

4-24-2015

When All Else Failed

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When All Else Failed

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B.A. Economics, Arizona State University, 2000

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of
Missouri-St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing with an emphasis in
Poetry

April 2015

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Drucilla Wall, Ph.D.

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Abstract:

This collection of poems *When All Else Failed*, closely examines relationships in many ways. It explores beginnings and endings. It examines nature and environment. It ventures through relationships with the self, the beloved, parents and children, and one's relationship to the world and natural settings around them. Connections are made and broken over and over again examining one's ability to grow and change over time, and this is done in juxtaposition to those things that remain stagnant. In this collection of poems I use lyric poetry with a narrative slant, nature and environment, and a precise use of the line. I pull from real experience, fiction, and myth in a confessional tone. Through all of this connections are made and relationships are built with the reader. In my collection I tell many stories, but most importantly I tell the story of loss and love, and loss and love again, something to which we all can relate.

When All Else Failed

Poems by
Jennifer Goldring

Dedicated to Jack and Cassidy my true loves.

*“Longing, we say, because desire
is full of endless distances.”
— Robert Hass*

*“To burn with desire and keep quiet
about it is the greatest punishment
we can bring on ourselves.”
— Federico Garcia Lorca*

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Shane Seely for his careful editorial guidance and support of my work. Also Glenn Irwin for his support and inspiration over the years. A special thank you to Drucilla Wall for helping to plant the seeds of my dreams and for being a wonderful friend and mentor. I especially want to thank my friends for their support and encouragement and for helping me further my work and my family who has been so supportive in the creation of this manuscript. Most of all, much gratitude, appreciation, and infinite love for my children who are my every day muses and have put up with infinite hours of me saying, "just a minute honey, I'm working on a poem."

The following poems are forthcoming or have appeared elsewhere.

Storm Chasing — Tar River Poetry

When All Else Failed — Architrave Press

Windrose — Architrave Press

Somewhere There is Frostbite — Poetry With a Dash of Salt (Lady Lazarus Press)

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Sometimes, The End is the Beginning

Sometimes the End is the Beginning and You Know When it's Over

I.

The way the cow chews
even smacking and gnashing
the same grass. Circular maw of jaw.
The same curl of tongue to gather
and pull it into its mouth.
The same worn path to slaughter.

II.

The hummingbird flaps its wings
three thousand times per minute
to hover. He does this all day. Each day
consumes five times his body weight
in nectar to have the energy
he needs to flap his wings
three thousand times per minute.
He will be lucky to live beyond a year.

III.

Each day: wake, shower, dress, work, wake, shower, dress, work.

IV.

Do you remember how she used to undress for you?

Every time

the shirt slipped
off her shoulders
to the floor,
then the trouser,
and panties in haste,

finally she'd reach
to unclasp her bra.
Then quickly she'd join you
in the bed. All because you told her

once

how you liked to watch her.

V.

The cockroach
survives seven days
after decapitation.
Enough time to lay
eggs—a last time
before it dehydrates
and turns into a weightless disc.

VI.

One last revolution
of things familiar.
The whirlwind of argument.
Then you start packing.
When you move out of the house
you remember how things changed
after you moved in.
How the sex became mechanical
and her skin was never as soft as you hoped.

Windrose

We are going south
there is no other point
on this compass

the needle spins and spins
only stops
if we don't ask for directions.

It is hot and getting hotter.
My skin is pocked
with blisters and bug bites.

We are always thirsty.
Mouths full of swollen buds
that never bloom

and all your words are lost
on the weird wind trails
of the dunes.

We argue again about the oasis.
Even maps of the stars
cannot guide us

You look at the compass
stomp your foot and shout
"God damn it, we're lost."

You have forgotten again
the paper flowers blow every
which way and only chase the wind.

Shape Shifter

He is mud cracked decay of an arroyo.
The arid wind that presses through cholla.

The dust devil's vortex
he criss-crosses streets looking for pigeons

who will relate. He prefers the lonely one
that's brown instead of grey. Calls her out,

coo coo, coo coo, of the crowd and asks her
to take care of him. His mad petitions whirl

take care of me the way my mama would!
She's carried off in tumbleweed ways.

The stickly palo verde pricks, the green shoot,
browned tip, implores, *touch me, you tired girl.*

But there's never shade beneath those trees
and heat ripples up. He's a snake-man,

that boy. Watch out! Shape shifting serpent,
rattle tail, venom teeth sunk into your side.

Hollow

Our bird feeder
is starling strong.
Winter's chill has set
and stiffens things.
We sit at the table
and talk only about the birds.
Your beaky nose
juts, jerky pecks
as you squawk.
You stand on skinny
prehistoric legs
trying to support
what you say.
It's like I'm seeing you
for the first time.
Frankly, in this light,
you're hard featured.
Blank eyed, hollow boned,
small heart,
bird skeleton man.

