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Fumbling in the Marrow: Poems

Shannon Azzato Stephens

Senior Honors Thesis
Carnegie Mellon University
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“To remember everything is a form of madness”

On finding an old Glenn Miller LP and bringing it to my new home

Wrap your arms around me
in a post-war kind of way: we'll forget
about the losses, the love between two
chipped souls, pieces broken off and tarnished
by the things we gave to the wrong people:
rent money, tuition, a ride to work,
a massage, the robustness of our laughter,
the earliest best years of our lives, the feeling
of containing multitudes, of being ourselves.
Cups of tea for old lovers
we wish we could call strangers. Or friends.

When coming back from war,
all good things feel too easy, like they aren't real:
those damp hells we squeezed ourselves into
feel more like home after awhile
than a dance floor, lamplight,
a polka-dot dress and round-toed shoes.

My love, I have been fighting for you
in all the wrong places. I would like, for one song,
to forget the shrapnel in my side--- the faces of friends
I lost because I thought I loved them.
Let me place the tip of my nose
on the slope of your neck, find my fingers tracing
your belt, and dodge the beat with me.
Slightly off step, we'll laugh over trumpets and shine
and your collar grazing my clavicle.
The jumpy forgetting that love, like a post-war boom,
bears the scars of the fight you've won.

No Letters

1989

In the first minutes of my life, my mother
was under, dreaming of me with her eyes
shut tight and her belly sewn. Cut
out of her, I was jagged-edged
with sharpened cries.

My father looked at me:
I was his but he wasn't mine.

1992

Old enough to cut my own pancakes
with a bread knife, I slapped peanut butter
and jam on with a spoon. My mother
was part of the stove, pouring
batter in pools. My father,
still jetlagged, his pine-tree scent
in my mother's house,
drizzled thin lines
across the plains of his pancakes.

2000

I shouldn't lie, she tells me.
Your father lied.

I check the mailbox every
afternoon, and squint inside
as the pale light behind me
fades. It has been two years.

Inside, I lean towards the bathroom
mirror. I have my father's mouth.

2009

Scuffed photographs out of a box:
my father the mountain man, hair
overgrown and curling at the tips,
my scalp on his palm, peach fuzz on
callous as he points my face
at the camera, his eyes hidden

behind flip-down sunglasses even
though we're inside.

Him standing
in the foundation of a house I've never
seen, a tool belt slung around his hips,
leaning on a shovel, those same
sunglasses shielding him again.

A closer look: my name and birthday
carved into the cement foundation.

For My Mother: A Precis on the Transformation from Burden to Freedom

1.

snapshots:

my paper wings,
hands folding
into plump dough,
two unseen
benevolent palms,
breasts rising
under a sweater
and two crossed arms.

2.

it is one thing to be a body that makes bodies

and another to rise beyond my limbs,
skin,
breath,
patches of thorny hair

and the residue it left inside you.

Promises

When Nana got high on morphine,
she saw flowers growing out of her blanket.
They scared her. I could see them too, I think:
dark blue, with round petals and ochre stalks
the imprint of a cotton-polyester blend in their shadows.
They heaved themselves out of her bed and towered
over her small eyes, her tufty, fuzzy hair.
She clutched the earth that bore them.
Pulled the blankets up to her chin.

When you're eleven, it's hard to hold
your grandmother's hand while she's stoned,
but easy to promise that you'll never do drugs.

When you're twenty-one, it's easy to dismiss
your promises. I sucked the salvia in:
sweet and sticky behind my tongue.
First: a clutch on the railing,
open-mouthed laughter that wasn't mine.
Invisible tweezers plucked the erect
hair from my forearms, thighs, belly button.
People were the stripes on a pinwheel.
I was the axis. Colors faded.
Everything mixed with grey.
They spun around me, their voices booming
from overhead. I fought
my way out. Made
my eyes see arms and fingers,
ask for water. When strips of pink and blue
turned to faces, I knew for a moment
that the people were the dream,
the spinning was how it was
and had always been.

