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Solastalgia

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An Abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

Solastalgia By Hilary Cadigan

The word solastalgia is a combination of the Latin word *solacium* (comfort) and the Greek root *-algia* (pain). Coined by Glenn Albrecht in 2004, it refers to “the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault . . . a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at ‘home.’” This is a collection of poetry that reflects on the nature of place, notions of “home,” and how they interact with the development of self. The postmodern world is an irreparably fragmented social space, leaving us with a blankness, a white noise of undefined territory. This is the creative space that my poetry attempts to fill, exploring notions of “place” in both the physical and the neurological sense. *Solastalgia* grapples with questions of self-contradictory spaces, and what happens when the self enters these spaces. These kinds of spaces become particularly poignant when dealing with loss, when dealing with the rejection of one’s own self. How does one move on when one’s selfhood has been rejected? My collection attempts to explore this question while both retaining and further developing a hopeful and powerful sense of self. The poet Derek Walcott said, “We are Crusoes: as poets...we survey islands, and we feel they belong to us—not in a bad, godlike manner, but with that sense of exhilaration, of creative possession. The other side is the despair of Crusoe, the despair of always being alone. That is our true condition as writers.” With my collection of poetry, I want to explore the paradox of this “condition,” how place can simultaneously exhilarate and isolate, and how through writing I try to define both myself and the places I occupy.

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“a combination of the Latin word *solacium* (comfort) and the Greek root *-algia* (pain)”
“the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault . . . a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at ‘home.’”
– Glenn Albrecht, 2004

Poetry by Hilary Cadigan

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Preface

Outside is all white,
inside yellow—this room
in the snow—I am central
and unhatched. In my smallish life,
everything revolves around me.
Cumbrous and slated to fall,
I trickle down the drainpipe—
let me out without breaking—
let me live without eating the world—
I want to be born, unfractured. My body
expands to fit the space, seeps into edges
and becomes the area, saturates and swallows.
I am the house, suddenly and slow, slender,
cuneal, then round and full and smoother than moon skin—
look here, I have grown.

Here Is a Place

Here is a place.
You can live here, make yourself at home.
The friend and his friend sell starfruit by the freeway;
you ask for pineapple and get booed offstage.

What did I tell you not to forget? What did I say to remind me?

The friend brings home twelve guppies in a jar,
this is where they live now,
they'll forget their mother's face.

Everyone marches home, slow like plants growing,
slow like a slow slow song.

Imagine a week where you never say the same thing twice.

We carve out abodes in the limestone, settling in, turning around three times,
creating space with our bodies.
The friends hold hands and tell each other everything is fine.

In the blue house, with the red door, a painter thinks about dying.
Let us leave the obedience school, he says,
we nod and whisper amongst ourselves,
mapping out some ways to live.

Here is some relief.
Here is an abandoned shell—
maybe you can live inside it.

Imagine a country where everyone looks like you.

Make a list of things to do:
belong to at least three clubs,
write letters,
be loud to scare away the bears.

Here is a place.
Maybe you can stay.

Out, Out

We are all mutants here,
eyes lashed and hips twisted,
tapering on down,
feeling our way out of this vast dimension—
my black holes should never startle you.
Your penetrable skin should never leak.

I'm swimming in feathers
and wondering why they won't
adhere to my body,
my face closed up, my hands
grasping—mirrors fall around me
like rain, catching and cutting.
Why are you so afraid of me?
Why is your face like a fucking stamp inside my brain?

I make lists all day and accomplish nothing.
You live like a snail,
slime-smooth, always closed.
Home travels with you and I can't get in,
your body is always blocking the door.

Creation Mythology

All hail the dazzling monster.
We crop up little daydreams to feed him,
throw our bodies towards his heart,
or where it might be, or where it should—
this time your children won't be home for supper,
this time your friends will close their doors and pray.

We keep boxes and boxes of living things,
a crèche for the child we thought we knew,
a hovel for the scoundrel in the red cape,
dump the bag and leave the lady alone, Superman.

It's all coming together now, this madhouse apothecary,
this vestibule for the birds—
in and out like worms through dead eyes we shift on our feet and count backwards
through the alphabet, lettering our numbers and forgetting
all the best cuss words.
Hercules on the doorstep, Athena in the bathtub
touching herself when nobody's looking—
yeesh, these games are hard to play,
these names are hard to remember and my stomach is so damn full,
but it's okay. The monster bides his time.

Hilarious! To say a word ten times without stopping—
to hunt for goldfish in the sewer and rabbits in the coat factory.
Here is a cure for halitosis! Here is a happy hummingbird! Hail Mary, full of grace—
twenty-nine doves set free in the concert hall,
vaedictorians chopping down debutantes in the middle of the woods,
a half-timbered cottage crack den, a place for ten-year-olds to get high—
long live this downtrodden dynasty of apes, this pristine era of melancholy,
this holy holy hell.

Zoetrope

If you were born inside a cave
you'd have to look away—
the wind would tear a hole,
the rain would gather
like a slow crowd.

We're afraid of being touched
though it hurts
to be untouched,
untouchable.

A little mirror in the hay—
the tip of the needle
is you, staring back at you.

