I.*

## Climbing Chuyo

Ancestor,  
my red throat arcs up  
toward the sky as I lie, prodigal

in the mud, hiding in the tall grass.  
In the green, a red bird chews  
tough seeds, spitting

song as if to split the morning  
from its fog. There was always  
something sinister

about ancestral land—I stood here  
once with my father, his hand  
sweeping across the green,

his mouth claiming all of it, sweet  
green earth as his own body, mountain  
he loved but could not own.

Because we had foreign hands  
around our necks, we knew what it meant  
to own just one small thing.

Because we could choke  
neither mother nor father, we spit  
instead at the land, to water it.

Because an old family curse pared us down,  
birthing girl after girl, we held our breath, broke  
bottles of gin till a cousin was born, male.

Something suckles here, some mountain-  
pig, bending grass to make bed below  
the guava trees. I smell her mouth,

pink ferment of fruit, and think of all  
the ruptured bellies, spilled where I lie.  
Forgotten offering, I never wanted

to come back here, yet my red throat  
arcs up toward the sky—atoning.

## After the Earthquake

*July 1990, Philippines*

When the aftershocks have spaced themselves out,  
we sit out on the porch after dinner, listening  
to news on the radio, and Papa is telling me  
about single-malt scotch—how he learned  
poetry from reading their labels. Once,  
he even impressed my mother by describing the night sky  
to her the way the labels extolled their liquor.

He burnishes the bottle in his hand  
where the surface has greased with mud. Today,  
he walked to town to collect our lot of water  
at the drop off and the disaster relief volunteer  
dropped it trying to slip it to him on the sly.

Papa says tonight, the moon  
has a *clear luminescent amber face* and that the evening  
is *full on the tongue and disinclined to fade*. And he says my girl  
with eyes that *smack of cocoa and sherry, are redolent  
with honeysuckle*, tell your papa that you love him.

We listen to the news, how they say  
now the landslides have been cleared, the helicopters  
have a space to land. And amid the rabble of neighbors  
yelling, mother clatters the pots and pans,  
scours them as best she can under the newly resurrected  
garden tap's sputter of muddied water. Every so often  
the street dogs start up, and the cats  
bristle in yowl, and their sound *reeks of wild  
game and burnt leather*. They duck and hide, cower  
as the tremors start and stop.

And every time, I start up to run out the gate.  
But Papa is saying to hush now, it's over, they're getting shorter  
and shorter, anyway we're already outside.  
Papa is happy—everyone is together, spending time.  
The university where mother teaches is in shambles,  
school's out for us, no bills to pay (or at least  
because City Hall has also fallen down).

We sit out on the porch after dinner, but really  
these days, we sit outside all the time—inside, a ramshackle  
of broken glass and toppled shelves, the kitchen caved in  
from where pillars fell, so on one corner  
of the porch, mother has set up a kerosene stove. Beside it  
she's stacked the canned goods and the 20-lb. bag  
of rice my uncles lugged back from town.

And Papa keeps singing about the sky—  
 how it is *replete with smoke and heather*, how it leaves  
 a sense of headlands, nostalgic of hills.

\*\*

On the porch, my sisters and I drink  
 the boxed juice in waxed cardboard they gave us,  
 and it is really just *sweet and citrus*, though I tell my father  
 it is *multi-dimensional*, gives me *images*  
*of balmy earthscapes with sunlight-flooded orange trees.*

We dig through the box, find squares  
 of American cheese which we peel gently from  
 their cellophane, melt them on charred white bread set  
 too long on open flame. And to us it tastes like *America*,  
 because here, we are amazed that these imported goods,  
 (usually so expensive) have been tucked in beside the spears  
 of dried fish, 10¢ tins of sardines.

In the evening, when grandmother measures out  
 just enough water from the 10-gallon jug to boil the rice,  
 she spoons some of the simmered rice water  
 into a cup for me, sweetens it with sugar, and I  
 tell her it is the best, thinking: it is the *blue milk*  
*a mother gives her babies, it is mud and starch*  
*on the tongue. A rice paddy. A field.*

And soon, on this porch, the sky exists only  
 in what we choose to see—mornings, my sisters and I  
 draw pictures on the backs of the empty ration boxes  
 with stubs of charcoal, draw picket-fenced houses  
 that don't exist in this landscape and in backyards we sketch in trees  
 that burgeon with oranges, apples and mangoes. We draw grass  
 tall enough to sheathe whatever 8-foot gashes rend  
 the gravel of our cul-de-sac.

Every night, I watch, as across the face of sky  
 there appears a smattering needlepoint of birds, black  
 and darning down night's shawl. From the porch,  
 the color turns into a mud-purple that bleeds, cut out  
 by trees brambling haywire and away from us. Beyond the gate,  
 the dogs still start up and the cats still yowl, and when the earth  
 moves I still start running. But in between,

I am happy. And it is a kind of happiness that is *sly*  
*on the uptake*, with a texture *thin and clear* as a pane of glass.  
 A happiness that *has some bite throughout, that opens you*  
 as a door opens—inward, each person into their own house,



where it is ramshackle, all ramshackle. A happiness  
that *smells of wood smoke, of cotton skirts, of caves.* That *smacks*  
*of brandy and vanilla. That is quick to fade.*

## Pusoy Dos

When I think of you, your purpose in life  
seems only to shuffle and spread, silently flick  
at the cards, never speaking. Never, not even  
to say *I pass* or *hit me*, or *fold*.

We sat this way for hours, playing  
Pusoy Dos, building our hands as if  
they were the most sacred vessels  
in the world—more sacred even

than lola's statues of saints in the main house,  
and the low rumbling of the old women slogging  
through their novenas. Our card games  
were an exercise in silence. In the muteness

we carved out, you taught me to read  
the secret tarot of your hands, taught me  
that the bend of the corner of your card  
meant it was your last play, taught me to reveal

my hand only when all the hearts had been won.  
What I learned in silence was to interpret  
each gesture, each look, the crease and partition,  
the cut in the deck I'm playing with. Even now,

when there's a lull in conversation, I can  
read the gritty tension in people's lips, as they smile  
and nervously part their hair. Flick. Your meaning  
turns into the black strip of fly paper

curling around the grills on the windows. Crease.  
Clusters of minced chilies and crackled  
pig skins floating on the oily surface  
of the vinegar bowl. Flick. The wide lip

of the spiced rum bottle and a pack  
of cards, the shuffle and gray sneer of the Jack,  
Queen, King. Rip. There's that eagle on the back  
of your last 25¢ staring up at you, its wings mantled.

## A History of Solitary Confinement

1

*Decipher this*, said father once  
to the quiet air, partition of silk panel dividing  
the room he thought was empty.

And then the sound of barrel sheathing into holster  
under black void of overcoat. Behind the fabric tattooed  
with alphabet from a country  
I could not name, I held my breath.

It is this moment where I am lost, as my father—  
whose arms reach down to lace the brown-black oxfords,  
whose fingers brush the pinstripe clean of dust, whose hands  
replace the paneling in a bottom drawer—  
steps out into a weak February rain, a lump  
of polished steel under his coat.

And there become two men,  
one a dark-winged hieroglyph, small  
and fleeting black bird in the weeds. The other,  
a thick and untame animal standing guard, growling  
cipher unwilling to reveal its true name. They circle  
each other, prowling in the morning light.

I sit behind the cloth, behind the unknown language,  
uncertain of whom to run towards, from whom to flee.  
I know I will never speak of this. Father, you are  
my confinement. My hidden gun. Its dark and oily home.

2

To choose to be silent. To never speak,  
especially when necessary.  
As if in those solitary confinements,  
I could see myself—alighting at the end  
of history, knowing everything,  
denying everything, proud confidant. As if speaking  
betrayed allegiances. Lest the animal  
take the favorite daughter by the throat. As if  
in choosing to bare the markers  
of my fate across my chest, I could forestall

my own breaking—shattered cup, the amber nectar  
 seeping, the syrup blasted out, sticky  
 honey on eggshell carpet, as if  
 by already living with the worms, my body  
 might be without decay.

3

Once, before I knew  
 what a gun was, I lifted it up to call  
 my father home, thinking it was a telephone.  
 Both were black with round parts, both had pieces  
 you could press, both fit into my hands  
 with awkward weight.