I brimmed into sanity on a chair
I hadn't been sitting in when I took the pipe.
Clenched my knees tight, brushed my fingers
through the shreds of vows I'd made, guzzled
water that tasted like polluted air
and smiled through as I was played a video
of my laughter and stumbling:
triumphant, trampling flowers,
maniacal, ugly.

Commitment

I have a friend whose Orthodoxy breaks in cycles.
Every few months he'll tug at his beard
and admit to having a "nekkedshower"
and when I ask him what that is,
thinking of the mountains of Hebrew phrases I will never
come to know, he punctuates his laugh with a palm
flat on the table and another double
shot of bourbon ---his only regular vice---
and explains that it's what happens when you remove your clothes
and get into the shower with another naked person.

I would like to ask him if the well-worn spaces between us
are like sex in the long dry spell that is his life. Instead,
I let him teach me the difference between scotch and bourbon
in his basement, keeping a heavy oak bar between us:
it's the largest condom in the world, he says.

He wasn't always this way. His parents are Reform hippies
from Michigan who raised him on bagels and casual
Passover dinners where everyone looked forward to
looking for the matzo hidden in a napkin, but no one knew
the reason they did it. He says somewhere along the line,
after wiping his mustache dry from another tryst
behind the synagogue, he was wrung dry
by the nihilism of adolescence.

He says his youth made him stupid, but I say
it made him stupid and lovely,
hiding from his memories under a *tallit*
and stumbling occasionally into the puddle of his own desires.
It takes commitment to know what you want
and turn the other cheek regardless:
I lounge in his basement in my sweatpants,
take the shots he hands me, and talk about a long-
distance boyfriend of mine who will never come up to visit,
and who I drive down to see religiously because
outside of someone to help me convince myself I'm happy
I don't know what I want. I hope this makes me as beautiful
as my friend, now too drunk to drive me home, slouched
on the other side of the room, his yarmulke tipping
like an empty cup onto the pillow behind his head.

When I left for college

I couldn’t write a poem if it didn’t have
the Hudson River in it: city lights
glancing off smooth currents of water,
spilled diamonds on black silk.

I missed the most those evenings off 8th
Avenue, a Jersey girl lost in bookstores
flush with pages that ached for reading.

I missed, too, the boy with heavy boots
and too-trim pants snug around his hefty hips,
a blazer crumpled across his back.
He never noticed the posed fold of my legs
as I perched atop a rusty ladder,
proud to be a deserter
of the cold, light-dotted night.

I dug my heels into the dust of Old New York
and dreaded the last train back,
a hollow tube of wee-hour dreamers
and their bleary, broken eyes.

I reveled in the outcast-ness of first love,
that nobody-understands-our-depth kind
of love, that assuming-you-can-find-yourself
entirely in someone else kind of love:

we wore stoops and late-open shops
like masks at Carnivale,
huddled under fizzing streetlights
and between lonely dog-walkers
shyly exchanging smiles like first-grade valentines
under a cloudy moon.

In my snug dorm room Upstate, I wished
for that fire-filled loneliness: that open
brewing melting into the rare and cautionary smiles
of passers-by on nighttime streets.
That New York kind of home.
Watching the slow scurry of traffic
rendered me thrilled by city solitude.

I kept the bookstore boy
and the clunk of his boots, his lumber through a crowd

on the subway platform, stored his voice
mails on my phone and made him a picnic on the quad
outside my dorm when he came to visit, told everyone
I loved him and to this day when I close my eyes I can't
see him properly without grisled graffiti and the storm
of New York air, trash and pizza scent in the air:

a love of the backdrop, I tried
to take it with me in the flesh

After Tim

We used to joke about fortunes yanked
from crumpled cookies:
"Love waits in the garden... In bed
It waits on the bus... In bed
It waits in the shadow of the city... In bed
It waits it waits it waits in bed bed bed bed bed"

We ignored the fact that there are no gardens
in our beds. We don't wake up with lilies under our pillows,
or bus drivers with gruff voices, kind chins, and bodies
like the miniature Dionysus statues we stole from the museum last fall.

