

Bright Appetite

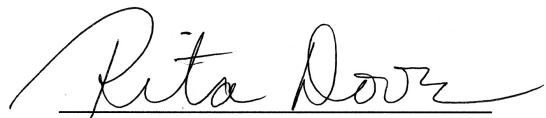
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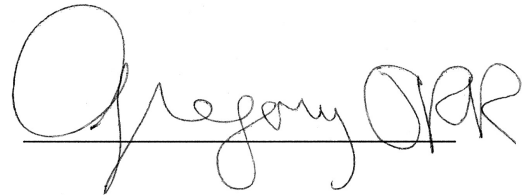
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for my parents, who keep a full fridge

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We write this to make our joy complete.
-1 John 1:4

I was reading the dictionary. I thought it was a poem about everything.
-Steven Wright

I

Moon-face

The side effects of Prednisone include mood swings, rounding of the face, sensation of spinning, thin, shiny skin, and poor wound healing.

The doctor clicks his pen, says *it's just a phase*.
My fat moon-face comes second to the x-rays

he pulls from a folder labeled with my room number.
I'm taking 75mgs of Prednisone a day. It's summer,

and I'm paler than I've ever been. *Lookin' good*,
the doctor says, by which I think he means: *you could*

look worse. Here in room 208, I've come to love
men who tell the truth, touch me without gloves,

and let me skimp on barium. My x-ray tech this afternoon
wasn't one. He looked at me as if peering through

a telescope and I, the cold and distant satellite,
moved quietly into his crosshairs. *Hold tight!*

he said. I waited for him to let me breathe again.
Released and back at home, I drift into the kitchen.

I'm scarred and white and wide, but never full. I try to sleep.
I think: *my life is one big compromise* while counting sacrificial sheep.

One night I cup two dozen pills inside my palms,
close my eyes, and consider swallowing them all.

Instead, I eat two sandwiches. Out on the night's thin skin,
a white bruise grows, shrinks, blooms again.

sonnet

for my ex-lover with prosopagnosia

you carry a little slice of silver push breadcrumbs
off tablecloths the color of three-day old snow
scattered like rafts across the heated patio
lean toward an old man a regular who mumbles
calamari or *gnocchi* it's hard to tell
twice a night I walk by on my way to the pharmacy
to buy floss aspirin anything small and practical
I can palm in my pocket as you continue not seeing me

your memory tethered to identifying tactics
my red bag my laugh *like a porch full of wind chimes*
the way I walk like I'm falling now my face is a stitch
disappearing into a quilt a word that rhymes
with every word this is what it means to be a ghost
listening to you describe again the house bordeaux

mel·lif·er·ous

adj. forming or bearing honey

I waited so long
 for lunch, spent hours
 slipping my fingers
 through the chainlink
 to pick honeysuckle
 blossoms, lick drops
 of nectar pulled
 like gold coins
 from the flowers' ears.

.

it was summer

I was wearing a blue dress

when a bee sees a bloom

it knows it will return to

that's how you looked at me

.

Of all the self-tessellating regular polygons,
 a hexagon has the smallest perimeter
 of any given area and can distribute loads
 without shearing or collapsing.

.

we toppled into the grass
 near the clocktower
 & even the moon
 honeyed

.

what's it like? I asked
imagine staring at something
terrifying and beautiful you said
now take away the object

.

when Milosz
 compared

a bombed building

broken
in motley halves

to a honeycomb

I knew
 I wanted

to write poems

.

Sitting in the frame
 of the window,
 I told you
 my nickname:
 Bee. Until
 I was hospitalized
 I never heard my mother
 call me Celeste.

.

indefinite period of tenderness –

a phrase lifted
 from *honeymoon*
 or
 the time between
 a bee landing on a flower
 and when it ascends

infusion room praise song

when the IV bag shrinks moonlike over my head
 and purple blossoms in my elbow crook
 people stare at me the way I look
 at a three-legged dog in the bad part of town
 like something that needs saving

when my dog dies I will not have a heart big enough to bury him
 already I have commissioned you to do it
 scrape of the shovel hitting clay
 dirt arcing into the air the way they say the soul does after death

during infusions I use my shoulder to hold the phone to my ear
 when you call the nurse is tying the tourniquet
the nurse is tying the tourniquet I say
 and because you know I hate this part
 for the same reason I hate long enclosed slides at water parks
 all that tight darkness
 you say *let me tell you a story*