4

Later in life, the beloved asks me  
 what the word would be for the sound  
 of his palms  
 gliding down my back: skin  
 on skin, rasp of flesh silkening  
 the fine blue hairs that cover me.

And I turn to him, because enough now—it's time  
 to stop tallying the things we do  
 in the privacy of our rooms. Here, our bodies  
 fit around each other, consonant  
 and key, lock like clips, link and tether, stream  
 of words, torrent exchanged.

Take the safety off—  
 It is the sound of Open.  
 Open. It is the sound  
 of unsheathe, unfold. One less  
 mark that names me broken,  
 one word spoken in the tongue  
 that calls me home.



*~ Storm Song*



## Zero

Which is to say, the point of origin—  
of all numbers. Which is to say that if any number  
is multiplied by zero, that number  
itself becomes nothing. Which is to say  
the lack—of everything or of anything  
we ever knew. Right down to the things  
we thought could never run out—  
hard-to-quantify things, like breath. Hard  
to eradicate things, like hate. Edible  
things like rice, their infinite skitter  
into the cooking pot. Bloody things like men  
and women who stand in line to have  
their limbs severed from their bodies  
by patient land mines in Kabul. Or Somalia. Maybe  
even Jersey—South Beach—Manila—the mountain  
back roads of Chiang-Mai. Where explosions  
in the form of hot fists and circular gun mouths  
ask us what it is we have and do not have yet.  
Questions in the form of quiet hands  
unbuttoning the back of a woman's dress. There—  
a young boy empties his stomach  
into the dark of an alleyway. There,  
folds the last flicker of street light  
into the crease of his eyes. And so, it is also  
all that we do not know. The woman's name.  
Our fathers' faces. The smell of bread, and the taste  
of a slick mouth to equal our yearning. Or maybe  
in that sense it is all that we do know.  
Like love. Like a list. Like one thing we tick off  
for every ounce of understanding we gain. Like one  
we find endlessly needing to be filled. Refilled, again.



## Sweetgum

Days like these, the ones that stretch out  
into the thin rose of evening

where only a few bright artifacts dangle  
half-heartedly in the pale sky; this corrugation

of summer and the first dog-eared pages  
of autumn leaves—I adore these days: the glass

thrown open after dinner, letting in the ripening silk  
of tree musk and asphalt steam in the florid swamp

of last thunderstorms. And then the rain  
drizzling out white in a crepe mist, and in its dying,

the feet of the little girls next door, bare toes  
molding into the warm wet grass.

I can see their mouths, saying nothing,  
agape as the breeze licks their curls back

against sticky temples. In that breath of dusk, they turn  
their heads up to the moon as if daylight, the bottom tooth

of one, poking out from behind a pink lip, a small  
and solitary history of faultlessness in that young

protrusion of bone. Their father following behind them with arms  
pushed out from his body in a cushion of watchfulness.

His mouth, also saying nothing, curling in a dim  
half-smile as his girls tumble into the soft

green banks, fall and streak their dresses  
with a wealth of sweet gum and winged seed.

## Meridians

You lie on the acupuncturist's table, a last resort  
to chase away the creases that line your forehead  
in chronic worry. She charts you like a globe—

left and right hemispheres drawn  
down your torso with the felt-tip of magic  
marker, black lines dotting your skin, latitude

and longitude swirling with monsoons, rough  
winds of ebb and flow churning as your vertebrae  
soften under the woman's thin needles.

Beneath the smoking wicks of incense, you are bathed  
in the scent of anise, burnt pods of vanilla bean, the spicy  
scrape of cloves dampened against your lips. You are splayed

on the table like a monarch, wings pinned  
to the exacting light, examined for flecks, chipped  
wings, and bent antennae. Your mind wanders, dwelling

on the small pleasures—the times where you felt most  
yourself: smiling hours you've slipped joyfully into  
your pocket, banking memories to brighten

a grayer day. You count them all: The sliding off of plastic  
down the slim body of ice candy, juice melting  
against your tongue; the crescent weight of a man's frame

hollowed against your own as you sleep in a tent in the blue  
light of mountains; the soft melt of ripe pear, halves eaten  
by the sea, graininess in mouth and under foot; naming

your breasts Bonnie and Clyde, pressing them  
into the faces of your lovers, peeling back their fingers  
from where they hold you tenderly so the rogues

can stare them straight in the eye. On this table, you look up,  
see the needles fanning out from their posts  
down the length of your collarbones, metal fishbones tensed

as if preparing to plunge deeper, take root, regrow  
skeleton and firm your flesh. When you are young,  
you learn that the speed at which a girl ages depends

upon the quickness of her skirt. How high you lift  
the hem, how much higher it is then lifted for you. Depends

on the raising of your hand, voice thin  
in a crowded room. Depends on the breaking of bread

with strange faces you cannot yet read—and it is  
this suspension you inhabit, strapped to a chair, counting  
minutes, the clock face cut in half from 6 to 12, symmetry

displaced, second hand failing to arrive full circle.  
Here on this table, you can measure how different time feels—  
writhing halves stilled, reconstructed

under the acupuncturist's slim needles. The dotted lines  
are drawn down your center and back, wrapping  
around your waist, darting across your skin like fish

navigating rocks to the mouth of a river. The acupuncturist plots  
the meridians of east and west. She counts your pulse,  
examines your heart, considers the debris.

## Train Song

It is in this moment at the station, after brushing past the river  
of debarking passengers, that you spy a woman pressing  
fingers with her lover like sex,

and you realize that you are halfway across the world  
in fisherman pants, hair coiled high upon your head  
like a local girl, shawl draped around your shoulders

because skin here is taboo. The only intimacy  
is fingertips, indirect kiss like in cinema when the woman  
at a café takes a bite from an apple, and the man

across from her leans in to put his mouth where hers  
once crisped into flesh. Here in the courtyard, vendors call out  
for your attention, hawking bowls of yellow noodles

in hot coconut broth, bolts of hand-spun silk to carry back home  
to those that wait, stalks of water lily to lay at the feet  
of the station Buddha, a prayer for safe travels. The loudspeaker announces

arrivals, departures, and last calls—and the dusty bodies, drooping  
in whatever shade they have found solidify en masse  
as your train rolls in, sounding its horn in that mournful way that trains do.

But these two, fingers pressed, eyes locked upon the other,  
skin barely touching as if there were a pane of glass  
held between them, are still. And you cannot tell—

which one is leaving and which is staying, the bags  
are carelessly toppled at their feet as afterthought, as if the journey  
itself were the last thing to do with their being here.

You stand there, transfixed by them, while they only have eyes  
for what will, in moments, be gone. Or is it already gone?  
Here, like them, you could be anyone, yearning

for that which lost. You could be going anywhere. Starting anew.  
But who is to say where? No one will know unless you tell them.  
Up in the sky, great smoky waves of dust coat the trees

with their yellow perfume, and in this motion of bodies, you are steeled  
against the current of passengers, the vendors wheedling  
for your pocketbook, the children carrying your baggage for a bit of change.

## The Idea of God at the Midnight Karaoke Bar

Watered down by Riesling, I lean against the wall  
 as a boy croons Shuggie Otis into the mic,  
 eyes fixed on me as he sings *Hello my love*,

*I heard a kiss from you. Red magic satin*  
*playing near—boy with the bluest eyes, gaze*  
*lapis as Lucifer, spangled under the disco ball's spiral.*

And I descend onto the dance floor  
 as he diminishes the space between us  
 on the oily and curling linoleum. I am close enough

to touch his collar, white and gleaming, rhinestudded  
 as Elvis, his perfectly slicked-back coiffure. *I'm going to be*  
*with my baby. I am free, flying*

*in her arms over the sea*, he sings, parting the clouds  
 of cigarette smoke gathered about our heads in a haze,  
 as he waxes psychedelic, leans in to whisper

*Is it cool?* My head spins, all glory glory, as his finger—  
 outlined in a shower of refracted disco-light—  
 charts a line down the tip of my nose.

And I think, this must be what it felt like—when my mother  
 gazed out, flower-printed from head to toe, at my father  
 with his 70's hair, singing on stage

with his red guitar about last trains and deserted stations,  
 the words rebounding towards my mother,  
 a litany, calling from a place immortal, mythic

as a blue sky, promise of all that could dig us out  
 of grooves we've gotten stuck in.  
 Everything tends to shimmer in a song.