I used to keep a city's-worth of men in my bed.
It was a cycle, rolling over their numbers like a clock
keeps the time: the falafel vendor with a tatoo
of the Virgin Mary on the inside of his thigh,
the punk who blushed when I tore
at his plastic-studded belt and found
peach fuzz swirling
over the dimples on his lower back,
the boy I picked up at a gay bar
who cried on my terrycloth robe
but left his number
on a scrap of paper beneath my pillow.

I keep it, yellowing and curled, inside an old Chinese takeout container
on the bookshelf beside my bed.

Chorus: My Mother Calls My Father's Second Wife to Find My Father and His Late Child Support Payments

You don't know? Where is the husband
that we shared? I know him, he leaves a trail.
He gave us things. A child, a black eye, a mortgage.
A secret to keep on a first date.
A reason for my parents not to trust me with my money
even though I'm thirty-seven.
Pain pills. A sympathetic sister-in-law.
A ring. A wedding on a hillside. Bills from a rehab clinic.
A reason to live. A reason to lock my door.
A reason to resent myself.
A broken bookshelf. A Civil War documentary collection
peppering the floor. A police report.
Bankruptcy. A hole in my living room wall.
A variety of orgasms: angry, apologetic, begging, loved.
Don't forget love? I forgot his love
when he forgot his only daughter.
You tell that son of a bitch to call me.

Fifteen years and a few more months

since he's seen his daughter, and he hopes
that she knows how to play Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young
on the guitar and maybe on the stereo in her car.
He thinks that maybe (if her mother raised her right)
she knows that braking hard on back roads
and spinning out into weedy ditches
is a requirement; that kicking the screen out
of her window and crawling into a night that tingles
on her skin like shards of broken glass
is a rite of passage; that fifteen-year-old-girls
should of course have dirt ground into their knees,
grass stains on their behinds, and dandelion marks on their chins;
that her father keeps every letter his hands tremble
too much to seal, and that he racks up one hell of a tab
at the post office on stamps:
tucked into the top drawer of his desk, for someday.

The Case for Magic

My father left. Well, he didn't leave. My mother took me away,
and asked him to stop writing. It was my fault. I told my third grade teacher
that I didn't like his letters because I could tell when he was drinking.
I didn't think I could make him ago away, but I guess I could.

My mom told me that I didn't need Prince Charming.
After watching *Beauty and the Beast*, we "finished" the story:
Belle organized the Prince's library and opened it up to poor schoolchildren,
improved literacy by at least 50%. But with my unicorn horn on, my flowers
stolen from my mother's garden, my climbing tree in the yard, there was always
true love, a peasant boy, a rebel, a kiss in the rain, someone I could save.

But my father stopped writing, and I started therapy, and I grew up.
Adults aren't supposed to believe in magic.

Love was history, weight, and the friend I turned to
when I was sixteen and broken by a crush who lost his virginity
to someone other than me. Sometimes you don't get what you want,
but what you need: someone who took shots before I did
and assured me of how much they would burn,
ate half my croissants, fucked me lazily, complained
when I wasn't in the mood, got angry when I shrunk his socks in the wash,
grunted when I got lonely at night. We shared a bed, bought a sound system,
and I wanted it to be--- Love was an old computer, a stale sweater.
The ghost of affection. Your life, unfolding in front of you.
I fell out of love and didn't notice.
He was my friend, and now if I never saw him again I would be happy.

But you know, it's a lot easier to not be in love with someone whose sentences you can finish
than to sit here in front of you, you who I met two weeks ago, whose middle names
I don't even know, and say, when you look at me the air breaks

and I will give myself to you
because my skin ripples into bloom, my unicorn horn grows back,
the magic of knowing someone creeps back into my belief system,
with you I could tear and disappear at any second
because I don't know what love is but I know that I'm in love with you
and I'll be honest, I miss the bland care and simple comforts of being with a guy I didn't love
because when there's no magic in the world, you know exactly what's going to happen next.