your grandfather went to war with a bad heart
 his doctor said *you won't come back anyway*
 he pinched kentucky soil into a matchbox
 kept it in his shirt pocket as he cut through clouds
 watched bombs fall behind him like silver fish
 descending through the waterfall of the air
 when he was shot down by germans
 the soldiers stripped him
 shook out his shirt and found the matchbox
what is this they asked
what is this in german sounds like branches snapping under boots
what is this what is this what is this
 a whole tree ground to mulch
 they beat him against the wall
 in war it is easy to mistake a matchbox full of dirt
 for a matchbox full of explosive powder

when I was very sick
 hope was my favorite dog lost in the night
 I stood in the doorway
 I let the doorway prop me up
 I could not call my dog back

this is what happens when we don't teach each other our names

CELESTE LIPKES

on a band around my wrist

remember this

while I am well

I am hoarding everything for later

pool of pink petals we fall in together

dumplings dripping soy sauce into my lap

reflection of my newly baptized face in the lake

this is the dirt my pockets are full of

who can blame us

for wanting to die

on our own land

Snail

She plucks the one
with the slowest glide,
the endless scrolled home.
Tucking it in a bed
of coals, she cooks the flesh
until the sky goes slack.
The man is unimpressed.
The meal, a mouthful
at most, cultivates
an emptiness.

 Their bodies take
to one another like knife
to apple skin. The nick.
Then the slow spiral,
red and unbroken.

Eve Miscarries

The jar of snake legs smashed the night I bled.
I sorted clay from cartilage from bone.
There are words that cannot be unsaid:

let there be light and of my flesh and wed.
I'm only here so you won't be alone.
The jar of snake legs smashed the night I bled

and thorns stippled the sky above our bed.
The farthest fields beget the seeds you've sown.
There are words that cannot stay unsaid,

so veiling my face in darkness, I bowed my head,
confessed, *I can't give you children.* Thrown,
the jar of snake legs smashed. The night I bled

you whispered, *give me back my rib, instead.*
A thousand bent-knee prayers will not atone
for all the words that should have stayed unsaid.

Catastrophe behind us and ahead:
the star-pierced sky, the garden overgrown,
the jar of snake legs smashed. The night I bled
I wished that every word could be unsaid.

Spilt

We that have done and thought,
 That have thought and done,
 Must ramble, and thin out
 Like milk spilt on a stone.
 -William B. Yeats

She sits upright in bed and looks
 across the sheets. Her wrists are wilted,
 skin like clotted cream. A carton
 of milk, mashed peas, mac and cheese
 lie bedside on a tray. She dines on
 pieces of the whole: packaged fractions,
 things puréed. I say hello, wave,
 check the nurses' cryptic wall chart.
 My mother's tongue is drugged
 and when she speaks, she feels the walls
 of every vowel. *I ate twelve
 little yellow teeth for lunch.*
 "Corn?" I ask, adjust the tray.
*They were molars from the mouths
 of babies.* She folds her hands, begins
 again. *I ate a dozen golden
 seeds. The hardboiled eggs hatched
 into two twittering baby chicks,
 which waddled off my tray.* The wheel
 of a kaleidoscope spins like my mother's speech:
 the chips of color never changing,
 just clouding up and rearranging.
The grub is good, but let's go home.
 My cue. "Maybe tomorrow, Mom."
Then don't forget to get your coat.
 "It's June." The colors spin, condense.
*Take me home. I have to make
 eggnog laced with nutmeg flakes.*
 Her eyes are wide, lactescent, pleading.
*We must border the windows with bulbs
 of gold.* "I've got to go," I say.
 She paws my arm, IV cords click.
*But there is no other time. We must
 cover the snowy hills with prints
 of jumping jacks, and watch the masses*

lament the shapes as fallen angels.
The wheel clicks, the colors curdle.
And in the evening, we'll drink eggnog
stirred with the slush of melted wings.
"Not now, Mom. Another day."
I rise too quickly, hit her tray.
The carton tips, milk spills on tile.
The wheel spins, the colors split,
light breaks through the unfilled bits.
Don't cry, she says. While it lasted, it was lovely.

ne·pen·thes

1. n. a drug mentioned by Homer that lets one forget sorrow; an antidepressant

2. n. a genus of carnivorous plants

monkey cup lizard drowner
 spider eater poison pitcher
 nectared tempter lidded killer
 bring the birds back to their maker
 wing shell bone eye tail
 feather webbing spinner stinger
 little remnants of loss
 no one remembers

*

In a dream
 I gathered shells
 while you surfed

sand sucking my heels
 I watched your body disappear
 the wave like a blue eye closing

*

an abbreviated list of things that cannot be unseen:

sparrows crowding the sill
 blood on the patio
 a glass tipping
 my breasts
 the apricot moon
 your hands trembling

*

Half-full at the approach of night,
 Lamarck writes, the plant is an urn
 into which a bug flies, slipping
 from air into syrup,

whole days
 when you can't get out of bed.
 Thickness pins your limbs,
 props your eyes open. What I wish
 for you always: short night
 into morning.