At the bar, a new one starts up—a loop of Shuggie  
 singing “*Sweet Thang*” over and over, and the boy's gaze  
 drifts to where a woman in cowboy boots is leaning

at the bar, ass skywriting in the stale air, a pattern  
 of sideways figure eights. And as he shimmies  
 over to her, his steps slow and sugar, sugar,

the light slowly glares up to fill the room with closing time.  
 I pay my tab and back out the door. Walking home,

I scan the sky for the trails of light

the evening news promised I'd see: tails  
of the agitated Leonids they say rain down  
on us this time of year. I find only old habits—

overhead, wintry clouds of cigarette smoke pluming  
across a roseate smudge of dawn, blush filigreed  
between dead branches and a carnage of crossed wire,  
that elusive blue sky skating coyly out of reach.

***A tempo****cantabile*

The story curls out of your mouth,  
 a sumi brush on parchment. He listens:  
 to how as a girl, you rushed under the hollow  
 of pregnant green curtains as they billowed

up with wind gusts. How you would count to five, pretending  
 to be child in mother's womb. Exhale: the curtain sails  
 lost all their wind, and you were born. Underneath  
 the hem of mother's green skirt, you were

sweet to the opening of the world, you say,  
 as he throws the windows open wide, holds you in the register  
 of mattress springs, trying to recreate  
 the moment of your birth.

*coda*

At the fork in the path  
 you let go of his hand, race past  
 the briars, cut across the trail marked  
 with wire, to where flat stone overlooks gorge.  
 Rock after rock below you, and beyond, the splintering  
 of pine, a neighboring mountain razed where last night's storm has felled acres  
 of trees to the ground. When he catches up to you, you are weighing  
 all the patches of black earth, shuddering with the weight  
 of feathers and scarred wood. You try and remember  
 all the names of the birds you spoke to—  
 ruby-crowned kinglet. Grosbeak.  
 Phoebe. Nuthatch.

*fermata*

Inhale—how many breaths will you count  
 till you let fall: a drop of water  
 wavering on the apex of leaf blade? The knife  
 on the wooden chopping board?  
 How long till you let yourself  
 make a sound to void the hollowing  
 of the room in your ears? The day blurs  
 into the next and still, you are breathing in  
 the steel of emptied walls. When does it fill?  
 Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the week after next,  
 a sound exhaled. A bird's eye blinking  
 at the pale iris of moon.

## Dama de Noche

*Where did you learn how to sing?*

After supper, I hide, quiet in the foliage  
 underneath the metal bridge. I smell like rust  
 in the leaves, scent of corrugated  
 steel mingling with petals, *Dama de Noche*,  
 they call me. You will never see me, only smell me—  
 etching my scent deeper into your lungs, feathering  
 out my skirt, motionless in the green of night.

*When did you learn how to speak?*

I insist on blossoming. Every night  
 my star petals peel, insistent with the weight  
 of my song. What I sing of is memory. Quiet  
 bodies that move together in the soil:  
 rhinoceros beetle circling my wrist, walking  
 sticks weaving into my hair; the languid stroke  
 of the dragonfly skimming puddles in the dark.

*Will you sing for me?*

I play under that bridge, steeped  
 in the scent of you. When you turn away  
 from me, you will hear me. Under the bridge,  
 you will never see a single petal, but I weigh  
 in your hair and on your clothes.  
 Hear my mouth ripening in the green.  
 I will never sing as beautifully as the jasmine,  
 but you will hear me opening, metallic in the night.



## Rosemary for Remembrance

Evenings, her absence curls around  
the bedposts, vines against the window shades  
to weave at night's long coal. He wants the windows

open, wants to let in the smell of dunes, salt  
from the sea beyond them, yellow jasmines  
dotting the hills. But outside, the black dog

wriggles his nose in the grass, tracing the scent  
of all things buried: coffee grounds, panic  
of eggshells, crushed bird bones

in flowerbeds, and the damp split bellies  
of teabags thrown carelessly behind the rose bushes  
after breakfast. So much of his life moistens

in the ground. Amid the mulch and ragweed:  
a sprig of rosemary for remembrance, packets  
of photographs, and envelopes filled with seeds—

around which, he's tied red yarn, knotted  
like a birthday present, buried under the locust tree  
for them to have unearthed one day

as afterthought to some imagined completeness.  
The windows remain closed. He begins to wonder—  
what does a man become when you tear down

the four walls of his bedroom? Sleep turns  
into a slow longing, the granular release  
of sand from scooped palms,

and even then the bed does not exist.  
Except in the dunes. Except for where the bodies  
teem endlessly in the green of wild oak, the moisture  
of bark, the turned soil of summer by the sea.

## The Drowned World

At the Saturday market, flooded  
in monsoon season, I swim through the green light  
that filters down through the tarp

stretched overhead in a makeshift ceiling.  
Stray leaves of swamp cabbage  
and chive bob around, little emerald boats

at the market-goers ankles, and I peel off  
an onion-skin sail clinging to my calf,  
reminded—of how this annual drenching

began the drowning of everything  
I knew and loved. Thirteen and sickly  
between September torpedoes

of rotting vegetables shooting down gutters,  
I went with grandmother to market  
with no one to keep watch by my bed.

She lashed me to her side, the thick mast  
of her body flagging us through the crowd,  
money pinned inside her shirt to ward off

eely-fingered pickpockets. We sloshed  
our way home ankle-deep in water, baskets and bags  
overflowing with remedies.

Fevered nights, she stood guard, boiling  
her latest poultice of garlic and guava  
leaves in oil, to smear down my back, bait away

the clamp-jawed mouths of fire fish  
that sucked at my fingers, pulling  
me deeper into that anemic pond,

where the bottom feeders fed on me and I bled  
a month straight, torrential. When I emerged  
from that watery room, lips still scented

with that olive perfume, I found,  
that as grandmother struggled  
to keep me afloat, my siren sisters

had unmoored, drifting deeper into the teal waves  
of their woolen blankets. They slept away whole afternoons,

sailing on the crests of their dangerous

dreams, polished their teeth  
and plaited their hair with seaweed and mire,  
making ropes—thick enough

for their drunken sailors to grasp. And I called to them,  
but they bit back. I cast out all the lines I knew, grasping  
around for mother's voice. But it came through sunken,

reeling in the murk of collect call static.  
And so I dip back into the only world  
that I know—into that green water, treading

my way through the damp rows of market stalls, deeper  
in the maze of things set afloat by rain.  
I build my apothecary—buying charred eel skin

and bone, filling my bags with the shriveled bodies  
of white and unripe strawberries to make a broth.  
I gather the few gold coins of light

that reach me here, slip them under my sisters' tongues  
as they dream, as I stand watch, the water  
inching higher.

## Blood Moon Over Siquijor

On the island, over a dinner of crispy swamp cabbage  
 and blood oranges, the sun sets slowly over Siquijor.  
 “Witch Island,” my friend tells me  
 as a flicker of blue lightning illuminates

the ruffled edge of jungle across the water.  
 In flashes, I can make out the path scratched from shore  
 to the village there, and a turbulence of flailed palms  
 blown black in the wind. But here, not a sound—

except the lapping of waves and kerosene  
 lamps hissing in doorways, here where electricity  
 is still a foreign substance. *Watch your back in the crowd*, they say,  
 anyone on the island could be a witch.

That I'll only feel a tap on my shoulder, but it will be enough  
 to alter the sound of my heart, to slow its beat  
 because a *bruja* didn't like the shape of my face, or the tilt of my head  
 as I pass her on the street.