“Every kitchen spoon has led me to you”

On our first date

--- though no,
it wasn't really a date,
we met at the club when I saved you
from my drunk friend --- or,
her from you, it was one of the two --- and then we spent
the night wandering across misty periwinkle Dublin, and the dawn

sharing a forty of Bavaria on your balcony
watching spiders --- "babies of Stephen", Stephen being
a mega-spider you loved but I never saw
because you moved at noon the next day, but not before

you told me about your friend who quoted Yeats
to a girl on their first date
and you were going to their engagement party in a week
and you invited me to their engagement party
so we could look at each other and not stop smiling
and then you said it might be presumptuous
to quote Yeats but you did anyway,
it was "The Wild Swans at Coole",
and maybe this was precipitated

--- again, I don't remember, I was getting drunk
on how your theory of heaven --- everyone goes
and everyone is forgiven ---

made me remember what beauty feels like

--- maybe this was precipitated by me
quoting Yeats first, I know I did at some point
tell you I was laying my dreams
at your feet and please tread lightly
which you did, moving inside to find
blankets and pillows for the bare mattress
in your empty room

while I sat under bright clouds remembering
that I hadn't been happy
like this
in years, --- if ever, as we are always
wondering --- and the best thing I
could do --- I made this promise
on your balcony, while you made our bed
for the first time at 5.30 in the morning

on a Wednesday in early July --- that I would simply

I will turn your cherries back to blossoms

after Pablo Neruda

watch them
ripen again

pluck

break
scarlet skin

drop slow
sweet joy

onto the edges
of your lips

I listened to The Cranberries singing "I'm such a fool for you"

And oh yes, you had me wrapped around your finger
from the very beginning, in that apartment I rented
for the summer, those disapproving Christian roommates,
the buttons of your shirt scattered in corners,
loose threads quivering in air laced with the coming of late July rain,
you leaving for work with an umbrella in your hand
and a scarf tied around the strap of your Rolling Stones bag.
I spent the weekend in bed reading the novel you bought me
and eating tomatoes, drawing skin away from meat
with my front teeth and wondering when you would call,
realizing that the shape of your mouth makes the world better

We Sit at The Original Hot Dog Stand

At 4 am, a large side of fries between us, tucked into a wax paper shell,
greasy tentacles tangling in their slow desire
to be separated from the rest,
picked and eaten, drunk fruit.
You take the chili dog in your fingertips,
cradling its spicy strangeness:
you told the slow man with the warts on the backs of his hands
that you wanted "a hot dog with everything",
thinking of ketchup and mustard and maybe some onions
and you ask me what a chili dog is
before taking a full two inches of it in your first bite.

This is your ninth hot dog this week, since you came to America.
I am proud to give you something you love.
I pick apart my cheese steak, fillet curled around rubber cheese,
and wish I had the money to bring you home,
buy you a real Philly Cheese Steak and take you to the Jersey Shore
where I could point at a spot in the sand and say, look
here, a boy touched my breast for the first time
and later, I warned my best friend: the first boy who removes your bra
will also want to lick your nipples.
It was the same beach where my grandfather walked me
in a papoose, a towel over my head to protect from the gritty wind.
I tell you these things because I want you to know me.

Sobering up, I remember the girls who approached you,
drawn like moths to your accent and your suit jacket
in a bar swarming with polo frat boys and shiny, hopeful geeks
in blue wind breakers. You stretched your arm down the bar,
a toss of faith my way when they asked what brought you
all the way, all the way to Pittsburgh.

I wonder about the girls you've slept with. You are unlike me
in this: I keep my tidy number tucked away, but when I asked you
how many, you paused and said, I don't know. What I don't understand
is the women who took you, how they could and then leave in the morning
not wanting to watch you dress every morning,
the wrinkles in your forehead as you ruffle the quiff in your hair
like small golden peacock feathers;
not wanting to remember your name: the peak of it
long "i" and a gentle end, your father's last-minute choice
humming under the tongue; not wanting to trace
the raised outline of your tattoo with the tips of their first and second fingers
before they are fully awake; not wanting to hear the story

of the day your back was inked, how you read *The Count of Monte Christo*
on a massage chair for eight hours and went surfing the next day,
fading the new wings on your back in saltwater.

I want to buy you another hot dog,
and another, and another, until you tell me to stop.
I will then find another thing to show you, something else for you to love
because I want to love things with you.
You dip your fries in mustard. You say you'll go wherever I do
and I want to turn to the register and ask
can we please stay here forever, at least for awhile,
love this greasy table together until we get tired
of fries?