*Keep your coasters on the table,
and your cups, she says
stupid things for us to do
and not.*

Don't waste electricity.
We sit in dark.

A flash for when your eyes adjust,
a moment when you know
you walked away too quickly—
slammed the door on someone's heart
or someone's lung.

We sat out there for hours,
waiting,
as the sun fell asleep, woke up,
fell back.
The silence was a sieve—
nothing we said could stay.

Cave Drawings

Swimming around corporeal metaphors and fat
men in bathtubs toward the porcelain bottom
of the sea, I make sculptures in agate, in azure,
a word that makes me angry when used, regardless of context.
No context makes azure okay.

Factories spit out people-shaped
objects, always walking and talking, always dining
and whining and crying and dying—each day
is so short, compared to a year which is long, and a lifetime
which is ultimately brief, outwardly painless.

Many many creatures do things every day.

I try to speak in generalities.

Don't be controversial, keep your face

to the stars, aim for them

and bring them down one by one until the planet
is aflame and everyone can go out dancing. Think of ways
to incorporate words like shoji and agamid into your daily
vernacular. Think of ways to make life less hard.

I need to stop giving orders. People in masks
run toward me from all sides. I stand
in the center of the room, where it's not safe.

Living in the nucleus, choking down
froot loops and froot by the foot, asking myself
how I got here, and when. It was a slow wane, I think,
an anesthetized decay.

There are many things I can't pronounce, more I cannot
comprehend—I depend on the cruelty of strangers, the trampled
residues of crowd psychology.

Many many creatures do things every day.

Crack of Dawn

I woke up on the ceiling
dashed against a metaphor
searching for the ice cream in my bed.

Fading dreams like blankets
twisted with my legs,
the sweltered sheets.

The pages fall inside me,
eaten or burned.
I have to look for nothing when it calls.

Life hits me in small doses,
feels sorry.
He tries to hold my hand.

He is not a life
or a blanket. He is not
my own.

I wake up on the ceiling every day,
looking down. My bed is like the seashore.
My body is a shell.

I reach there every morning
and turn around.

Playhouse

I say, count the number of times
I jump through this fiery hoop and fall
screaming, on fire, wondering why the fuck I jumped through a fiery hoop
just because you told me to,
because I told you to tell me to—this is madness.
This game isn't fun at all.

At the beginnings and ends of each month
we dress like clowns and run around,
honking each other's noses like bicycle horns,
pinwheeling into the gloom—I'm going to make it fun!
I'm going to make this into something you'll want to do
every day!

But you don't, so I didn't, I guess, and here we are,
sitting amidst the 52-card pickup, wondering where we went wrong
and why. I write biographies of anonymous vertebrates. You
stack pencils in a factory. I do this for a living, you say,
but whose living? Who, really, feels alive here? Raise your hand.
We are like rigor mortis—arms glued to sides.

This is the story of your life, typed and smudged and whited out,
this is the umpteenth reason you decided to stay,
the umpteen millionth time you wished you hadn't.

I breed reptiles in the garden, feeling around with my hands
the little fuzzy places between rocks, where I might find insects to sustain us.

I come in drenched from the rain, wringing my hair into flowerpots.
I need a raincoat, a washing machine. Men in boots kick past my
miniature fences, headed west, always west. What else am I missing?
I stay in the sunlight, providing shade for creatures smaller than I am.

These little beginnings, these horrific middle-grounds—I need an ending,
an end. Burying goldfish in the tiger lilies, holding funerals for mole rats,
these days are sluicing by like a knife through watermelon,
like crystallized sadness, like homemade pie.

Nothing happens when I press the blue button.
Nothing happens when I close my eyes and count to ten.

Carpal Tunnel

Meandering,
I follow the hillside, my acid dreams a flashing cry, a rumpled dread.

Behind my eyes a cityscape, the coolness of rememory, my parents' house—I fall into a hole
behind the shed, the shovels shift and swear at me by name. The time we thought we had has
gone away—the playground is a floating tube.

I see and taste a feeling, a nothing-laugh,
I rest inside a cartwheel,
a tightrope,
a killed pony grazing in the shade.

Time leans down—
my life erases me in sections, slowly,
like ice melting.

In the Right Places (With the Right People)

Everything is related to my life—
 a seizure! a death adder!
Beneath this faded loss a new country is born, a new way to walk around.
I feel every piece of it inside my marrow; I know every name by the sound of my heart—
I can hear the sound of my own heart!
Envy me, and desist.

The green of his tongue slides gently past my clavicle—
there is a tube that leads to my brain—
I reel in fish and dreamlike father figures—
I reel in real things with my tangled nets like webs.

You cut me in the punctuation, the sidewinding—
you always slither in somehow, even when it's only me.

It comes to me in dreams,
swollen apple eyes, clouded rims around the glass front falling back against the green—
darling, I am capable of so much more!

Twelve deep dives later we are gasping and the you and he and I and me
have become a we and frankly, I am scared.
And I am scarred.

Words become my playthings,
if nothing else,
if nothing else will hold me.

This is the end: you waiting at the bus stop with no one,
me trudging home alone—
I thought this was a spectacle! A moon race!
We watch each other fade, or I say we when I mean me.