And I think maybe it's that she knows everything already,  
 allows passage because of the hidden thing, sees me  
 biting down on the pit of a green plum as I recite  
 the names of my sisters as ward. Here, where magic coats

each grain of sand, each strand of hair, in the arbor  
 on the torch-lit path, my true love  
 is kissing a witch. And all the world's darkness  
 folds into me so that when I look up, I see

what appears to be the sun rising up again  
 from behind the trees when moments ago it just set.  
 And from here on out there will be nothing else  
 but this fiery ball of light: sun setting backwards

over Siquijor, girl looking out towards the sea.  
 What is the difference between wanting  
 and needing? What have I left on the shore?  
 My boat. My sister's tortoise shell comb,

rubber sandals that bore me here, directions  
 to the knotted banyan tree. They said  
 turn left at the village gate, turn right at the mouth  
 of the second cave to where light dusks

in the mangroves. He will be there, they said, and one can pay

this *mamamarang* to recite under his breath,  
the secret words to fill the stomachs  
    of those that wish you ill with a fast growth

of cockroaches, fleshy bodies to eat  
    away innards, explosion of eggs with each word  
spoken against you. In their mouths, insects multiply,  
    and multiply again. They will not realize until too late

that the words these lovers speak to each other in the dark  
    are their downfall, your name, their undoing.  
But there's no need of talk like this—not here,  
    not in the company of friends.

When asked, I'll say it wasn't the sun  
    afterall—it was the moonrise, its ambering grown  
bloody with the islands' magic, the smell of iron  
    in a witch's hair, in her mouth, in mine.

## Matchsticks

*Oh in the desert, we tried to  
Love like they do in movies  
Face to face end of story*  
—Kishi Bashi, Atticus in the Desert

I.

I am smoking by the dumpster behind work.  
Back here, there are print chemicals fuming  
out the exhaust pipes and into the winter air, and my fingers  
are wrinkled as I pull the door closed.

In the parking lot, there's still a perfect square  
of grass that hasn't eroded, despite how the pressmen  
pour buckets of spent developer and stabilizer down the gutter  
to the drainage pipe, where the metal-toothed

sewer entrance is now caulked with dried paper. My hands  
in the afternoon are raw, even if I wear the latex  
gloves, and the chemicals I change out every few dozen plates  
make my clothes smell like bacon grease—I don't know why bacon grease,

but I swear—so it is as if I have a cover, like I've actually  
been working in a diner instead of a print shop, and we joke  
at night, this particular boyfriend and I, about me fixing him  
a sandwich with a side of fries before I change, before I shower

that delicious mess of god knows what out of my hair, and wear this apron  
and nothing else, please? This dumpster, even,  
has seen better days, there are rusted out patches  
in the corners, and there is paper spilling out of the top, such a mountain

of shredded waste—so I think that they are grateful  
for the hedge, the tall growth of bushes to cover up the muck.  
And while I know little else of chemicals or combustion, I think maybe  
it wouldn't take much, even the smallest of accidental sparks—

like ash maybe, from my cigarette, to set us off if flicked  
in the right direction, an ember, or the fixing of sandwiches  
in our secret lives, anything that's been scraping on the bottom  
of our soles for far too long—like loving, like smoking, like breathing.

II.

This other one's breath rises and falls as he sleeps,  
and that ground meat smell from his Taco Bell Volcano Taco wafts  
over me with every exhale in all its cuminy glory.

This one's belly is fat. Okay. Not fat—but round and springy like my mother's dulce de leche pound cake. Yellow too, like the sugar of its crusted edges. Okay, it *is* fat, but I like that because it means that I am small and pillowed on the mass of it. Its warmth, lifting and dropping my head 3 inches with every exchange of breath, and I can look up from here at the blurry stars through the half circle above the bedroom window, and think endlessly of pound cake, and how with certainty, you get one equal measure of everything—milk, sugar, flour, an egg cracked over the top, boil it all down into a delicious mess at high heat, and how everything is better with an egg cracked over the top of things. And I can love a pound cake, I think, for a time. Or at least, I'll never go hungry.

### III.

At some point we all go back into the cave, strip off our cotton and our bacon grease, the latex clinging to our skin, break the china and porcelain, erase all memory of ever wanting anything: from the world and its traps, its rotation of next things better than the lasts, and in this post-nothingness, post that ceaseless desire to fill, and fill, and keep filling whatever emptiness we think is lonely, we'll find that lonely is a kind of burning too. Your skin, your hair, your lungs, and face—the small things you thought needed amendment—there will be no history. No lines. No curling parchment charting the geography of your insides for some future race to come across and ponder. Linger upon. Ignite.

### IV.

When I was a girl, my grandmother told me you have to be a caveman, bare your teeth and whittle drumstick down to bone, pick the meat

off of everything until it is clean, and that is how you know you've truly loved it. This one is a caveman just like me, night urging us to warm ourselves. And so we use our mouths

to learn about fire, tasting it in between the dark and light, exhausting all else

so that in the morning when we wake, we devour cold

leftovers, chicken and rice, slices of meat and beans,  
cabbage stir-fry in the early dark. It is as if  
in the dawn, we have not yet invented fire.  
And we are hungry, and this is all we know.



## Long Creek Trail

At Seashore State Park, I watch  
     the osprey empty their beaks  
 into the beaks of their young, see the charcoal

mouths grasping for the brine  
     of inch-long mummichogs  
 and minnows. I love

how the park quarters itself out:  
     down the Long Creek Trail, distinct zones  
 of variegated flora. First, the choke

of emerald fiddleheads that curl, quietly  
     parting by water's edge to take me  
 into dunes shot through with an augury

of Carolina Jasmynes. Then, the deepened  
     viridian in the shade, the cardinals  
 nesting in their holly pockets, pine sap

collecting in the swale, and the rustle  
     and dash of pinecone by foot. And here  
 the branches run into scarcity while everything else

opens up—the sky, the path, the rocks  
     scattering themselves haphazardly  
 into the brown silt, the fallen

trunks sunning themselves half-buried  
     in the marsh while their gnarled branches  
 antler up toward the sky

as if part of immense animals that have burrowed down  
     into the cool bleed of marsh-muck  
 and tall grass. Everything is louder here—

the sun, its glare, the reeds whisking backwards  
     over shallow pools, the grass  
 sprawling tufted, tawny in the crunch

of mid-spring's spackle, and my eyes  
     draw up to the lean snags of dead  
 cypresses where the ospreys

have perched their twig-nests.  
     I am *here*—witnessing,

remembering how even the softest body

can shrug itself out of the well-worn husk, can move  
naked into the hollow  
of another shell as it continues

to thicken on its own. And I walk on—  
to where, finally, the woods drape themselves  
with Spanish Moss, gray tendriling over everything in sight.

The soft things wind quietly around the limbs,  
dampening each remembered profusion  
of extravagant color—leaving only the osprey:

their feeding, their flight. Knowing exactly how many times  
I've seen the young take minnow to mouth,  
all softness in me is unhoused every time.

## Tidewrack

*“oh you who are never the same  
who are secret as the day when it comes...”*

–W.S. Merwin

The morning gums up under my shoes  
as I walk along the shoreline, skirting driftwood  
like the sandpipers. Knots of seaweed, bits of glass,

halves of shell to hang in the window, catch glints,  
rub and clink bodies in the sun. My beachcombing  
has turned up a collection of tidewrack to string

up in the kitchen light—display proof of the seascape's  
transience, of mine. Who is to say how far these remnants  
have traveled? Across the Atlantic, in from the Chesapeake,

or only 10 blocks down from the bars on 25th. How slim  
the chance then—of finding the same smooth, flat stone  
I skipped out over the glassy water, yesterday

at low tide. Here it is now—the shine of it. Its gleaming  
face staring back at me, red heart-shaped weight, rippling  
striations of ash-grey ore like wave caps down

its broadside. I slip the stone into my pocket,  
believing that perhaps every bottle or shell, each glass  
that breaks and finds its body drifting unsurely

toward shore, will somehow find its way  
into the pocket it is destined for. Bottlecaps  
of San Miguel, Mythos Hellenic Lager,

strawberry-flavored Jarritos, and Scandinavian  
Mikkeller—these relics I've punctured through  
and beaded with lengths of wire from mangled hangers,

studded with the broken coils of rusted rings. These garlands  
I hammer onto strips of coraled wood. And the scraps  
in my pockets, salted in their unwillingness to dissolve.

I hold them, crease edges in my pocket,  
my fingers following the fold of their bodies like a map,  
or prayer book ready to open at the turn of dawn.

## Storm Song

Virginia, country of deer  
 and deer tick, of blue-  
 ridged peaks, where owners of blue tick heelers  
 roam the streets, the dogs' sky-tinged manes  
 slicked down to black in the rain  
 under lamplight and the fall  
 of leaves. I never knew  
 I'd come love a place  
 as much as home.