Soft Boiled Egg for Breakfast

The world is crust around magma
an egg's shell – inside my body
things ooze and heat penetrates
there is a delicate tapping
to get inside finding the first
fragile cracks – the careful peel
of layers away from flesh
warm albumen and the thin skin
of the white – crushed in my bowl
with a slice of toast

outside the tufted titmouse
gather strings of bark and dark mosses
dehydrated grass strands
finds fodder for a necessary spring
while I chew
this egg could have had life in it
instead it is macerated between molars
flows into my gut
and I take a moment to feel
the golden yolk coat my tongue
and taste the sun pecked patch of rye
near the chicken coop

I hear my husband chew
his fried egg — yolk the color of bile
his knife and fork screech across
our wedding china
I cringe
he never seems to hear
anything — including my words
which come out of me like music

he never looks up from his plate
the mess of broken yolk
shoveled in – he fills
his sight with anything but my glance
I see the bird carry a piece of string
Look, I say, the nest in that pin oak
and his gaze goes glassy

I want to try them he says
the little eggs before they hatch —
you know in some places that's a delicacy
I see chick and all crunching between
his teeth – small soft bones eviscerated
I stand and leave the table

I take a moment at the kitchen window
see the titmouse leave the nest again
I empty my plate into the sink
watch the whirl of water
clear the waste away
l'oeuf o ovo das Ei ovum
swirl down the drain
and no matter how you say it
this morning I am sure
there is no life left

Somewhere There is Frostbite

She will lie down here -
let the snow cover her. Let the quiet
bury her body. The flakes fall fat
and fast and the wind,
the wind drifts and pushes her hair
into her mouth and it tastes like salt.
It freezes against her cheek.
The way his last kiss did,
like a brand, burn of lost desire.

She says to no one, *how long does it take to freeze
a human heart?* She thinks of it now
like a piece of meat and removes it
from her mind as the structure of love.
She buries herself to her waist. Lies
back in a drift. Counts her breaths in. Out.
The empty spaces want to fill. She hears
the swish in her head, *wait, the whole world
waits — for you.* She knows it's a lie.
No one is waiting. Everything moves.
Crystals come in this cold and the pain —
it lingers long after she has dug herself out.

The Sparrow Has Gone

I lay out my blanket and rest
over the ground where you now lie,
curl up with the earth and lament.
I've brought you paper-whites
and two small flat stones
to place on the large granite one that insists
I remember
where you are now.
I feel their porous surface against my fingers.
and remember your hands in your garden dirt
pulling out wayward rocks and weeds.
All that work and still your hands were always
so soft on my face.
My cheeks flush,
I feel the trace of your embrace.
and wish I could be in your arms
one last time... my daydream interrupted
by the white throated sparrow's staccato song.
He used to sit at your window in the spring.

Lucy

Lucy sits where the light pours in. Purring. She is pressed into a tight crouch. Falls asleep in the warm slant of sun. Outside it's gone cold, but these windows magnify the heat. Now we all hunker in the kitchen around the fridge and food. Make hot chocolate. My six year old daughter says she misses when daddy was here. I nod and say, I know. I cannot explain to her why he left our house. I cannot tell her how he chose other things over this, over us. I cannot even explain it to myself sometimes. Another Christmas comes and our children have to go to two different houses and sometimes I feel it's my fault for choosing to be happy. Damn it! When I stood next to him and took those vows I meant all of that *forever*, until he changed his mind, which was so much sooner than I expected.

Amusement Park Fun House

It wasn't that he took
all the spoons left me
with only forks and knives
or that he unscrewed the bulbs
in half the sockets
didn't clean up his dogs mess
or wipe the toothpaste film off his sink
It wasn't that he left his moth eaten sweater
button missing and just one black shoe in his closet
it wasn't even the empty
dining room — missing furniture
the dark spaces
where the sun hadn't faded
the wood floor or the vacant
frames on walls
It was the way he shuffled out
after fifteen roller coaster years
saying *it was fun while it lasted*
in that half committed way
he always did