I stand at the lip
 looking in, until the insect stops struggling.

*

the rim of the sea wall
 almost complete
 the tide at Long Beach
 tempered by concrete and rock

no more waves
 to drown or surf in
there are side effects
 you say *to everything*

*

wine-dark sea
 was the phrase
 we were trying
 to recall
 the evening
 we snuck
 into the museum
 and stood before
 the glass case
 of rare butterflies
 almost touching

*

The first encounter was a miracle.
Past ills were forgotten
 as the men watched the pitcher's
 opening lid—an eye unafraid—
 let everything in.

A Kite Addresses Benjamin Franklin

The lightning wants you to know
it reaches for whatever it pleases—
light can strike a woman through a keyhole.

When brilliance grabbed me, I glowed.
At the end of my body—a brass key
the lightning wanted badly. I know

what you couldn't have, you stole:
exquisite sparks that buckled your knees,
glances of a woman through a keyhole,

radiances our eyes can never hold
for long. (Even God looks away, releasing
lightning.) What I wanted you to know:

I saw you kick the shimmering snow
and knock your knuckles raw, pleading
to the woman through the keyhole.

Where the light travels, you cannot go
with this bright an appetite in your belly,
wanting lightning, wanting to know
how to touch a woman through a keyhole.

Instructions for my Lover

It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars
and then back to the tide pool again.

-John Steinbeck

Let a skin of algae cover the swimming pool
so the water will not have to mirror the stars.

When I can't get out of bed, let prayers
arc like pennies flicked into a pool.

Covet cogs and keys, the possibility of machinery.
Prize the compass's thin arms. Disregard the stars.

Emulate the nurse who moves her hands
like silk coats sinking into a Koi-dappled pool.

When the moon is an unpaired parenthesis, do not
touch me. Admire the spaces between the stars.

Determine which is more terrifying: a memorial
for the dead or my face in the reflecting pool.

After I'm gone, play with the toys of my childhood.
Tangle jump ropes. Scatter the jacks like stars.

Look to the sea, which hoards things from this life—
starfish reinventing themselves in her tide pools.

Remember the celestial sphere is full
of dead things we still consider stars.

cousin

i.

under a sheet
in the sun room
we found it

metal ribbed
black barrel
of a trunk

flaking rust
in your hands
as it opened

its body full
of bolts of cloth
white & stiff

ii.

before the ship left
termini imerese
and her second son
died and she sewed
without a pattern
four baptismal gowns
our great grandmother
packed a steamer trunk
with enough fabric
to make a sail

iii.

easter sunday we set the table

snapped the cloth in the air

pinned its four corners

as it buoyed upward

later when you said *leukemia*

the word was a whiteness

that arced the air between us

fell covered everything

iv.

no stranger to the way water
resists the bow of a boat

hesitates the oars
of eight strong men

you cut the river
every morning

the coxswain shouted
a pattern of attack

you sweated in the sun
you clenched your jaw

but the water wanted
to stay whole

v.

no one is allowed
to see you until
as the doctor says

he has been completely replaced

vi.

emptying the house
after the death
of our grandfather

you pulled the bolts
of brittle cream
from the trunk

I scrubbed
its three gold locks
with a toothbrush

wiped clean
the metal bands
around its hull

I couldn't lift it
so you did

dust billowing
into light

vii.

the night before
they left for america
she cried over the body
of her favorite trunk

filling it by candlelight
with expensive fabric
the whitest thing she knew

thick milk of it
replacing the air

Examining A Phrenological Chart Bought on Ebay

Destructiveness is tucked behind the ear—
 “where you keep your ballpoint pen,” you say.
 I shut my eyes and trace the stained glass ceiling
 of the skull.

It’s like the third-grade game
 with spinning desktop globes and jabbing hands.
 “You have to live where your finger lands!”
 Kat Stein would shout. Her braces flashed like guns.
 She always got Hawaii.

“Stop!” you say.
 I open up my eyes. “*Causality?*”
 We read the key aloud. “*Causality:*
this faculty allows for understanding
reasons behind events.”