Virginia — middle ground, where migratory  
 buntings brown their blue plumes,  
 on the way south now that summer's skirts  
 have closed petal, have shrugged  
 on drowsy coats of November gray.  
 November—and once again the year  
 washes out, the landscape  
 that I've come to know lets the rain  
 be itself: a sky  
 allowed to glass  
 down in sheets, torrent raising pools  
 of stillwater amid whatever's left of green.

In the afternoon, I walk out in the pause,  
 find a half-gnawed stump of deer haunch  
 softening in the grass, foot  
 still clumped with strands  
 of muscle, sinew, shattered shards  
 of bone needling wet earth.

Around it no body left in sight.  
 Not a trace. I theorize vultures  
 lifting away leg from what's left  
 of a downed deer in brush,  
 carrying by beak the crushed  
 cartilage to crack, the thin flute  
 of femur pried open under pine shade.

\*\*

So much broken in the world, more  
 than I can make sense of. Here in Charlottesville,  
 downtown, they comb the ground  
 for the missing girl, and I follow  
 what news I can glean.

But the sky just keeps falling down,  
 drenching the bales of hay lined up  
 in what I see of the rural landscape here.

Once, I could make sense  
 of all the water in the world — the Philippine sky  
 under which I grew, spawning water spout  
 and cyclone, typhoon  
 and hurricane. In school, we learned each name, charted  
 each particular kind of violence, what wind  
 gust, what circumference  
 the eye's gaze held, what calm  
 circle would descend before the encroaching  
 winds started up again.

\*\*

Now, I can't tell you the difference  
 between one violence and another.  
 It all churns out there—from cloud to lake,  
 or puddle or sea, eventually  
 back up into itself,  
 around and back.

Driving to see my family down in Norfolk,  
 I think of what to tell them—the small city  
 in which I've chosen to live  
 in turmoil, the search for the missing girl  
 still going, day six and counting. My thoughts wander,  
 to Norfolk itself—how it has been sinking, its history  
 of strange waterways and sunken streets, the underpasses  
 they won't repave, how a large part  
 of the land was once marsh. Even there  
 no sureness, everywhere the same.

Almost there, I call my mother, tell her  
 not to worry; I'm on the way, just stuck in traffic before the tunnel.  
 I hang up, see cloud tendrils in augury  
 over the water, the dark spools of them  
 about to plunge into the gray ice  
 of the Atlantic, making me  
 think of home.

\*\*

Which home? I know I've mentioned three now.  
 Charlottesville. Norfolk. The Philippines.

When I say home, I always mean the islands,  
 with tropical storms they named  
 after women — not nice-sounding  
 Western names like *Irene* or *Isabel*, but  
 thick-tongued native ones like *Karing*,  
*Unsang*, *Loleng* and *Sisang*—all of them  
 pressing their hot mouths to the islands, wailing  
 their storm song into everything in sight.

Behind, they leave a hickey-trail  
 of bruised barrios, *barangays* broken,  
 houses hinged at the roof  
 where sheet metal has shrieked open to the sky.

\*\*

Back in Charlottesville I pick up my routine. I drive  
 to work, to class, drop off  
 loads of laundry, check  
 email for messages from my sister.  
 Still no answer—three months  
 since I've heard from her last.

December where she is now trailing the last inches of  
 its damp cape of typhoons down the coast,  
 land still battered from the storm  
 that a year ago submerged entire cities.

Once, on TV, I remember  
 watching Ms. Universe—the Philippine  
 contestant was asked facts about the islands—how many  
 there are (the host having heard  
 that there are thousands)—and in a diamond-speckled  
 sheath dress she laughed, asked  
 if he wished to know  
 the count during high tide or low, several  
 of the uninhabited ones small enough  
 to completely disappear.

\*\*

Trying again, no answer on the other end, I remember  
 the story my sister told me in the dark,  
 something that happened  
 one December. Not what—just something. The season hard  
 in its grayed-out cold, the monsoons  
 just trickling to a stop, the air turning sharp

and brightly scattered with stars. I imagine the worst—  
 in the murk of a dark room, some strange homily  
 of tongues and limbs, arms tightening around her waist...

But when we last spoke, my sister  
 tells me she thinks she's met the love of her life,  
 a girl named K, who has family in Arkansas.  
 I told her come—you can get married in Virginia now—they've lifted bans.

She told me that she and K laid the tarot out and read  
 a strange history of similarities, how eerily  
 echoed each of their paths have been—  
 favorite movies and songs,  
 four sisters in both families, hair cropped close  
 to their heads, faces gleaming at me from the computer,  
 half-lit by the slatted light of the window screen.

I hope that it is happiness and not the onset  
 of December blues as she's been given to. I hope  
 they're busy, buried in their loving, curled up  
 in their room against the rain. I type her a message  
 that says *How are you?* I tell her to write me soon.

\*\*

Driving back to the cottage one afternoon,  
 I didn't know it was the smell of skunk that filled  
 the chambers of the car. We'd passed roadkill  
 some three blocks back, the light bleeding  
 across a watery five lanes of traffic.

But I swore that I smelled roses—said  
*aahhh, what is that smell?* It was sweet,  
 the way rain water in this country is sweet,  
 America drenched in everything but still,  
 the air smells clean and cold.

And here now, the smell of roadkill, rancid  
 to some other's nose but all I recognized  
 was country—soft animal smell releasing its musk,  
 a dying smell, a living smell, utterly  
 and terribly in bloom.

\*\*

And the rain comes down as it always does.  
 Over the years, I've watched the sky,

taking in what I thought was its wisdom, my mind  
 blanketing itself with familiar adage:  
*Red skies in the morning. Warning.*

But young and on the coast  
 of Virginia, I'd walk: the morning calm, early Fall, the sand  
 still warm, the sea still filled  
 with memory of bodies  
 lifting their summer arms to plunge, bronzed  
 and aching for the cool. Fall—and as I walked, as if from nothing, out  
 of the flawless blue, cloud drifts crept in,  
 and from a knotted point I couldn't see  
 their quick gather into swoons of black-  
 bellied rolls, fat wefts of them tumbling  
 towards me. I stood underneath,  
 the dark coils of their roots, looking  
 skyward, perceiving the drop  
 in temperature as a cold front  
 stung my skin with sand. And even if  
 I'd seen this all before, every time,  
 it startled me—the smack  
 of air across my skin, what now is here  
 that didn't use to be.

\*\*

Across the sea, in the country where I was born, they are burying  
 a man—No. Not a man. A woman—but born  
 a man, and who three days ago was found  
 face down in a hotel room in Subic—military outpost  
 turned import-export zone, dock  
 of processing goods, of crinkle-wrapped  
 condoms come undone, red zone where  
 street walkers hook, their heels  
 splashing against the rain water from monsoons.

She was found dead after a U.S. Marine on shore leave  
 shoved her head into toilet water  
 feeling *he'd been tricked*. The international channels,  
 the Philippine news all aflame. I wait  
 for something to emerge on TV here in Virginia,  
 but nothing.

I wonder what it takes to break  
 the surface, what tangled knots  
 obscure what's worthy of reporting, who skims the scum  
 to find some notable bit of news.



Something closer perhaps, to hit home—

\*\*

Maybe when I say home, I really mean everywhere.  
     I mean the heart. How it can drown, but still  
 a body needs to drink.  
     Okay, my friends will say, but you don't know  
 how to swim. Not literally, but still: I know something  
     about rain—that it falls and touches all,  
     that sweet smell  
         of after, of everything..  
     not clean, exactly—but brighter, how things steam up  
     to greet the sky.

And I know mountains—here the same  
     as the city in which I grew.  
 I've long stopped trying to understand.  
     I've moved so many times but have ended up  
 returning always to approximations  
     of what I've always known.

And as the sky starts back up, I move  
     the shattered fragments of deer bone  
 under a pile of brush, pushing  
     into the black of wet earth  
     and mulch, into the scraped good smell  
 of everything breaking down, thinking:

how good it is, to call some place home.  
     Virginia—country of cotton fields  
 and cottonmouths. Country  
     of both deer and deer tick, of blue-ridged peaks,  
 where owners of blue tick heelers  
     roam the streets, the sky-tinged manes  
 of their dogs slicked down to black  
     in the rain of lamplight and the fall of leaves.  
     How good to know the body  
         will bleed, will open to all  
 that readily falls, as it moves up  
     again to meet itself. Again, the self.