Reticence

It's Christmas Eve and I wonder
why we eat the animals
that warmed Jesus' newborn flank.
I wonder why we have the resident vegetarian
prepare the meat.

I painted all morning,
waiting for my mother
and her boyfriend
and his brother
and their Russian friend, who
will ask for shots of vodka when
my mother offers him wine.
Now, flakes of cadmium yellow
and magenta flutter
from my fingertips into the simmering
ausso bucco juices,
hibiscus petals on moist dirt.

Oil rises to the surface.

My mother left me instructions
scrawled on a napkin that tore
under the flourishes of her pen---
let the meat simmer
for at least three hours, and
add wine as needed! She
signed the note with a scribbled heart.

My fingers, veiled in flour,
unfold the heavy wax paper
and leave white fingerprints, like tracks
of snow, on the scarlet muscle
of a dead lamb. I drop it
into the pot, my palms still tender
from the softness of the meat. I run
my hands under icy faucet water
to soothe the burn of boiling wine
that jumped at me
as I splashed in the shank.

Other forms of water falling from the sky

If I were a dress I would be
the one left out

beneath a sheet of rain,
translucent in the morning.

If I were a cloud,
no one would see me

until it rained
and nipples bloomed

through cotton dresses.

Stories I Tell At Sleepovers: My Parents Met At A Bar

At 22, mom packs her car with everything she owns
and doesn't stop driving until Colorado,
eating tuna out of the can, finding half a worm in a tomato
and hurling out the car window somewhere in Ohio.

She moves in with her friend from high school.
They go dancing at the bars, wearing fake wedding rings
so they won't be bothered by local college boys on the prowl.
She takes the ring off, sometimes, as she would do
with her real one years later, giving it to me:
"Do you want this?"

One night, a blizzard. Neon beer signs in the windows
turn the snow red, purple, orange as it falls.
My mother is thinking of the flatness of her belly under a cropped sweater,
the embarrassing flush of her cheeks in the warmth
cast by her hair: a new perm, bouncing in the mirror behind the bar.

Somewhere, my father slips in,
somewhere he sidles up to her
and she never imagines that this is the man
she won't want to tell her daughter about.

my boyfriend of one week wants a papier-mache t-rex bed

we will discuss this at a time when we are actually choosing a bed.
i will use my boobs.
you will pretend to die.
we will have make-up sex on the floor
(because we won't yet have a bed).
we will be bruised
(emotionally and physically).
we will discover that we really do need a bed.
we will then decide whether to sleep in the mouth of a dinosaur.

Your mother, gardening
                vermillion flowers around the driveway:
eremurus, fuji mum, gardenia, and everything was dead
everywhere else, chunks of thistle and cowed branches
poking up from the ground, but she looked like Alice in
Wonderland in a taffeta skirt, color of my eyelids
after a camera flash, and red high heels that dug
into the yard, she could have put seeds in the holes
but she didn't she was too grounded, legs like twigs
bearing down over the glimmering tumbleweed
she released onto her lawn, her face frowned
with every clanging drop, I could have sworn
she was laying eggs

In the morning kitchen

Jade leaves puffy, shining, just
dusted off, their stems hardened,
age lines winding down
into the soil. Grandfather's hands
in the work: each branch held
by a bamboo reed, velcro
wrapped around the stems to catch
any sagging arm. These plants
don't rustle. They hold the light
at their tips.

put me in a white bed

you say, remind me to always
put you in a white bed.
you call my skin dark, marvel at its bronze,
though i know if i were home my shoulders
would be twice the mahogany.

i reach to hide a stray stand of hair
i lost overnight: black on white,
usually straight but now curling, long and slow,
from the tip of a pillow to the mattress,
a lone comma on white paper.

you stay my hand, trace the line
of hair where it ends on your wrist,
rise to make tea, leave me full
in the empty, warm place you left

should i stay
or dress to help you, i apologize
for my tacit indecision but i have never
been loved like this: you take my love
bottomlessly, return
it blooming

in the kitchen you
press your thumbs into our tea bags,
squeeze out the last ochre drops,
cloud the mugs with milk,
feed the cat, and if i were down there
i would measure my cheek against the space
between your shoulder blades
and tuck my finger against your
gentle hip bone, sweat pants slipping
so low

desire is a plant that trembles
from a crevice so deep within
i never knew it existed.
you are the only one who
can slip into me like this, having always been
the same, stretched out, waiting
for someone to take your love,
to drink your tea