Now I'm falling down the stairs—I thought you said this was the end!—
I'm falling in the cracks between the beds, between the floors and walls and teeth,
in the spaces between keys
kissing my worn fingers in epileptic revelry—

I called the fire department when he choked!
I watched his face turn blue and thought of someone else.

Weird Animal

Raving on, into the bliss,
my coat like a piece of an arm—
my walls serpentine coils, beleaguered by details,
I rest in an ellipses, Miltonian in my lack of brevity—
oh, the trees are on fire—
oh, the camels are eating all the food and nothing will be left for us.

Under my arms and legs, cities well up temporarily,
like art exhibits, so much effort for so little payoff,
depending how you look at it.
Sometimes we like to burn.

Hello, parrot box. Hello, cat-shaped moon.
Time will tell if time has told us anything.
My legs are tired,
my hands are turning gray.

Here is a tiny elephant on the windowsill.
Welcome to a very strange pageant.
Welcome to the day you find out it's not going to last.

I wash my hair with radioactive materials,
I sit in the bathtub until my fingertips disintegrate.
I am rendered anonymous.

Solastalgia

Prone to wandering, this person
asks questions and reels—snatched
and temporary—into the softened gap.
A nesting animal, a ruined bird—
this person is wingless,
a feathered stump.
What will you say when it's time to say something?
How will you handle the words?
The grass parts like traffic.
Insects crawl home.
Wet glass pressed, trails fade
in the wake—
this person feels related
to the rain.
Beads of honey, scraps
of toast, bread broken daily—
this place will rupture.
Time is a throbbing thing.
Here, spotted for a moment then benign—
this person, sheltered
from the fallout; this person, sickened
in the maze. Hold your jumping horses.
Tie your money to the trees.
Breathe like this until you stop.
This person is tired.
Things happens slow.

Afternoon

It is a heavy thing,
not knowing—
as we sit in the yard,
watching the terrier run
laps around the garage,
a hairy streak of muscled smallness—
there's something real there,
if not explanatory.

What are all the things
you don't know how to say?

There is a pebbled taste
in my mouth, a dryness I can't
quench. It rests there
like a dead thing on my tongue.

I think this is the way we'll always be,
you say, clouded and halved.

I get up fast and knock over
the patio chair,
trip and start bleeding
from something stupid
like a garden gnome's pointed hat.

I wait but you say nothing
so I sit back down, leaking a little
from the knee, calmed by the slowness
of grass growing, the terrier
doing loops around the garage
like lightning.

Intercoastal Clavicle

You were and are
a living breathing seam

across the days, the green stab
of broken fondness,

a fence of eyes
closed against the breeze.

Here, the bad cool touch of unlove—
this one will break your heart.

Ballooning over the river,
he whispered *I did*

in the ankled sandy wash
of holding on

without staying still—
the unbroken stretch of starfish.

Hello, imperfect sneeze
of transcendence.

I waited all these miles
for you, a sliding face.

Ad Interim

I knew you for a minute there.

In a paradigm, a rodeo show, moonblanket starshimmer leaping green.
In the taste of you, the feeling of my tongue against your mouth's roof.
This is where you live, I thought, and touched softly like a mouse—your lips, your face,
your every inner moving part and insideoutsidebreath. Keep inside me like a fish,
learn how not to breathe when you're away. This must be
love.

Say the word and lose it though,
like a scuttled crab between the rocks, a tide pool loss—the tears of being fouryearsold
and emptybucketed. Like a rabbit, like a xylophone, like a chopped tree in an old man's garden,
the only thing he lived for, the lifescape of a wife, the wifescape of a life—
I squander the simile. I watch you walk away.

Restitution Telescope

Remembering the fall, I feel my way back
to the entrance.

The man says: no, this is the exit. You must turn around,
go left, spin seven times and make a wish about dolphins,
you'll see a child in a yellow raincoat,
don't look him in the eye.

Continue, past mountains, through corridors,
around the washing machine section
and through the microscopic canon,
shoot yourself into oblivion and land on your feet,
get up quickly—but not too quickly—and start hopping
on one foot, through a red door,
down a staircase made of leaves,
through a glass-coated tunnel—be careful! It's slippery.

When you get to the place where the peacocks live
(you'll know by the sound of violas), look for the nearest
body of water. Don't jump in. Find the bridge.

Cross it, if you can. A family of gnomes lives beneath it.
Don't ask for their names.

Walk past the fields where turtles grow—walk slow,
they like that—and enter the floating maze
by way of the smallest door.

Don't trip on the fetal pigs! They tend to gather there.
Follow the maze as best you can, avoid the praying mantis,
watch out for cauliflower (it's poisonous!).

If you make it out, look for a yellow tricycle. Ride it
to the end of the rainbow
and dive off the other side. There may be water.
Swim until you can swim no more
and then you'll be there,
halfway home.

Flight Plans

In this village the people are hungry.
We walk in short lines down the tarmac, breathing with our hands.
Rachel watches starlings from the window, calling them each by name—
nothing blue can stay, nothing green can wait to be offered.