*~ Illuminated Body*



## Windmills

“...maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it should be.” — Cervantes

Giants tumble in the barren fields,  
but as old Quixote prepares to charge, to lay waste  
the ruffians dervishing the horizon, he's seized

with sudden regret. Why did he ever fall  
into this mad enterprise? They laughed  
when he bristled at lotharios he swore

were jousting restlessly beneath Dulcinea's  
balcony, her kiss-curls spilling out in warning  
as she looked on from behind a lace mantilla.

So what if she could carry her own, throttle  
those too-fresh boys, throw those brown-necked cattle-  
wranglers over one shoulder to deposit them

at the garden gate? What a wench! Sancho says.  
O what muscles, and what a pair of lungs!  
Wide-lipped carnations rain down from her

fingertips, already the mind's eye welcoming  
her spiraling emissaries. And Dulcinea—  
sweet burn of sun from climbing trees

to gather fruit, strands of auburn hair  
loosed around her freckled décolletage; bare feet  
and running up the rust-runged belfry ladders to call

the men who helped harvest her father's fields:  
*Come in and rest from the noonday sun.*  
She climbs trees like a boy but has also laid out loaves,

and bowls of soup—the ivory of her voice  
echoing from the turrets to call them in, that hollering,  
itself a pureness. And for this, Quixote tilts at the skyline,

gives his visor one last resounding flick, clangs shut  
the metal cage. Madness is a cut-throat business,  
and beauty above all to keep in our defense,

above the many truths we hold to be self-evident. What more  
need be explained? The girl is lovely. The milk is white. And by god  
those are giants tearing up the horizon.

## Tremors

\*\* *Epicenter*

Curled up small, I press my ear to the ground,  
     while indoors, the grind  
 of bone-white china, cups  
     breaking against each other in the glass-  
 fronted cupboards.  
     Kitchen knives and pans in scatter, rucked  
 curtains dislodging from their rods.  
 On the stairs, my sister stuck in stride, my uncle  
     scooping her up in his arms to run  
     into the din of tumbling  
 trash cans and alley cats, the scour  
     of mothers shouting for their young.  
 Today, dusk nicks its blood red into  
     sky's pale marrow. The treeline  
 tangled and in swoon.

\*\* *Murmur*

A worry  
     of sparrows thrashing  
 in the trees. Numbed fingers  
     pressing into her chest, grandmother  
 cradles her chipped statues  
     of saints, sputtering prayers  
     into their glazed eyes, as over the crest  
 of the hill, a firewall of houses  
     descends into the newly opened earth.

And in the shaking, my uncles carry  
 grandfather out in his chair—  
     his limbs eaten  
     from age, bedridden, thinned  
 flannel wrapping the cage  
     of his ribs, his raking  
 cough that shook his lungs—out  
     into the street to where the rest of us sang  
 our wailing song.

And this was not what broke him—blackened  
     by the earthsong's bloodshot warble, he sang

a few more days with the packs howling beneath the trees.

After, when I pressed my ear to his chest,  
it seemed startled, still.

\*\* *Aftershocks*

Far from all this shaking that I knew—dusk  
shackles the Blue Ridge in a prayer.  
Far from that country, that age, somehow  
the earth still holds me, unwilling  
to forgive. Each lift of wind  
that rattles window blinds, I take  
as the ground advancing.

And too, the tractor  
groaning from its bales of hay. Across  
the river, lamentations of geese rebound  
off the water, off the hills, and I mistake them  
for a pack of agitated dogs, the fear of earth in them  
a sprung aria of muzzled beaks.

The earth still moves. It rubs its plates  
against the grooves to consume  
what the animal in me knows.

**Honey Locust,**

thicketed by a crust of thorns—you are as I  
once was. My tongue: your body, unholy, entwined in spirals  
of barbed vine. We let nothing through.

In the mountains, a woman lived alone for years,  
and when she died they pricked upon the traces of her  
mourning. The dried husks of your pods her last harvest,

their sugar-smell still throbbing where she crushed  
with pestle: your guarded, secret fruit. She watched from afar, picking  
your fallen pods, to grind—such strange music in that circling.

She was patient, so patient—forgoing your body, evading  
your thorns, knowing winter would make you drop your seeds, how even  
the sweetest points of light become too frail to hold on to

in the cruelest cold. But that is a music too: a giving  
so that she might feed. In the liquored sugar of the body's blackness  
everything loves what it will love—that is what pierces.

Come spring, the ghosts of sycamore and vine, the wine  
of dogwood and its flushed and tapered blooms shrug off  
the cold. And then we rally our thorns anew against

the dangerous brightness. Call it God if you must—that intervention  
between our tender flesh and the rest of the living—  
I call it the body: grieving for what it grieves, sorrowing

in whatever way it can. We peel barbs from where they cling  
around each limb. We've all felt them before: oh the sweet, and oh  
the salt—what bitter light you shed, what true and piercing light.

## Strandbeest

*“Since 1990 I have been occupied creating new forms of life. I make skeletons that are able to walk on the wind, so they don't have to eat. I want to put these animals out in herds on the beaches, so they will live their own lives.”*

—Theo Jansen, Artist's Statement

A man on the beach, outfitting a skeleton with sails—  
 this is what the patrons at the Bella Vista see one morning, lifting  
 their heads from circling stocks in coffee-stained newspapers. The skeleton  
 is huge, ten feet at least from snout to tail, yellow  
 PVC tubing interlaced with wire, lemonade bottles marching  
 down the ridge of its spine. The man steps back and the sails  
 begin to breathe, the long bolts of white cloth ripple, catch light.  
 The patrons press their faces against the hotel windows, children, jaws  
 falling open as the skeleton begins to move. One clawed foot  
 in front of the other, slowly at first, then gathering speed,  
 until it is running across the sand, as if ready to take flight.

*Self-propelling beach animals like Animaris Percipiere have a stomach.  
 A stomach consists of recycled plastic bottles that hold the air. The air  
 is pumped up to high pressure by the wind, with a variety  
 of bicycle pumps, and plastic tubing. These little pumps are driven  
 by wings up at the front of the animal. They flap in the breeze.  
 It takes a few hours, but then the bottles are full.*

The patrons send out text messages, to their wives,  
 or to their daughters' nannies, to their neighbors, and their bankers,  
 to the people they share cubicles with at work. They snap pictures  
 of crazy Jansen and his plastic monsters—*he's done it*, they say, *he's done it!*  
 But what it is, they can't say exactly. Watching the skeleton  
 on the beach, the patrons feel witness to some sort  
 of resurrection, feel the shell of a metal filofax peeling open  
 into its rusted nautilus, and an itch inside them thumbs  
 at the dusty numbers marked for deletion. There is an idea there—  
 a song vaguely remembered, scratching the bony wings  
 from where they have folded into their backs.

*They only contain potential wind. Take off the cap and the wind emerges  
 at high speed. The trick is to tame the wind and use it to move the animal.  
 For this, muscles are required.*

It is a brisk morning, even mid-July. One doesn't exactly go swimming  
 in the Netherlands, the water is icy-cold. Still, the patrons  
 have grabbed their swim suits (packed as afterthought, the way  
 one does, filling a suitcase for a working holiday). Soon,  
 they are running to the water. Trying to reach the waves before  
 the great plastic skeleton puts them all to shame. Take the cap off  
 and the wind emerges. Move the animal. The trick is to tame them,



have the sun catch on some brightness, lead them to the blue water, their eyes trained on the light. They must catch it before it recedes, they think, that glimmer undulating in the morning, and soon, they remember how their muscles feel, running, kicking up dust, sand billowing out behind them, breath filled by the wind.