Ars Poetica: The heart is wrapped in words

We make art to recreate the world in our own image.
It's not a god complex.
I write because I believe
if I can describe the delicate wager
between light and my love's eyelashes
---which owns my attention?
which glows in the dawn?---
it won't matter that my desire to wake
with my lips on his shoulder for the rest of my life
scares the crap out of me.

I don't know what I am, only what I love
and what I fear.
If I write the violet bud of a bruise
his hip bone plants on my inner thigh,
the scent of our sweat (burnt cinnamon and celery),
his inability to hold my hand without fiddling
his fingers against mine, the way that kissing, for us,
is as much about noses as lips,
I will own a life measured in the joy of the details.
I will never wake up wondering where the passion went,
the cold pillow on the other half of my heart.

“If it’s the end of the world, there’s no one left to bury you”

Husbandry

I've always loved the way you stack your plates
before you are finished eating.
With the salad saucer atop the lasagna platter,
you pick at raw spinach
and saw into your cherry tomatoes with a steak knife.

This morning your hands began shaking
as we cleared the breakfast dishes.
A whole tower of teacup upon saucer
upon cereal bowl on dinner plate
with forks and two oatmeal-coated spoons
wedged between the layers
rattled its way out of your fingers
and spread their splinters across the kitchen floor.

It took me an hour to find the last chip
of our gold-rimmed wedding china
underneath the potted jade plant in the corner
that seemed to grow itself into gnarls
more quickly since you were diagnosed.

At lunch, we made sandwiches on paper plates
and you asked me to cut your tomatoes
while you gazed at the jade plant quivering
in the breeze from the open window.

I don't believe the dead can see what you do with their things

On our second date, I took him back to my room
where we fumbled with each other's clothes
and the glossy friction of lip on lip. On his chest:
a dimpled scar from a childhood surgery,
a cloth medallion of St. Christopher, the patron of travellers.
In my purse: a St. Anthony charm, found on the curb
outside my car on a day when I most needed
to hear my grandmother say "you will find
the things you've lost". He said he liked
that I paused before pulling out my charm,
and we compared their sizes before he yanked his from
his neck and placed it on his rumpled shirt beside my bed.

Summer Eulogy

Papop, even now I miss the pearl-softness
of your palms, hands made
for tapping numbers into a calculator
and brushing hair back from my forehead.

I gorge myself on your memory.
I know if you were here your wide nose
would be coated in pure zinc
and I would have to wear sunglasses
just to look at you. Streaks of Coppertone
over the wide pores on your cheekbones:
your face in August is what I always imagined
the surface of the moon would look like.

Walking home slowly, I would examine the flower
petal bruises swimming over cellophane skin
on the backs of your hands while you quietly
rest my palm in yours, leading me across the street.
We would play the game where each of us thought
we were taking care of the other.

I would let you make me pastina with an extra dab
of butter that you thought I never knew about,
and we would drink tea with honey and lemon while I pretended
to know as little about ordering a Pay-Per-View movie as you did.
I would let you tuck me into bed and place my forehead
on the small indent your fist made as you braced yourself
to stand, pad down the hall, and slide your door just short of shut.
I would forget how old I am.

I would still miss the safety of watching you
and Nana waltz in the living room before dinner,
lubricated by Louis Prima crooning and an inch of sherry.
I would not try, again, to replicate the sweet slip
of her stocking feet on the carpet.
I would not believe that I should ever have been
enough to keep you here. I would tell you
that because you left us on the morning of Nana's birthday,
I believe we all have some choice in dying.

I would say, I forgive you
and I am so, so sorry.

when babies are born we don't think about how they'll die

mud on the trim of her gown as she wanders
sleepless into the pond

a sheet over the tip of that nose
after a palm rubs shut the eyes

Test Prep

Emma found out she was pregnant
in a dormitory bathroom, the fall of her senior year.