The cool kids peeked.
 I know that now—that’s why their fingers found
 exotic, tropical islands every time,
 while I was stuck with Laos or South Dakota.
 “Laos sucks!” Kat yelled. I live in Boston now
 and Kat is dead.

“My turn,” you say. I nod.
 You land on *Memory*. We go to bed.
 “If only it were real,” I say. “The chart.”
 “The body’s not obvious,” you say.

Kat called
 me two weeks before she passed away.
 “It’s this thing I want to do,” she said,
 “call everyone I’ve hurt and say I’m sorry.”
 I hung up quickly.

“Good night,” you say. We kiss.
 I map your hot, white scalp with trembling hands—
Benevolence, *Constructiveness*, and *Hope*
 bubble up beneath my fingertips.

Victor

We never would have guessed—age six and twelve,
ears pressed against the baseboard's fleur-de-lis—
that shavings, fur, and teeth were sonorous:
a thousand mice can make a lot of noise.
Inside the racks of plastic boxes, they bite
the water spouts' thick lips, click ear tags, squeak,
and multiply. Each week a woman shouts
the names of boxes set for sacrifice,
a bingo game in which A6 will go,
B7 stay. I miss the strategy
of death, thrill of droppings trails behind
the fridge, the Victor traps dad spread with Jif,
the sticky sheets we laid like landing strips
across the kitchen tile. We thought we saw
mice everywhere. Your gray-toed, mateless socks
were curled like bodies. Dad's epaulettes were fringed
with thin, pink tails. And when it came—a crack
of alloy springs, a squeal, a wood-flesh thud—
we ran to watch the facedown, flailing mouse
succumb. It pissed and twitched so long I looked
away. Everyone dies quicker now.
They say it took you seconds: the squeak of brakes,
a detonated car bomb, shrapnel, dark.
At the wake, I gripped your dog tag tight
enough to leave your name incised inside
my fist. I know how clean it is to snap
a spine, how swift if done correctly. A pinch
of fur, the tail tugged back until I hear
the oft-repeated sound of sacrifice—
the crunch of bone, pebbles under boots.

cam·pa·nol·o·gy

n. the study of bells

My sister was married under the sound –
a church by the sea, white gown barnacled
to her body. She dragged the train behind her
as a mother pulls a petulant child
away from the water.

.

I climbed
the clock tower

before
I held you

beneath it
before

your body
became a bell

I wanted
to ring

.

At the end of a sitting meditation,
the teacher tells us to track the chimes
until they collapse—each *dong*
a wave swooning into silence.

.

the sort of stillness you love a calculus exam

proofs rustling awake
 under flakes of eraser

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{\sigma\sqrt{2\pi}}e^{-\frac{1}{2}\left(\frac{x-\mu}{\sigma}\right)^2}$$

dark curve we huddle under

.
 Curls of prosciutto,
 green olives, bread.
 After dinner, we fall
 asleep holding each other
 before the doorbell
 startles us apart.

.
 For years I misheard
 the lyrics from the soundtrack
 of *Le scaphandre et le papillon* –

I fell into the ocean when you became my wife
I fell into the ocean and you became my wave

.
 You are oceans away. I make the bed,
 run, meditate, eat my spinach.
Good tone means that a bell must be in tune with itself.
 Without you here, it is hard even to listen.

.
 no music without anatomy
 ear lip waist tongue
 when I touch myself
 the feeling rings
 memory lapping
 endlessly

Alkali Flies, Mono Lake

Beyond the wooden sign that says *you're here*,
flies thread past tufa, algae, sand—
a buzz-strung band
of static streaming towards pier.
From here, the teeming flies, like Monet's flecks,
clot into a whole,
until a pink-beaked seagull pecks
into the masterpiece a single hole.
I walk to shore and watch the insects fill
the missing puzzle piece; with outspread
wings, the jigsaw of the dead
is plugged—flies swarm until
the shuffled bodies finds a resting place
beyond the tides,
and like a muscle pushed beyond its pace,
the strand gives one last twitch, subsides.
How easy.
Sewing up their veil, the insects see
that this old sign's a trick—
that *you're not here*.
Pulling off my socks and shoes, I kick
the lake's black rim until the shore is clear.

II

Put Down

“It’s true,” Nathaniel says. “I saw Coach cry.”
 I shut the tumor-ridden puppy’s sty-
 swelled eyes. Ted circles *cancer of the bone*
 as Final Cause Of Death and scrawls *unknown*
 beside Pet’s Name. “You’re full of bull,” I say.
 “He’s not the type.” I prep the surgeon’s tray
 with forceps, clamps, drills, pins, and rolls of gauze.
 Nathaniel tucks the puppy’s limp back paws
 into the body bag. “This job’s the shits,”
 Ted says, and it begins—the bitching blitz
 of burnt-out vet technicians:

“Yesterday
 this owner burst in halfway through a spay
 yelling: ‘Hold on! I changed my mind!’”