*Beach animals have pushing muscles which get longer when told to do so. These consist of a tube containing another that is able to move in and out. This mechanism acts as a piston. The air, it moves in and out. In and out.*

They remember feeling like this one long morning ago, waking up and thinking of birds—rifling through Audubon's to disprove a mistaken conjecture of hollow bones as delicate. They had thought them creatures brittle with the sea, that hollowness carried gulls out over the waves, that they glide with the wind above the white caps and only start flapping if they veer off course. In fact, they learned, gulls resist the wind, tilting their wings forward and back, depending on which direction they want to go. Small movements towards a fixed point, their eyes waiting for the sparkle of scale under saltwater. That is where they'll fish. That is where they'll dive.

## Bortle Scale

*“Before we devised artificial lights [and] modern forms  
of nocturnal entertainment, we watched the stars.”*

—Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*

At a lecture once, you listened—as a man spoke  
about gradations of night sky. How over the years we've lost

full spectrums of darkness, the sky suffering, her stars  
burnt out by cities brimming electric. With skyscrapers

layered as Babel, we've forgotten how  
to constellate, shining out directionless, incommunicable.

And you think back to how mama said  
it used to be easy. To find Virgo: how she nestled

her beaded hip against the Sun Dome on 5th.  
How they called it that because it was the only one, metal roof

amplifying what shone from above.  
Where all the buildings are now, there used to be

only silos—black things that housed the quiet industry of grain.  
You were like that once, lying in a black field, the white seed of you

scattered soundlessly, while all things hidden could breathe.

\*

Once, you kissed a girl, full on the mouth, heard the ransomed  
sound of her teeth rattling white against your own.

How you wanted that, the only thought was bone and bone  
glinting in the lamplight, twin urgency of mouths, mirroring.

Your shoulders were loosed from the brittle rachis  
of your spine and you slumped there, hulled, trying

to reflect back her light. While down the street  
the midnight girls at the corner-o-clock, clapped

their heels, swaying down the pavement, as they called up to her,  
their glare jangling into her room, their bodies made

of mirror. There—pinned by the neon  
sizzling against the blue walls of the room—you dimmed

as the city around you gasped from too much brightness.

\*

Think of the stars: how with patience, even the naked  
eye might see the lilac of stamens webbing

across the black sheen. Once, buildingless, we knew  
what they looked like, following as they cast their lines

between each other, charting pathways down the known map  
of their separate darkness. And our eyes, unobstructed, arced

to Arcturus, sped to Spica, connecting; the way the astronomers  
showed us, guidance gilded with child's play, old rhymes

and bedtime stories; the slow mnemonic of sound  
gently coaxing as if to say: see here, how easy it is to trace

the way back, to turn from those lacquered, concrete gods.

\*

And so to find yourself, begin: fold inward, body  
darkening fetal, curling to shadow. Everything

around you will expand—let it. Compress—  
clench into yourself to remember. Root around

for that white hot core that once burned.  
Mama said it would be black like this, when you finally

trusted that sky—let its canopy descend into pitch  
as you leave all those glittering buildings behind. Travel farther

and farther down the road, to where the ghosts of everything  
undress, and they'll coil into your skin

as you bed them finally in the grass. Oh, how you'll unpeel—  
a winnowed thing, ripening at their touch.

## Philosophers

*For my Lola Susie*

Grandmother and I sit, leafing through old albums lined  
with acetate, drinking iced tea from glass tumblers.

As usual, the TV is on, she has always loved  
her afternoon programs. She points and laughs

as the bald man tumbles over backwards in his chair, felled  
by a gigantic sneeze. She chuckles, gesturing back

at her own thinning hair from twenty five years of wearing only  
the most stylish hats, the curved brims, derbies flourished

with great red bows, those pretty cloches—fabric curling  
close around her head. In a New York winter

so many years ago, she clicked down the cold streets  
on stilettos, clutching grandfather's arm. She tells me

they passed women—and she knew they were philosophers  
because they were bald. Wearing only black from head to toe,

attachés swinging from their brusque arms, grave charcoal  
boots stomping down the steps, around the university buildings

into the snow. *I wanted to join them*, she says,  
as we look through her transcripts, year after year of degree—

Bachelors, Masters, Doctoral. And when I ask her why  
she chose to study Political Science, she says

*because of your grandfather—who was a judge. I wanted  
to be like him.* We come to a picture

of her and me from long ago, both our heads thrown back,  
frozen in laugh. I am on her lap, small girl

with a blue ribbon collaring my neck. Both of us bright eyes  
and wide faces, laughter stopped by camera shutter, faces full of love

and not yet the lines of age, my hands, reaching out  
not yet knowing the weight of a poem in them.

I become tender—like when I am in that part of a poem  
that is glass, when I temper sand with the sputtering of flame

as best I can, coaxing the clear hard luminescence  
into shape. I wonder, how many desires still burn

in my grandmother's chest, how many things  
wish to step brazenly out of her into the streets,

wise and wild, bare heads gleaming in the street lights  
like philosophers marching on their own.

## Illuminated Body

### I.

The shape of a heart is a fist that takes  
 what you hold when it isn't even yours to give.  
 Under the covers beneath the ceiling fan that whirs  
 in time to the lizards clucking smugly in the walls,  
 you rock like a river pebble, waiting for your father  
 to come home. Outside the women slap their hands  
 against the Persian rugs, the clouds of dust chase flies  
 out of the orchard. Outside, the sound of oranges, ripe  
 and plummeting onto the grassy earth. The same  
 dull rapping that comes at dusk to the kitchen door.

### II.

The shape of a mouth is a dove fluttering  
 beneath the magician's handkerchief—the same  
 handkerchief he whispers into as he blows his nose  
 under the stairs. With the dust motes swirling  
 through the banisters, you can see the children  
 playing in the garden, the girls' hems ragged  
 in the wind as they run around the spider grass.  
 The magician pulls coins from behind your ears.  
 The smell of feathers is a moist rag, wings  
 that paw your breasts, a trick of hands groping  
 in your pockets. The magician's mouth goes—*hush*.

### III.

One by one now, count them—the battered hands  
 of the apostle. The calm rope of braid, straight  
 as an arrow down your back. Your teeth  
 are jagged as the tines of the cemetery fence.  
 This is what they teach you about your body.  
 To cut each finger off to mark  
 what you have lost. To dissect it into parts  
 so each pain is smaller when it dies. The language  
 you learn is of skin. And you slice away  
 like they taught you, sloughing off the folds  
 of flesh. Here—the merciful pouring of rain,  
 and the heart which is all that remains, sitting akimbo  
 atop the compost heap, refusing to erode.

## Tearing Bread

My boyfriend's mother is telling us how her father ran  
behind the horses instead of riding them, urging them across  
the river when he heard the sound of soldiers.

Maybe they were disassembling their guns, maybe  
they were laughing behind some tall bushes, maybe one  
told a joke or cleared his throat, threw a rock

into the river the way one does, preoccupied  
by the things your rifle has split open that day.  
Whatever it was, it made her father run, that gut

reaction quickening his feet at the sound of the living,  
trusting his legs over the swifter hooves he followed.  
This is the image that sticks with me as she speaks—

how so much of what is said is in the ghosts  
of movements, fingers darting in air, to mimic  
the way a father doubles the leather of reins

around a fist, smacks the horses' flesh forward.  
Later, working on a farm to buy his way across the border,  
her father's hands—and now hers—tear bread,

small comfort, crumbs dissolving, tasting of something  
much too fleeting to be nourishment. She is there,  
ripping apart loaves behind barns. Behind rocks. Tall grass

in a field. My mind fills in the things I hear singing  
in the distance. Because I am there too—  
throwing them more, feeding their hunger.

## Impression of the Shore, Memory of the Sea

*Istanbul, June 2013*

Inside the house, James is raging.  
Our host for three nights in Istanbul. Some incident  
with numbers, 900 Lira missing from a bank account.

*"Your system's problems aren't my problems!"* he yells  
into the phone, while outside on his balcony,  
we make ourselves small, surrounded

by the thick blue domes and thorny minarets of mosques  
that suffocate under an alien growth  
of satellite dishes, pale lunar faces turned toward the sky.

And out beyond I can see Gezi Park, where a line of protesters  
ripples down the streets like the blue water  
of the Marmara. Gezi: now pulsing with torn cloth

tied around the arms of those who gather there.  
We are left listening, imagining what James really wants to shout:  
how it is to furnish his house, arrange his rooms.