Escape

she could not be the red he wanted
that perfect tone of compassion
wet on his tongue
that perfect translucent seed
of the pomegranate
she wants to be as red as he likes
but is not *that* shade of garnet

nor could she be the pith
or the pitch the perfection
she could not be the earth or the water
it turns out she was not even part
of the red world he created
land and water he did not tend

still she begged him
Make me your moon let me
satellite around you
she hurtled herself
near a ring of Saturn to show him
became space dust and ice
pulled into a band

time passed but the clocks froze
time paused but her hair found grey
she
pushed away found no propulsion
every action
and its equal and its opposite

back home there are green cicadas
that crawl across the backs of her pictures
he feels their hooked legs slick off the paper
finds he drowns in those found images
all the color faded but the red of her lips
and that soft blue gaze

now imagine the mountains
the way they push up their jagged peaks
see how the whole crust shifts
imagine the sea bed moving
in simultaneous waves
and the moon and the moon
and how it pulls the water all this
while the crimson slipper lobster
creeps along unaware

Inadvertent Love Letter to the Fly

In the stone grey of storm
this city is like every other city.
Each fly waits under or in something—
a damp culvert,
an upturned dog dish, a molded eave.
Somewhere there must be a swarm
of buzzing blackness waiting for a break
in the drizzle.

I pulled on my panties,
moments after he orgasmed,
and walked out of the room.
My hair sweeping across
my back, sacral dimples
wet with sweat.
I knew before we started
it was the last time.
He lies -- smirk faced in the bed
ready to sleep.
I go and tap out these breathy rhythms
face lit by the erie blue of ether.

Now, I have a buzzing in my ear.
Not so much in as around.
Cilia prick up in the canal.
I hear the persistent whisper
of some future,
but shoo that away for the immediacy
of being here and remembering
who I was before him.

A Hint of Someone Else

Seattle 1995

She reclined in the bath. The claw footed tub cradled
her flesh –
pink toenails against tan skin against white porcelain.
She looked at her ankles. Pointed and flexed her foot.
Ran a hand from toe tip to thigh and back down,
palm pressing into the sweep of her arch.
She admired the angles and curves where her bones
and skin connected.
What else should a girl
with only eighteen years of life do?

She sudsed her body and waited like Persephone.
The water cooled and he never called
to say he would be late.
As the bath turned tepid her hands grew idle and older.
She pulled the stopper and let the water drain.

She stepped out of the tub and toweled off –
soft cotton brushing her breasts.
Slipped into his French cuffed shirt – though she was angry.
It smelled like she hoped he would when he returned,
earth and salt and his skin.
Instead, he smelled like whiskey and cigarettes and maybe a hint
of someone else.

Why did he think tulips said sorry the best?
The ones he brought were as pale pink
as his Irish cheeks. Lies flashed in his stygian eyes
and she chose to lay with him anyway.
The next day the flowers sat on the window sill
in a vase of clear water, heavy heads hung in shame.
She boarded a plane home
though he begged her to stay.

Murmurs

I watch the fan blades spin;
their shadows race on the ceiling.
I am narrow in the large bed
with umber colored sheets,
and I am warm under the blankets
you tucked around me
as you walked out of the room.

When you walk out I cry
and those cries turn into
bits of a quiet sob
as I think of being alone again,
this time for a different reason.
This time, you say, it is not your choosing.

I fall asleep and dream of a field of sunflowers
and that bright sky blue that flows
over swimming pools in summer.
The wind races itself around the field
and pushes the big lop heads over
so they are bowing in devotion.
They murmur to each other

like I murmured to myself after my divorce,
saying I'd never let another man
love me and leave like my ex did.
There is nothing sadder than being alone
in a hot bed. Circumstances spin, past mirrors
present in that funhouse sort of distortion.

I wake from that dream to the rushing wind
of winter out my window. An overgrown
branch rubs itself on the side of the house.
I listen to see if you are still in my kitchen
or if you've gone home to your wife.
I pull the covers up over my ears
and pretend I can't hear you
I turn over betrayed by myself
and right now all I want
is to go back to sleep.

Missed Lover

I want to run into you
at the grocery store
picking pineapples.
We'll talk about making
fruit salad or how to pick
a good melon.
You'll mention San Diego.
I'll laugh at your joke—
flip my hair over my shoulder.
You'll tell me how nice
it was to see me here.
I'll read into that more
than I should. I'll hope
you watch me walk away—
and think of the sway
of my hips.
I'll think of you
while I'm driving home,
putting away my groceries,
slinking into my nighty
slipping under my sheets —
and while I sleep you'll enter
my dreams, interrupted by baby's cries
my husband leans over
kisses my cheek
and quietly slips out of bed.