“I’ll beat

that easy—Pomeranian in heat
 comes in last week and bleeds so fucking much
 I have to get a mop.”

“Yeah? You can’t touch
 this, man: I found a sign-in sheet that said,
 Describe Your Pet: *a bitch with jowls.*”

“Hey, Ted—

A bitch with jowls. You sure that’s not your mom?”
 We whisper insults while our fingers—calm,
 deliberate—sew up kittens, scrape dog skin
 across dark, pre-stained slides, and spin blood thin.
 “It’s true,” Nathaniel starts again. “Coach *bawled*.
 They euthanized his Chow and when I hauled
 the body off, he lost it.” “Nah,” I say,
 “no chance—Coach didn’t even cry the day
 his daughter died. No way he’d go soft now.”
 “He did,” Nathaniel said. “That goddamn Chow
 was all he had.” The centrifuges hum.
 The putting down of things becomes too tiresome.
 I get a call to post-op room thirteen.
 A cranky, shaven beagle pup sans spleen
 is sitting on the countertop. I grab
 peroxide rub and clean his stitched-up scab.
 Clipping the thread that gates his broken bones,
 I quietly undo the stitches that I’ve sewn.

a pair of impossible objects for a friend who is dying

i. a frictionless pulley

Bricks of 9kg and 10kg hang from a frictionless pulley. The 10kg brick is 3 meters from the floor when the system is released. Find the time it takes the brick to hit the ground.

It doesn't squeak,
 little silent circle

holding one great weight
 from the left,

 one great weight from the right.
 The string passes the disk

and the molecules are strangers
 in a train station. *Hello-goodbye,*

 you say. Such an easy burden
 before the body hits

the floor. That's what we call
 the brick in physics: a falling body.

Every body is pulled downward,
 the question is how long

will it take, how quickly
 will the quiet halo rotate.

ii. a sharpened stick of negligible mass

At the bottom of a 200 meter high cliff and a 30-m-wide raging river is a stranded explorer. To send him supplies from the top of the cliff, you quickly attach a sharpened stick of negligible mass to the front of a rocket, so that it will impale itself into the supplies. What minimum speed must the rocket have before impact in order to save the explorer's life?

It exists because I will it—
branch so light it cracks

with the weight of a sparrow.
No mass to subtract,

just the multiplying of momentum,
the curve of calculator buttons

pushing back against the thumb.
At night my snug-shut eye

can't stop seeing him
across the river's rush,

the stick like a phantom limb
divorced from its trunk.

I got the problem wrong. I guessed
because I knew that's what you'd do.

I'd make a forest weightless
if I thought it could save you.

psith·ur·ism

n. a whispering sound, particularly the noise
of leaves rustling in the wind

After the hospital we listened
to wind lacing
through palm fronds,
hum of hands holding,
letting go.

*

trying to fix my comb

you broke it

our last night

warped wood snapping

now I hold myself

my hair tangling

*

I have a friend who knows
how to love me across distances.
I sent her wind chimes
and she wrote back,
*I hate the way they sound,
but they remind me of you.*

*

I placed a finger over my chest
and still this poem slipped out.

*

shell
blackberries
gull feather

won't stop
muttering

I delete
wooster ohio
from weather.com

is the wind
rearranging
your curls

do you stand
in sun
or rain

*

the scarf my mother lent me

leaves my neck leaps

into the throat of the chicago night

pink silk tongue

swallowed by the city

*

Originally the term *break up*
was used to describe
a plow dividing the land.

*

to return
to the room
whose windows
were clotted
with leaves
whose walls
amplified
our breath

velvet hush
of legs
under sheets
whisper
of hair
you hid
behind my ear
I'd follow
the breadcrumb trail
of any
small voice

Dowry

Like every beast, identity is litany:
plecia nearctica, lovebug, summer snow.

Coupled to their mates, they swarm
 the Exxon station; females drag

the males behind them, men who spend
 a lifetime walking backwards.

They die en masse, smashing into windshields,
 encrusting cars with wings and egg sacs.

They love the color white, the smell of gasoline.
 “Burn a bride,” you said. “I bet they’d swarm.”