To lay down tile and paint the walls, adorn the rafters  
with fairy lights...making it as he always dreamed—  
Ikea kitchen, and French doors, sunroof cutting light

onto his body as he bathed; a balcony where he could sip  
wine in the evenings, listening to the perfect night  
where he could hear women down the street

throwing back their heads in ululation. He could live in those waves  
of human voices, that laughter singing up from the dark.  
But then he runs out of money, and so he cordons off

the unfinished rooms, put the rest of the house  
up to let, to pay the mortgage, the stacks of bills. And he retreats  
to the back room, sleeping behind a padlocked door

to give his guests their privacy. He lets them  
use all he owns: the sheets, the pots and pans,  
pours them beer into frosted steins. Walks onto the balcony

at night as they sleep to watch the paper lanterns and flares  
fly up from the protesters in Taksim Square...There in Gezi Park,  
they are building things he's never even thought of:

a library with makeshift shelves of splintery boards, stacked



on hollow concrete blocks. A daycare where the protesters' children—  
chubby toddlers crowned with ringlets—scribble on the sidewalk

with crayons and chalk. A garden planted with squares of marigold,  
roses and geraniums tucked along the bedrolls.  
He wants to camp out there with them, lying under flags

and yellow handkerchiefs tied to branches, eyes drifting  
to the trees where cats wandered freely in the leaves. But summer  
is a breath dug into the ground like tent stakes:

uprooted when the water cannons flush you out from under the sky.  
But at least, he thinks, they are out there, together  
under that sea of stars, linking arms for buoyancy, while here,

there are things that need attending, there are faceless voices  
shouting at the other end of the phone. This is where the drowned go  
in the night, he thinks. This must be where they go.

\*

A song for him, then—  
in that moment at dusk, when the call to prayer echoes up  
from the 12,000 mosques in Istanbul, each prayer

warbling in the summer night, querulous  
as the black hearts of doves. Let it peal from the spine  
of the ridgepole as the sun gulls cackle

the last of the day's light from over the Marmara. Listen,  
as the blue-domed palaces layer a port breeze with prayer.  
Here is the wind gusting through the open windows

of the house, breathing into white linens on the bed,  
turning the mattress into a ship, the sheets  
into sails, and your breath into salt in this hour of prayer.

**Bare**

Last time they made love, his body reminded her  
of mountains in the Philippines: summer, grass seeds  
between her teeth after she stripped

the stalk bare. Maybe it was the smell of afternoon sun  
in his scalp, the taste of rice and green earth  
from the lunch she cooked for them:

her grandmother's pandan rice and cod, baked  
in palm leaves, garlic, and vinegar—food from an archipelago  
he has never seen, soaking his tongue.

Or was it the confidence of his long fingers that traced circles  
around the strawberry tattoo on her back? So easy to remember  
the time when she knew she was lovely. Up in the mountains,

by the neighbor's magnolia, she remembers  
pungent sweat dripping down her sides. Here, the dampness  
of her shirt at the waist. He grips her skin

where she arches towards him. So wonderful, she thinks.  
To never be afraid, to slip the straps off her shoulders,  
to be beautiful, to press into him, fearlessly. Outside, cars slush past

on wet gravel. Her fingers coax his mouth open wider,  
so that he might help her remember every last scrap. Panting,  
she swears she can make out

the sounds of home—roosters ruffling their feathers  
in their coops, street dogs baying, the blare of jeepney horns  
like women laughing in the night.

## Lake Water

*Sagada, Philippines*

I arrive in a city I've never seen, come to  
 the banks of *Lake Danum*—lake named  
 after water itself—*Water. Lake Water*—and I drink  
 from a canteen slung around my neck. I have been walking  
 all day, and now under the night sky, I hear  
 the jangle of tambourines  
 reach me from where revelers camp by lake's edge.  
 I pant in the thin air, my mouth like the mouths  
 of mottled catfish breaking surface  
 in the crib of an algal bloom. Around me, voices  
 splash around a fire as people sing, fingers plucking  
 bright notes from stringed instruments. Like me,  
 they have come farther north than they've ever been—pilgrimage  
 to the mountains, crawling up the roads in rattletrap  
 jeepneys, jostled up to the foothills, and then half  
 a day's climb to where the small city nestles  
 amid the caves, its tepid lake, its orange groves.  
 I remember that here, they hang their dead—  
 dangling their coffins off the cliffs, wiring the pine  
 boxes round with bent spokes, staking them  
 into the stone to lift the bodies  
 of their loved ones away from mud and tumbling  
 rock of landslides. And here the wind slits me  
 from my dress as I recall  
 this place my mother wrote about, place  
 I traced through the water-spotted blue  
 of notebook paper, story  
 of my parents' courtship unfolding between the spiraled  
 pages of her journals. What is perfect when pressed  
 between the grass blades  
 and orange-scented leaves, I find is everywhere here  
 and ordinary—what heaves the bough must fall, we only think  
 its weight is given. I have been walking  
 with this story all my life—its cloying

scent, its pouring gravity—the one that drowns  
the night, pooling beneath a foliage

of rocks and spires. The sky opens, releases  
the mountain fog, and water stipples me with rain.  
I see my loved ones swim into the trees,

I hear their voices wreathed around the pine.

## Aubade

I never knew I liked being left behind. Waking  
to the screen door swinging loose, father's shoes gone  
from the front step. I know he is gone

because of the things that remain: faux-leather belt, the blue  
and white slippers under the bed, pack of thick-filtered  
cigarettes on the dresser. And what's more—the red guitar

still hanging behind the bedroom door. And I'm here too.  
In the night, the shape of us molded around his hollow, ignorant  
of how our bodies had bruised, sagged into each other

grasping in formation around the space he filled. It was black  
as belt leather cracking out seed. The elegy of fruit flies  
still hovers overhead, complacent. I know full well

that if he were coming back, if he were simply running  
to the store to pick up bread, he'd have taken the white Brazilia—  
accursed thing belching smoke, upholstery cottoning where the sun

has brittle the seams undone, nag he used over the years, cursing  
at its starts and stops, machinery run too ragged up and down  
these mountain streets. He loved this best of all.

I lie down, not yet ready to announce his absence. This hour  
is mine, returned to me. In the orchard, in the light outside my window,  
a miracle unspools from the pink lip of morning—birds

threading sunlight down avenues of fruited trees, chorus  
of wings following in the wake of night's unmooring. The sky, the sky—  
her gay threads, the leaves wind-bent and keening.

**A Card of Yellow Celluloid Stuck Loosely Into A Book  
of Poems Long Forgotten on My Shelf**

In the picture, my father's arm is raised.  
He is waving, as if approaching

with delight, whoever it is taking  
the photograph. On his face, a milky smile

and a mouth of crooked teeth, greeting  
them with something like love—

we do not bare our crooked teeth  
that way to just anyone. And I feel my arm rising

to meet this greeting, claiming a joy  
that isn't meant to be returned.

## Vespers

Now the shedding of the winter clothes, now  
the burning of the last of day's fire—

and I am ripe from racing out  
to hear the rustle and clap

of wingbeat, and all that glides  
around the red abandoned barns—

all I may have missed before, bright  
indigo buntings trembling on the wires,

the gold and grey of finches  
in the thistle, guzzling seed, and here

the larkspur lines the path  
as I run and startle deer, and the young

fawns I've come to know are before me,  
so small and brown, darting

with their white tails pointing to the wind.  
I lie down to feel my pulse, breathe

the blue of cornflowers in the grass  
until my lungs are thick with mist,

astounded at the body I never knew  
could live, how it's learning still to love

a thing that it once shunned. And how it goes  
and goes—beyond what it thinks it can

and will ever know, but only feels, surely,  
how it must be.

\*

I was told the heart  
can scar if pressed too much, thin

cartilage thundering  
against its cage. What other choice

is there but this? To have suddenly found  
that I can hold myself, be blown

as moor grass is blown, be broken  
as the hidden branches I tread. And here

the self disperses into air. I watch  
a great unfolding of cloth and wing,

wanting only to do what I must do,  
becoming one breath

and color, one fire. So if I must  
love the things I love—

please forgive. If I must run  
to watch the birds, bank into the wind

and take to meager wing, if I must taste  
what fruit I can with my new beak, forgive,

forgive as I too must forgive  
what once was taken from me.