We hold hands with the Indians, running like teacups away from the shore,
fragile and invariably broken.
Get us all to higher ground,
somewhere in the middle, where things won't happen quickly.

The man at the station spells my name wrong, looks me in the eye
for moments shorter than half-seconds, half-lives, half-lived.
The people start to dance, throwing their hands toward the planets,
all of them.

The airplane kills seven geese, sucked into the left engine and pulverized,
instantly. We clap our hands at the fasten seatbelt sign,
happy to be alive.

Laura sets the table with the forks on the left,
spoons folded into each other like people,
doing what spoons do.
Rachel washes windows, makes them invisible
like pure air.

The pilot falls asleep in the cockpit,
wakes up moments before landing,
mercifully unnoticed.

A starling crashes into the perfectly clean window,
falls instantly broken, instantly dead.
Rachel buries it in the courtyard, crying softly behind her eyes
like virga rain.

Silver, Gold

Closing in some time
we might find a place where
home feels like something warm and tasty,
held melting under tongues,
held sweating like a hot hand—a space
to fill out into
like a sponge growing,
like me learning the names of the streets
and drawing a map between my
eyes. This space, this little
hole in the woodwork, this little
band of strangers getting to know each other—
here we are, beating out different
patterns like little drums, like little tiny
people going home alone but
never lonely—I'll make warm meals,
I'll pull down the shades and kiss everyone
hard on the mouth.

Nuclide Deviation

Two people in a house. It rains for seven days.

This is the poetry of delirium. You are a fever,
caught and held like a red red heart, glowing space
wrapped in tinsel—it's real. I rinse seeds from my fingernails,
pressed against the radiator,
waffled and touched too many times.

Oh, my indecipherable little girl,
I'll write novels in your skin and hold you like I wish someone would hold me.

This music will make you forget yourself,
I promise. Someday I'll show you how I learned
to hang in there. Someday I'll teach you about you.

These are turbulent times, walls closing in
so quickly. These spleen-bursting tricks are hard to pull off.
And I am just one. I am just one of them.

Here is a holy way of saying
all the stupid things we say everyday.
Here is a word to incorporate everything I know.

There is a pumpkin far away. Our bodies are long.
Elasticized, I creep up behind you.
Elated, you run with my face in your hands.

Roadkill Corollary

Skipping along the side of the road,
I leap into an oncoming van—
instantly pulverized.

On the other side of the continent,
inside a box of Chinese noodles,
my father sees my face
for a second,
misconstruing his guilt
as carb-related.

I'm there
in the road—liquid flesh.
Passing motorists hold their noses.

Air feels good against the puddle of me,
the rind, bitter like an orange,
inside spilled outside.
Tires flutter over me like waves.

Hold your breath and let them pass,
my father said,
letting me—six and
slippery like a fish,
or a Chinese noodle—
jump off his shoulders
and into the salted sea.

Long Distance Aneurysm

A little boy rolls like a wheel. I'm sorry
I'm not what they asked for. I came this way,
pre-packaged and planted on a floral-print couch
with obsolete coolness and ravaged nerves.

This room persuades me to leave—the ceiling
fan, the two cats curled like statues—
no longer alive or in existence I creep sideways
toward all corners, hoping.

Desperation will undo me. In a new city,
disinfecting scars that will
last, last, last like nothing else. This room,
this chair—they need to be replaced
with new rooms, new chairs, things that will undo
the way I've grown—things that will ungrow me.

Freeway

In a cart by the side of the freeway
a man sells butterflies, ten cents for a yellow one,
eleven for blue with a spot like an eye
on each wing. Sixty-seven miles per hour,
we screech to a stop, tires burning.

My eyelids are dusty, my feet pinned and needled,
my face against the dashboard, throbbing.
Eleven cents for two more eyes, twelve for wings
with scales, crystal pigments fall slow
to the asphalt, steaming.

Ninety-nine degrees, this day
is another one wasted, another series of back and forth,
another call unanswered. The trees respond
with apathy. Comatose, you drive further.

Each mark on the highway blends
with its neighboring mark, one long stripe
like a gash, open and bubbling—my feet immobile,
my heart like a tire.

Aviary

The man catches no birds,
no bird in hand, no swallows—
dovetailed, a rooster spurned.
Lightly, lightly, over and against
the air—wings, the ground
like so many tangled branches.
Head of hair against the stone,
water rockets, a played piano
wrenched from a room he knew
once upon a time. Here is the place
he came to be born—
reborn, or smiling, killed, wiped
into shades of bister brume.
Knots and wormholes guide the way—
a home he once had,
a shed to keep his very old things,
a way of keeping oneself together
in the meanest of times.
Prismatic teeth lined sideways
along the brook, water shelved against land—
so many fish speaking their patois,
liquid resources, holy craters. One moon
scratched against the surface of the sun.