Bare feet sticky on tiles tiny as first teeth,
her toes splayed, pinkies twitching,
size four corduroys scrunched around her calves,
elbows on bare knees, running through
the vocabulary for Friday's astronomy exam---

stellar parallax: inaccuracy in the perceived position of certain stars.
Galileo Galilei: the first to turn a telescope on the sky.
retrograde motion: a loop in the orbit of certain planets;
they retrace their steps once a year.

She didn't worry about the beer she had been drinking,
the small warped growths in her womb with every sip.
She had done this before.
By now she was used to negative results, the expected relief
of one slim pink line, innocent as a stick of gum.

After Allison

I miss the sticky scent of iron, she said. The connection crackled, almost as if she were rubbing plastic on the mouth of the receiver.
I miss the sticky scent of you, he said.
I don't smell like iron, she said.
You could, he said. *Are you working tonight?*

driving somewhere
pressure on pedals clutching
at steering wheels leaning
on horns slaps of wind
against windshields
no headlights

neon lights
blinkingbuzzingbroken
brokenbuzzing
crackling electric open
signs above cracking broken
doors lone
cashier lone
cash cashier
fleet
of cameras
the lingering stench
of iron on fingertips
iron stain on camera
reverse re
verse

The night my dog died, you took bikes out of the closet

At the tip of the island, the world was made of glass.
The river, glossy, on the verge of breaking. The stars
hung precariously, portraits on unsteady nails.

We rode through the Financial District, sidewalk-heavy
with its office lights quenched and pubs open, women
in stilettos, heels catching on the cobblestone.

The calls of drinkers, the tings of bike bells.
The molten things, the moon, the glitter on a passing boat's crown
would melt and bury me. The momentum of your legs,

spinning their pedals, spry as reeds, was soft. I nearly lost you.
You were reeling in a line at the edge of the water.
You were leaning over the rail. You were on a boat,
fading into the night like drops at the end of a rain.

I think about the hands that will be on my body when I am dead

dressing me, pulling lace up my thighs
thumbs between my fingers, removing my rings
the hollow of a palm over my cheek
breath hovering over
my lips as they rub the color on.

who will it be, who dresses me?
will they scrub underneath their fingernails
with lavender soap,
will the fume of their melon lotion keep
beneath the collar of my shirt?

and will they be happy,
will there be photographs of their children
on the desk behind my table, bright two-pieces
stretched over beach-ball bellies,
a calendar with a wedding date in fat pink letters.

or will they return at 11 o'clock
to a darkened condo and switch on the light
that will reflect over plastic furniture and empty
water bottles? or no light at all,
a pair of boots kicked off in the dark,
crumpled socks on the floor and moonlight stretching
over the carpet like a shadow?

I would like, please, for their hands to not be smooth:
guitar callouses, or the rough patches left by handlebars
on the heel of a palm. I hope they don't comment silently
about the tarnish on my jewelry
as they remove the posts, slightly bent, from my ears.

Vignettes of Waiting for the Next Great Un-American Poem

I.

Picture this:
Chelsea, West Side, Winter.
The moon bows over the skyline
the flower shops, the sex shops,
the cafes with darkened opal windows.
The avenue is a wind tunnel.
Litter flits along the bike lanes, loping
between 21st and 20th, caught
in the eternal uptown-downtown conundrum.
The night slides to its knees,
bowing towards the dawn.

II.

I don't write because
I lost my pencil in the fall.
My notebook's belly is gouged
by the ball point rivers that cut
through the creamy smoothness of its fields.
I lay awake lamenting solidity,
the loss of a smudged word, an erased
date.

III.

This is the reason I do not wear pants
while riding a bicycle:
summer nights, past ten,
late, late for work in the morning,
lolliping dress twisting above the stark
chalk paint of the bus-only lane,
hitting Chinatown, sloping down
the Worth Street hill, skirt lifting
like a pair of eyelids after a nightmare,
wonton-grease air and tunnel vision, Manhattan
breeze licking me where it counts,
the grey eyes of early late-night city blues
resting on cream thighs.