One night in bed, your body dark
 and elegant as Sanskrit, you said

into my pillow, “I saw a woman burn.”
 In West Bengal, you’d stumbled on a throng

of shouting villagers. The saris shifted,
 revealed a girl, her skin a hundred shades

of red. They call it dowry death, bride burning,
 honor killing. It’s why I’m pumping gas,

your window rolled up tight.
 You still smell burnt flesh beneath

the gasoline: char of cuticles, skin stripping off
 in panels. I lick my finger now and lift three bills—

epidermis, dermis, hypodermis. I pay
 for everything I’ve taken, every drop

of gasoline. You pull into
 the street. “How much?” you ask.

The insects crack against the glass,
 matches striking without end.

Panic Attack in Paris

I bet you thought this poem was set in France,
yet here I am in Vegas, sans baguette.
Dear body, don't leave anything to chance.

Pacing beneath the Eiffel Tower's lance,
I can't stop mumbling half of a duet.
I bet you thought "this poem is set in France."

My ribcage twists as neon red lights dance
around the words A Night You Won't Forget.
Dear body, don't leave anything to chance.

Inside, the slots induce a kind of trance—
cherry cherry cherry makes my palms go wet.
I bet you thought this poem was set. In France,

expect to unexpect. Even a stranger's glance,
the *whoosh* of shuffling cards, feels like a threat.
Dear body, don't leave me. Everything is chance:

my banging heart, my breath, my jellied stance.
I wipe my hands. I line up for roulette.
I bet. You thought this poem was set in France,
dear body? Don't leave anything to chance.

The Sword Swallower's Daughter

I.

My daddy kissed the silver hilts,
 licked the blades before he eased them in.
 After the clown on stilts counted the crowd
 to ten, he pulled out the sword and bowed.
Fearless White-Skinned Freak Eats 2 Foot Sword!!
 "It's really twenty inches," daddy said.
 He practiced every day behind the tents—
 jeweled daggers, bayonets, cutlasses.
 Slurping Cokes and fisting candied nuts,
 they packed the stands to see him gag on steel,
 watch him eat the sharp impossible.
 Planted in the center ring, Daddy winked
 at me, tied back his long white hair, and turned
 his soft esophagus into a scabbard.

II.

One day the clown on stilts forgot to count
 to ten. This is what my sister says.
 I wasn't in the tent. I'll start again.
 The day my daddy passed away, it poured
 so hard the sequined bareback rider woke
 us up. "Rain day, kids," she said. "Stay here."
 Of course my sister didn't. She slipped out back,
 saw a tent collapse and a pair of bears
 escape, pink rolls of tickets spinning out
 into the wind. Still the show went on.
 She sat beneath the folding bleachers, drinking
 a day-old Coke, and ringing rivulets of water
 from her brown French braid. The clown was late.
 "Daddy ate the sword, but the clown didn't count."
 He lost his grip—the blade slid out red.
 He heaved until the dust was dark with acid.
 "The jugglers carried him out back," she said.
 "I didn't see him move. He wasn't breathing."
 She paused. "Then everybody's makeup dripped."
 "Tears or rain?" I didn't ask. *Tears or rain?*

III.

Without his stilts, the clown was five-foot-four.
He liked to stand inside our canvas door
to watch my sister practice at the sink.
She stuck a toothbrush down her throat as far
as it would go. “The trick is to pretend
that everything will be okay,” she said.
I couldn’t do it, though. I followed him
into the dressing room. “Did you forget
to count to ten?” I asked. He came too close,
whispered, “I know it must be hard for you.”
His white gloved fingers vanished in my hair.
The wind snapped at the tent. “Don’t cry,” he said.
He pushed me up against the costume racks.
I felt the sequins scraping up my legs,
the tulle against my back, his quick, hot breath,
a metallic tongue thrust between my lips,
into my mouth, my throat. I almost choked,
but fell, instead, into the sawdust shouting.
My voice is all I ever had, I have—
my long, sharp scream, a sword unsheathing.

Eighteen Photos of Me Holding Up A Boulder

You made me pose beneath it every summer:
palms against the stone's cold underface,
boots in the muck. I lifted up the rock—

or so it seemed from the Nikon's glossy eye.
Always the grit, the crisp brown needles buried
in my hair, the smell of sweat and sap.

Men in darkrooms watched my body develop:
the same fake straining stance, the loose-
haired head thrown back in ecstasy

or effort—to them, it hardly mattered which.
Daddy, look with both your eyes
and try to find a single negative

where you are not pretending I am strong.

al·bes·cent

adj. becoming or passing into white

there was
 a moment
 when I saw
 the glass
 tipping
 and thought
I can stop this

then milk
 everywhere

.