Seasonal Offerings

Spring dazzles
in paper mache—
mother at the bathtub,
washing dogs
with special shampoo.
A glossy coat,
a forgivable rub-down.
Here I am, with my trees,
my Russian dolls for eyes,
Recalling the summer
we all forgot the word
for nectarines,
called them clementines.
Beneath the buried cat toys,
hamster envelopes,
Chocolate Chip and Buckwheat
in the cemetery
behind our yellow house—
it's here.
Spiraling down,
jump-rope, four tangled kites,
seahorse caricatures and everything
he lied about—I put them into piles
on the bathroom floor.
Things I want, things I don't need,
things I can't hold onto
for various reasons—
each sorted, separate, a pile of one.
Clean carnivores and polluted tongues—
I lace my fingers together,
hold it all back
like a fence.

Worst Subject

*Tesselation: a collection
of plane figures that fills the plane with no overlaps
or gaps.*

With no gaps, I loved you. For the first time, maybe
the only time, I did. Tessera, which means small square—
tessella, often made of glazed clay. My love was like that.
A house is like that, a strong thing made of many pieces,
strong like gold currency, strong like me.

You overlapped, and like columnar jointing
in Basaltic lava flows, love cracked. Love broke apart,
mathematically.

Tesserae, soft or rough—rotational centers
should have formed, could have kept me there.
I would have enough
polytopes to fill a honeycomb by now,
with the way I've suffered,
and all the math, which I hate.

I thought if I tried
to make the unknown known, it wouldn't be so unknowable.

But you, unknowable, left me, unknown,
with only useless terminologies and wooly equations where $x + 4$
ends up equaling $x - 7$, which makes no sense.

It makes no fucking sense.

Tesseract, tesseral, isometric crystallog—
these words are little treasons.
They burrow in, stay the night, wrap around me
like hot animals, wake me up
sweating, nearly asphyxiated.

I must tessellate the plane. High as the sky
it's me, looking down and there's the world
in all its gratuitous mélange—tesseraic,
like the way atoms are everything,
like how you told me Hans Voderberg discovered
Voderberg tiling. I said, what a coincidence! (Ha ha!)
And you looked at me in a way that would kill a plant,
or even a person, like me, if I wasn't so damn strong.

Strapping Myself to the Ceiling

The words come slowly sometimes.
Here is a spider
draining a moth.
Here is an anchovy
being removed from a Caesar salad.

I spin circles, plastic plates,
dancing like a whirling dervish on the kitchen floor,
saying join me! to the cats.

The feet fall out from under me.
The walls like splashing jell-o not quite hard.
This is not quite hard—my life,
my facsimiles and little sad reasons for moving forward—
This is not my least favorite game.

The cat scrapes his face against the lamp.
I swat fruit flies in the kitchen,
in the bedroom, away from the sink—
where are these fucking flies coming from?

Things could be worse, if I was pregnant.
If I was part man, part woman, biologically.
If my car exploded. If everyone I knew was dead.
If I were an aborted fetus.

Leaping lizards, a polymer! held together by chemicals.
Held together by knowing I have to go on,
because many many things depend on me.
Many many animals would starve if I did not feed them.

And a lot of people invite me a lot of places,
though I don't think they know exactly who I am.
Who exactly am I?

The cats are giving birth to fruit flies.
I'm sure of it.

Visiting

I leave pieces of my body
in cities and in towns
with names I don't know
but should. I should
listen to the tour guide,
all frosty blonde and loud shoes,
but there I am by the window
touching the coolness of it,
staring at caught dust in cobbled floors,
pulling fingers through my hair
with its inevitable looseness,
its insatiable need to be free—
there is always a strand. I watch it fall,
glinting and kinked and boundless
into the footstamped refuse.
Sometimes it's a fingernail, a bitten scrap of skin.
I breathe and it feel like spider webs.
I breathe and it feels a little bit like home.
I breathe and it feels a lot like losing something
simply by forgetting how to get back.

Spilt Milk

Please be my shoes.
Let me walk inside you.
Object to nothing I say.

Once I spent hours looking for shark's teeth
at the beach in Jacksonville, single-minded
and so beautifully distant. I was nine.
You didn't know me.

Now here I am, sitting beside myself at wooden tables,
lost in the contingencies of the known,
dirty bathtubs and diminutive ways of saying goodbye.
Seeya later, or silence.

It's too many times removed, this thing I try to encapsulate.
The muse, quiet and sweating,
tries to be on time, isn't

You stay gone.

Ink Mouth

O jeez this landscape is a pain in my ass,
the tires treading all day until it gets dark and then light again,
the wasted pillars holding up the sky sunrise after sunrise—
it's too much to bear, really, too much to ask for. I cannot retain
these slug-like bonds, these mammoth equivocations,
I'm trying too hard and it's showing.

Each day I get up like a gastropod mollusk
asking for tribute, receiving only mercy.
It's too bad and too sad, the bystanders say,
as I wave my hands, asking
can somebody please get a handle
on the peanut gallery.

Nobody holds my hand when I jump
off high places, resplendent, I think, in my insolence.
Just watch me fly,
I tell them, each little life wrung out like a sponge.

Rectified and pacified, small humans come out
like termites, seeping from the woodwork, calling
the names of those once loved and not quite forgotten—
who are these people? I choke down a breakfast burrito
and get to work, throwing my bones in violent circles,
crushing weird bugs to the pavement, stick legs accordioned,
bodies leaking.