If I were Audrey Hepburn

I would sit on the fire escape,
losing my shoes and calling down:
hey! my shoe! throw it up
and don't look up my dress!
I would spread my knees slightly
as they stood underneath.

Sitting in the dewy belly of Union Square

Hiding from the shadows of park rangers and drug dealers
who would bother us with citations
and dreams of luminescence, I wish on the whole sky.

If I could swallow the stars, they would taste
of molten glass, searing as they cooled.
I would like to drink the moon, siphoning its sweet
milk down with a moon-milk bong.

But I would have to weave that pipe dream
through the tangled crystalline branches above, between
the golden window-lights and outlines of lovers
drawing their curtains, around the stars that pop
and sparkle, and eventually draw, with great breaths,
the opal light out of the moon---

Instead, we pop open our beers, fizz
and sizzle escaping into the toil of traffic
and bicycle bells beyond
the stained-glass slivers of dashing

light between the trees. The crunching boot steps
of a park ranger sends us, unfolding our lotus positions
and dropping our laps, to leave fireflies
woven into our sitmarks on the grass.

Spring in the Graveyard

We carried bikes on our shoulders,
climbed the hill and over
a gnarled wire fence into a clearing
still burdened with last year's leaves.

4.30 in New York

and the world is a collection of hot dog stands
I blur their edges on a borrowed bicycle light
under me I think the wheels would go
on without me if I left myself
in one of these cracks of glimmering asphalt
jolting me: would it be cooler
looking up from between two bricks
at the gum-stuck soles of so many passers
by but I doubt it even the shadows are still
too hot to sit on this time of day and there is
haze coming off of me the afternoons
go on long here it isn't even
time for a drink

sweat is the only thing
that sits still in New York City

and under it dodging doors ditches
falafel vendors model joggers fluffy dogs roller
bladers with Hulk legs and wide wingspans
circus of middle schoolers from Ohio black
and blue emo child dropping cigarettes
on his shoes hackeysack circle on the corner:

I am still standing where mist comes off the water and light
glows up from the island and I am leaning on a rancid
park bench with someone calling
oh come now I love you get up

Three Months

I. July

I love the grumbling hum of your bike
way off down the road,
the kick start in my belly
the slow sweep of you, upright,
helmeted: your hey
when it comes off, a Marvel comics scarf
teasing the ginger stubble on your chin.
You have a pizza tucked into your bag.
You made it at work.
The cheese has shuffled to one side.
In your kitchen: a bucket of eye-popping potatoes
for the horses that wander the golden hills
beyond your back garden.
Your Converse knock-offs, cadmium red, clean.
Somewhere, your cat is doing something
that will annoy you.
You switch on the TV, plotz over Japanese
reality TV, and we don capes
(Batman and Spiderman)
before uncorking the wine.

II. August

The family in front of me
in the check-in line at Dublin Airport
has an infant, a four-year-old,
two carts full of bags
and anxiety about their Irish passports.
The four-year-old tugs at her sister's onesie,
scuffs her stubby white sneakers on the floor,
grins back at me. I wish her parents would hurry
up because you aren't allowed to stand in this line
with me, and I only have twenty-two minutes for tea
before I have to go through security.
On the other side of the divider
you're wearing your motorbike shoes,
curled at the toes as if you're about to leap
at the LED screen of departures.
When I step out of line, you nod
to the little girls scampering around
their parents' duffel bags and ask me if I want one.

I laugh and say, "not now, I'm busy,"
realize you're serious,
and before I go through security
you kiss my lips as gently
as the soft spot on a baby's head.
This is the first day of my life.

III. January

I am learning your love
for the lines of my body
when you draw them by the bland glare
of your laptop screen: you keep the lights off
because it's 3 am and you think I'm sleeping.
I have class in the morning and you're
looking for jobs.
Tonight, the bag of chinese delivery
came with only one fortune cookie:
you cracked it open on the bare slope
between my ribs and belly button
(deeper than yours, it always catches
lint and now, a few cookie crumbs).
You lifted its crumbles from me with your tongue
and we are both too timid to try
the "Learn Chinese!" lesson printed
on the back of the fortune---
guo-dong: "jellies".