White noise is the hardest to block,
 as it contains a wide range of frequencies
 all possessing the same intensity.

.

how to forget

that beautiful blanching

the whitest part of you

pouring into my hands

.

When I dream, faces shift
 like clouds. I'm at the ocean
 again with my doctor : you : my sister.
 The water scrambles over our feet,
 frothing out to nothing.

.

In trying to describe
 his condition,
 a patient with a brain injury
 said to pretend

that I'm walking
 down the street with a friend
 when a man dragging a roller
 filled with white paint
 begins to follow,
 painting over
 everywhere
 I've been,
 blanking out
 windows,
 the sidewalks,
 my friend,
 erasing even
 his name.

.

my gifts to you, in reverse order:

noise canceling headphones
 bowl of coconut ice cream
 handful of q-tips
 mad-lib on a faded receipt
some emptiness for you to fill

.

when my face
 goes pale
 blood
 is rushing elsewhere

.

Transfixed in the garden
 by an egret stalking its prey,
 we watched the beak's yellow blade
 strike a lizard, shake it limp
 as it tried to wriggle away.
 I heard the bird's hunger:
 soft snap of bone, white yawn
 of its widening throat.
 If I reached for your hand
 then, I don't remember.

Untitled

Add this to the running
tab of Things God Owes You – the blood running

between your legs, you screaming my name
even after I reach you, the river-running-

backwards wrongness of it all. In the exam room
I pace with a cup of coffee, black running

over the styrofoam lip. You climb onto the table,
whisper *Carol Chandra Claire* – names running

like hounds after the nameless. For years it feels
the doctor is squinting at the screen, running

a probe over the hill of your stomach.
Faith Fay Fiona. We're running

out of ways to call her back. Through the twin fists
of an hourglass—the sand's slow running.

Darling: even when we want to stop,
our legs keep running.

The Misspelled Fish

George Bernard Shaw complained that fish could just as easily be spelled ghoti (gh as in tough, o as in women, ti as in nation).

—Steven Pinker

Before you died and I became sincere,
I fished for compliments at Tordo Pier.
My lips were pursed, my purse's lips were loose;
everything I wore was short or sheer.

The bill is fifty dollars and five cents,
a man intoned. *Please give my compliments*
to the chef. You parroted the English tapes—
for weeks you only spoke in present tense.

That summer people kept mistaking gray,
flat rocks for devil rays. The cobalt bay
was full of tourists shuffling to the shallows
where danger was better on display.

The night we met, you still could barely spell
your name. We drank like deep sea fish and fell
into the blanket's swirl. I taught you idioms
like *come on down* and *boy, that's swell*.

After work, we scattered pita bread
across my porch. "Elizabeth," I said.
"Nicola," you said. We named each bird
as throngs of wings unfurled above our heads.

One August night, a storm destroyed pier 3.
The waves revealed their innards easily:
a fish's jaw, a noseless figurehead.
We picked our way past half-submerged debris.

The little coming-ons of death were slow.
Doctors mapped your chromosomes—the glow
of God's absurd and hasty signature:
forty-six X's, not a single O.

When I was twelve, I found a squid and stripped

it of its ink. I wrote a note that dripped
until my words, like now, were watered down
to only half of my intended script.

Some things are written, some aren't meant to be.
Happy people have no history.
And I'll inscribe these lies until, inside
a conch, I hear your voice drown out the sea.

Hospital Through a Teleidoscope

They die in an instant, in the middle of the night;
 the people are shaken and they pass away. . .
 -Job 34:20

In bed, I shake the world by turning glass.
 Twisting the plastic tube, I shut one eye,
 watch the people break apart and pass

out of my lens. This is my morning mass—
 mosaic glass, white nurses floating by.
 In bed, I shake the world. By turning glass,

I split the mother's dying son, the brass-
 necked stethoscope, the doctor's tucked-in tie.
 I watch the people break apart and pass

my curtained room. I fill six test tubes, wineglass-
 thin, with blood. I fast. I sleep. I lie
 in bed. I shake. The world, by turning glass

to dust, scatters what we thought would last.
 The mother down the hall keeps screaming, *why?*
 I watch the people break apart and pass

away. That night, the doctor cups my mass,
 benign, like bread between his hands. I cry
 in bed. I shake the world. By turning glass,
 I watch the people break apart and pass.