This is the day the Lord hath made, crapulous mammals
holding hands and belting into the light—a pig circus!
a rat carnival! These bulbs are made of sapien hearts,
hollowed out and lit from within, electric candles,
wind-powered flashlights. No one is ready to give up.

And here's the magnum opus, the grand parade,
Aphrodite's coronation ceremony and Michael Jackson,
post-mortem, molestations dissolved. I'm ready for the great
collapse, collecting button shrooms inside a jar,
carrying shrapnel-packed stiff's to the ossuary;
pallbearers march through a looted city.

My time nearly expired, I run like a horse through the crop lines,
rattling the bars of my movable cage—these things are coming to an end,
in the souqs of Marrakech, in the golf courses of Pasadena, I find myself
panting, reaching for a lullaby, holding out
for the cold and inevitable rain.

What Happens?

When all of us believe in the afterlife but no one can agree
on where to go for dinner? When none of us understands the difference
between wanting and needing, when nobody knows
how to let go?

There is a little hole inside the hole inside my ear—someone could live there,
tell me nice things when I'm trying to fall asleep, scream "careful!"
when I'm about to fall in a hole, or down the stairs, or off a very high ledge—
this person could become a very good friend of mine.

When it rains, and I mean rains until the whole world floods, hopefully we can make boats
out of things we already have in our houses, things we don't even need to buy—
it would feel satisfying and very resourceful—like recycling,
like not cutting down trees.

No word on dinner yet but
the sky is blue,
and we have time.

Science

The time it takes to grow a soul is wasted. I say this
in the dark, by myself. A turned-off lamp nods its fabric head,
or doesn't. I can't see because it's off,
because it's dark.

This confabulated thing, this place—it's like a mission
to the moon, something that maybe never happened fully;
we believe because we have to.
Never mind the ruffled flag.
Sometimes the breeze comes without a breath.

Lungs are made of many tiny things, all attached to one big thing—
a big messy thing, coated in blood and slippery fat.
The numbers never change, the cells only grow larger.
It's kind of like life, or reincarnation,
which might be the same thing
to some people.

It all depends on the books you read, the citizens you sleep with.
It all depends on the color of leaves in July
versus August.

Today I thought I figured something out.
I was walking between buildings, and for a second
the sun looked different—
I felt a humming, like an insect's kiss, or the first part
of an earthquake.

But earthquakes don't happen here
and from what I know, all insects are assholes
so neither option seemed viable and I thought,
well, it must be something else.

I had to keep moving though. I didn't want to be late
and somehow already was, like always,
so I stepped out of the light, let the building take me.
When I returned, not too much later,
the feeling was gone.

The insects weren't in love, or even lust,
and I hadn't moved
to California.

Syncytium

This little white
heart, I have it.
I hold it but
barely know why—
slow like slowness,
train-thick and perched
like a canary
caged, and hovering—
this sad heart, like
a paper box, like a fetus
still breathing, against all odds
the rescuers crowd
around the dumpster—
save this sad
poor thing, unloved
and doomed to know it
always.

Little paper heart,
like a loose
book carried
unread, unloved—what
is this thing
you try to explain?
what is this beating?
I move it
around with my fingers
I squeeze it like a sponge
and feel for a moment
satiated.

I do not
know a form
that can hold this
kind of thing—
I paddle around
all day, fruitless.
Little sad heart, you
want to stay
with me, and you can
but promises are
words—like fragile nets—
my teeth chew through them
so easily.

Fallout

You never understood
the little reasons I was mad, the rabbit moments
in the car, when we were still okay,
when we were laughing—I caught the sleeve of you,
carried into cloudless nights, like the too-still center
of a tornado, the calm before the storm,
the counting of eggs before they hatch, whatever
you said that I forget, whatever I said
that means nothing now.
Every single piece of me was there,
now something is undone, falling through
the sawdust and scrambled eggs—here is a better way
to be sad, here is a time for letting go.
But I can't and you couldn't and we are broken
but caught, a little string left hanging, the last thread
refusing to split. It's embedded,
like gravel after the fall—it becomes a part of me.
My days are always longer,
my nights smell like fossils, like Iceland, like things
I've never smelled. I fill up cups with water and leave them
all over the house, forgetting if they're mine.
Nothing I say seems real, none of my questions
have answers, none of the times
you said you loved me
are true anymore.
And I'm hungry all the time.

Spawn Song

This little smacker has yet to grow up,
I teach him lessons on my knees, let him dig through my hair

like a crazed chimp, let him set me on fire
and take his time learning how to put me out.

Inside and outside of rooms I lay listening for him—
he is not my own. He is never my own.

His body is larger than mine but I hold him.
When he shakes I peel off my skin and fold him inside,

when he cries I take out my own eyes and trade.
With a grown mind he is ready to leave me.

He is built like a house of limbs. I lent a few to get him started.
I do not ask for return. He runs much faster than I taught him.

He recedes like a cannonball,
like the fastest insect in the world.

It's All Happening

Everyone in the room is a little bit broken.
We talk about times when we accidentally drank vodka,
thinking it was water. All the stories are about the same;
there is only so far you can go with a topic like that,
but everyone lets it go pretty far. I get a little sad.
I don't bother to tell my story.

Pillows and water are just about the only things
I'm always interested in. My feet hurt in the cold.
My face feels like a pan of milk, lapped by a cat
in wintertime. But it's summer, the last few days of summer,
and it's getting harder to recognize all the different words
that mean the same thing. Some things only deserve one word.
Life is not fair.

I put things up on my walls until I run out of things
and one wall is still blank. Something must
be done, the wall is like a face,
mocking.

Life breathes on. Blank walls, pillows and cats and water and stories
about vodka, mistaken for water. Things collect. Broken boats and dolls
with scratched-out eyes and chopped hair. I alternate
between sick and healthy, asleep and awake. My days escape me,
I tell anyone who listens. They smile and nod, I know, I know.
We all know.

The last line is always the hardest. I slaughter words to get to you,
use up perfectly good subjects in a single utterance—didgeridoo, kaleidoscope,
emulsification.

Fractional Bloom

Nine times out of ten I end up broken,
too quick to give it all away, I expire in the eglantine,
begging for another chance.

They said I had plenty of time, and I believed them,
helped myself to another serving,
watched my thighs grow fat with the days.

Under the moon, creeping like a slighted child,
I made piles of dog shit and sang about birds.

Hold my hand and walk quickly toward the light.
Drag me, if you have to.

Four times out of six I lose my way,
end up somewhere circling around bales of hay and mule corpses,
looking into the eye sockets of skulls and immediately wishing I hadn't.

I found blankets and brought them back—
let's make a fort! I said, smiling like an imbecile, like a boob.
They looked at me like they would look at something dead,
rotting—a mule corpse with terrible eyes.

Beneath the balsam and the balm, I held my own hand,
telling stories to myself. It's fine because no one can hear you,
I said. It's fine because you know this. It's fine.

Seven times out of three I forget what I'm talking about and have to start again.
Five times out of five I don't remember.

Dual

These meanings twine around these thoughts.
I don't think I'm getting them right.
I don't think I'm getting anything right.

I believe there was a beach in my head, a mountain,
a very flat dry ground swathed in sand glinting like many eyes,
when I was born lost screaming into light—when I was there
most surely, when I cried to tell the world I had come.
I am here, learn to know me.

And love,
well what of that—the firmament bends down to kiss me (what is another word
for sky?)—and I, not ineffable, make this overwhelming (it is
another word for ineffable) thing.

I do not do the things I say—
this thudding verve, this intrepid pronunciation—where is the place
where things convene?

Recipe

I know the muffin man.
I speak to him at night and he sucks down
all my secrets like a sponge.
I feel good knowing he's there,
far stranger than my own strangeness.
He makes the bad things syncopate
and they don't scare me anymore.

When he was a little boy
he was snips and snails
and puppy dog tails. I was jealous,
being nothing more than ingredients,
granulated,
and not even all that nice.

Muffin man,
make a muffin out of me.
I'd like to be swallowed.

On Drury Lane, they asked me
do you know him?
and I did. I knew him and I know him still,
better than I know myself.
He is mine and I am his
and I don't need anybody else,
not anymore.

Scrapbook

Paper stars and centipedes, I measure life in pieces,
waiting all day in the car with the windows shut,
waking up with nothing left to breathe.

He said, "it's something that doesn't happen everyday."
He grew up in boxes, saving plastic bags, counting pennies.

One day in Biloxi he caught a striped bass and four minnows died in the reeling.
Well done, his father said, well done.

I found him in the middle somewhere, along a row of eggplants growing,
ripe and purpled in the sun, a field of dreamy sting, the slapping sound of holidays
gone sour.

Behind my cheeks there is a place to hold the things that hurt me,
a place to put them, keep them safe, they nestle closer every night,
I swallow back the sun.

This is not
a playground for the lost—
this is me, choked back into the fat moon,
losing speed and undressing too quickly,
stripped and panting,
under the porch swing, huddled like a frightened bee,
stick feet stuck fast to a thick flat sprawl of honey.

He painted ladders a million june bugs high,
tossing buckets down,
grazing knees in grasses the ticks claimed,
bitten all the time.

This is me, distancing myself.

The city has a funny way of choking,
the gutters have a funny way
of reaching for my hands.

I will be forever lost—
by choice, mind you—
breathing lines at the garden party,
tossed into a bright brick cell, two by four
and getting smaller.

Landing Site

In the gloaming, wings grow trees,
the acreage of the untouched

wonderland, the melted, or still
parched and frozen—we, an endless blue,

a thirst unquenched. This is the bottom
of everything, this is the slow glassed-in creep

of season to seasonal, of always-broken
promises. I am what you heard of,

that scaly thing, that wretched speck—
undemolished, calcified, placed somewhere

conspicuous. In a department store,
or a town square—Macy's, Times Square,

you name it! I am not a we, not a beloved,
perpetually only, forever just-the-one.

Specificity skulks in like partitions,
alienates. You are not me, I am not

anyone I know. Printemps, Hinsdale—
I rotate through the cosmos,

calling out words, dusting for consequence,
caught inside my own chest, peering through the slats.