envelope

the dark cursive of the address
is a miracle not to mention
the seal where his tongue slid
wetting its curve never have I
been overpowered by so small
a thing holding its edged body
to the light my mind staggers
backwards his cigarette
jumping from the pavement
to his lips the sun arcing east
illuminating his bare feet
crossed in the grass the bed making
itself as his fingers leave
my hair one of those was a dream
if I am being honest so what
and yes I stole the envelope
from his bag caressed the four
pressed corners the rippled seal
the whole translucent skin of it
so what if I love a man
who doesn't love me
so what if he forgot the stamp

in·tinc·tion

n. the act of dipping bread in consecrated wine
so that a communicant receives both together

I left the window open
& my hands were amputated
in a nightmare
& woke to snow
shrouding dishes
in the kitchen sink

what I want to tell you
I hold on my tongue
until it dissolves

*

What
does
it mean,
broken
for you?

*

Handfuls of pills didn't help
my body recognize itself.
I was sick and believed
in miracles, my face purpled
in the wine's mirror,
wafer rippling the darkness.

*

at night betrayal

scrapes

the butter of us

across my bed

*

Instrumental to winemaking and baking,
the yeast *Saccharomyces Cerevisiae*
is not airborne and requires a vector
to move—most commonly wasps and bees.

*

the morning I said
I love you

our waitress discovered
I don't eat gluten

is it okay she asked
if bread is touching the cheese?

*

No word
carries

all that
I mean.

Take,
and eat

without me—

on your
tongue,

sweet slick
of a petal,

a prickle
of crumbs.

Hoarder

First to go: holy water in a Smucker's jar.
And in the turned-off fridge she left ajar—
a box of fist-sized figurines: eskimos, rajas,

nested peasants, tiny wooden men
from places where *they don't say amen*.
We did, over frozen peas and ramen,
and as my father, fatter and meaner

every year, broke her bric-a-brac. I'd bow
my head with each glass-smashing blow.
She took to stacking porcelain saints below
the sink, tucking rosaries in jacket elbows,

snow globes in the crockpot. Into my bag
go trinkets *I'll be back for*, she'd brag.
Her ghost, all hands, grabs and grabs.

Alphekka

broken crown of stars

I grew up in the perforated dark,
bright-struck, cheek pressed against sleek telescopes.
I swept across the Milky Way's faint arc
& knocked my flashlight beam past Pisces' ropes,

Aquarius, the Hunter's lucent hips.
I tripped a lot back then—my head tipped back,
my opened mouth an annular eclipse.
I stood in awe of things that broke through black.

At school, I nightdreamed through the classroom hum,
connected dots behind closed eyes until
they filled my skull's domed planetarium.
The sticker stars on homework didn't thrill

me anymore, so I put them on my tongue.
They clung like notes, a golden song unsung.

*

They hung like golden notes, a song unsung
until I swallowed & shat an astral melody,
told no one. One night my mother strung

a popcorn chain around the aspen tree,
remembering last winter when she found
a sparrow stiffened in a slack-beaked sprawl.

Behind the red-roofed barn, I heard the sound
of dirt flung-back & saw mom's shadow crawl
across the snow as she lay down to rest

the shoebox casket in the ground. She hummed
Ave Maria, crossed herself, & pressed
a stone into the snow-slush mound. I thumbed

my frostbit nose at things falling from the skies.
The steady heavens winked her thousand eyes.

*

Steady heavens: blink. Your thousand eyes
are fixed on all this earth-bound misery:
a duck's snapped neck, the estuary dry,
my body flimsy as an effigy.
Which is to say: you watched me almost die,
dear universe, how I once observed a bee—
belly-up & wild—writhe inside
a mason jar of broken combs and honey.

This is the sweetest sort of drowning, this
is all I thought the night the feeding tube
went down: viscous wings, the nectar's glue,
the scoop, salvation in a slotted spoon.
Evenings when my lids clench shut like fists,
I thank God's blank eye, the socket of the moon.

Notes

“Moon-face” is for Claire and the epigraph is based on information from About.com.

“sonnet” is for Jake.

“Infusion room praise song” is for Amanda.

The quotation ending “ne·pen·thes” is by Carl Linnaeus and translated by Harry Veitch.

“cousin” is for Todd and in memory of Tod.

“Alkali Flies, Mono Lake” is in memory of Rita and Morey.

The physics problems in “a pair of impossible objects for a friend who is dying” were adapted from *Fundamentals of Physics* by David Halliday.

“The Sword Swallower’s Daughter” is for Joanna.

The patient’s story in “al·bes·cent” is based on an anecdote from Abigail Thomas’ *A Three Dog Life*.

The dictionary poems are for Q.