After the Fall

I don't know how to get back home.
I think that's all I need,
but I can't get there.

I've had it with love, trying to love,
failing at love,
getting flattened into a stupid pancake by the steamroller that is love.
I'm tired, I'm hungry,
and I'm cold.

I'm sick of writing poems about dumb things like windows
and shadows
and me, being an idiot always.

There was no reason for anything to go wrong.
Hating myself is exhausting.
I wish you were dead.

It's not even you anymore—
now it's just me, eternally alone,
and embarrassed, quite frankly.

There are pretty things to talk about,
jeweled lizards in the jungle, sunned on rocks like royal gifts,
clouds that can morph into anything you imagine,
babies, and songs.
But I have nothing to say about them. Nothing.
Fucking babies.

I heard that home is in your head.
This worries me.

Au Contrition

Eve is the garden,
scratching out various sets of eyeballs in the living sun.

Eve, alone—
a collective sigh—
here we are in the car, parked,
forgiving each other.

I'm sorry I let love die
like a baby I didn't want.

I wanted it though.
The love, not the baby.
A miscarriage, I guess,
is more like what I mean.
I miscarried love and dropped it,
watched helpless as the life poured out
quick and rough, like falling
and hitting every stupid branch on the way down.

Eve, the garden.
Me, and you in the parked car,
saying *we fucked up*.
It's good to hear you say that.
It's good to say it, to wash away the leaked life,
to make the ground sparkle.

Or to see again how it sparkled, how almost,
how maybe for a second,
how fleeting a gleam.

And Eve, wholly unrelated,
yet there, in and as garden—
and oh, I am the garden, the daughter,
the fool in the car, love leaking out of me,
saying I'm sorry
and fine.

Second Beach

Oh man, what a wreck I became,
a crashed boat beating and beating
back against the shoreline, a glutton
for punishment, bone shards in my hair.

I think back:
there was a road, a pathway going
somewhere, I was on it, I was there.
It's falling through
the insulation of my memory, bolts
of fabric time, Lilliputian
junctures of being fine, like mice
scattering at the first vibration.

Cleansed by catharsis, I spend
my days in lines, behind
and in front of people without faces—
May I pluck this loose hair
from your coated back? May I
tuck in your tag? My hands grow
little teeth, my arms strain to keep from biting.
Little people somewhere
clap their hands.

The days scour on, pulling dreggy
fragments from my skin. The water spirals
down and I am a little bit cleaner
every time.

How To Be You

You are you again, small and blue, like a tube
of blue paint, a brown animal next to the house,
silhouetted grotesquely and panting. You are mountains
and hills where moles reside, a withheld exclamation point,
broken-bottomed and finished off with a tiny invisible speck
like a tiny invisible flea.

Here you are, you are here: printed
and folded into sections—a circle on a map—
gasping often, signifying nothing.
You talk to ceilings, floorboards, get your kicks
and punches, hover over chlorinated water
like an undercover satellite, big and ugly
and ever-unseen in your blatancy. Blissfully
oblivious, counting doorknobs in houses
miles away from the hole where you live,
practically unborn. Your mother's offspring,
your father's shoot-out, your fingers and toenails
like kernels of armor, amor, that's amore.
You are an interstellar novelty, a situation
involving two or more stars. Drugged up good
and feeling the sting, each day more and always growing,
it's you, always and everywhere you—
meandering, wasting each moment precisely
and without scraps, Pythagorean in your exactitude.
Oh boy, do the days move fast, oh man, they go by like fish
you can't catch, like newborn calves
slippery with life and learning to walk straight away.
And there's you by the water, watching boats,
you and the neighborhood, signing petitions,
blowing up cars—revolutionary remnants
of days you didn't witness, wars you didn't win, results
you still can't comprehend. You anticipate collision,
hold out for something a little more unusual
than animals marching in groups of two, giraffes
like snakes with bodies attached,
cows like Dalmatians with larger spots,
and you, like you, but better.

How to Live in a Head-Shaped Home

I threw a party and a lot of people came.
I started a conversation and finished it, unscathed.

I am here in this place, coping with the fallout,
holding it together and feeling
okay. I play little games.
I babysit feelings and hand them back, safe and sound.

Words keep the darkness at bay.

It feels good to be outside,
in real air, quenched
with the sound of birds, the falling splash
of water moving. I lay in the grass with my face
pressed to the earth.

This is art,
an experiment in synecology.
I am highly, highly evolved.

The doctor says, congratulations.
My friends call all the time, my friends
increase exponentially.
I exude good times and break out in song without catalyst.

The days are each like bright little eyes,
opening, closing, soft and intact—
I am safe in this casing,
this alabaster-coated domicile.

If this city is your home,
welcome home.

Post-Script

It ends with a sphere.

It was a cool broken moment, a dubious chord—we were 2 people with not enough legs to carry ourselves—I felt the way it felt to hold our knees together with strings—I knew the painful repetition of too many dashes without the cool rush of ellipses to keep our bodies quenched—I felt the way it wasn't only you.

Bitten and down I reached for your shadow and felt it collapse and realized for the now, for the moment, we are this:

gone,

as if we never were at all.

Spherical, I begin.