Whiteout

The falling snow became a meditation
almost brought her to the ocean
sounded a lot like rain hitting something interesting
in the distance she heard a freight train
no doubt taking coal somewhere to power something
the wind whipped her hair blew in her face
and steam came from her mouth
and at that moment
the whole world was covered in a soft wet blanket
the whole world breathed the same cold air
and as the snow turned to ice she retreated
went inside and built a fire to burn all night
even though she was alone

Somewhere in the Middle and Moving

For Fear of Momentum

There was
 a braided ligature
 around her
willow hips

 something wanted
 to dance her
to the constant music
 playing in her head

it was Miles
 it was The Violent Femmes
 it was loud
and complicated

 still
 she understood
the need
 to move
 and let herself
collide
 with herself –
still she remained

 motionless

she could not
 articulate
 the ligature
 the tenuous pull

 the refrain that constantly played

and held her —

Fresh Cuttings

Naked underneath my robe, I stand at the kitchen sink.
Shelves of plants hang in this eastern window. A pothos
I've had 15 years mounds in its pot, the heart
leaves trail down. Bijou bud vases cast clear and green

and cobalt reflections. In them, fresh cuttings
want to root. A pot of dragon's tongue wants a drink.
A basil plant I refuse to cook with has grown too beautiful.
I rub a leaf between fingers — fragrance fills the room.

A leggy stem of wandering jew reclines in a jar of water.
The pothos tip rooted in two days — wants dirt. A sprig
of basil remains fickle — tiny rootlet. The wandering jew,
I do not know what it wants.

I dreamt of you. We were in San Francisco
walking up Lombard Street, your hand twined in mine.
We went to your apartment. I waited
for you to root in me. I needed your arms to split

me open like hoyas roots split soil. Twist my limbs
into tendrils. Was I not beautiful enough?
I fill the copper kettle, light the stove, set it to the flame.
I prepare the loose leaf oolong, I search again for roots.

We want so many things.

The Year of Iris

Early Spring

It snowed today. I thought
the last snow was the last
I could handle. I'm crying
again at the window wanting
to hear your voice, but you
remain silent. You quiet yourself
around me even more than usual.
Tell me, I say and you say nothing.
Only wrap your arms around
my shoulders and pull my hair
into a bunch and knot it.
Should we cover the plants tonight?
I ask. You lace your fingers in mine,
lead me down the hall, put me to bed.
Tuck the covers up around
my neck and say, *don't worry,*
this isn't the first late frost.
Still, I worry.
When you finally come to bed
I turn towards you, like I always do
you take my hand
and say, *my love, don't worry.*
Go to sleep.

Summer

The garden looked different
without the tall stalks of the iris.
We forgot about the late frost when
the heat of spring finally arrived.
Couldn't understand what happened
to all the blooms and bulbs. I said,
maybe it was deer or rabbits?
You said, *or a sneaky squirrel digging up*
our work and you made a silly
squirrel face. I laughed.
Last year we dug up and split

the lot of the iris and shared the purple
and pink varieties with neighbors.
Left them in a box by the side
of the drive with a sign that said 'FREE IRIS'
in one afternoon they were plucked up
and planted somewhere else.

Later, in the kitchen looking out
to the garden I was reminded
there would be no blooms.
I cried and you said, *you are always crying lately.*
I said, *I don't know how much longer*
I can take this weather, this city, and you said
it's not such a bad place to live.
I know I said, *maybe I can't live anywhere.*

Late summer

I am naked when my hair is down
it cascades halfway down my back
your thumbs press into my sacrum.
You pull the brush through the strands
and smooth it with your hands,
your fingers play down my spine
and scoop around to cup my body
the warmth is too much and I pull away.

Just yesterday I watched you
plant iris bulbs and pull weeds
you came into the kitchen and whispered
something I did not hear and did not ask
you to repeat. It hurt too much to hear
how much you love me. *I am not*
so lovable and we are too quick
on this earth, I think and I bury my tears
in your neck. You tilt my chin
up to kiss me, my face half hidden.
No no no, you say, *it's all true.* I shake
my head and say, *I wonder what color*
the flowers will be. You touch my nose
and smile. You tell me, *be patient.*

We'll find out next summer.

Winter

There is nothing but snow
snow and more snow.
Slick streets, sleet,
and pot holes. Everywhere potholes.
We talk at length by the fire.
We do not touch. I watch the flames
and I long for you to come closer.
You keep a distance.
I no longer remember
what I wanted when I was young.
I just keep longing
and the empty keeps coming.
The ground is frozen solid.
I need to get my hands in the earth
so I get up and kiss the top of your head
I go to the garage and repot a pothos.
I go to sleep with dirt under my nails
I will wait for you as I have always done.

Spring

You yelled at me last night
because I didn't park the car right
and I left the window open
when it rained. I am beyond crying
and you won't talk about what
really bothers you. I am exhausted.
The tulips have come up and their
heads bob in the breeze. They nod
in accord. There are street crews
with beds of hot asphalt.
Maybe we are finally done with winter,
I say as you pass by with your tea,
I reach my hand out and you don't touch it.
I repeat, *maybe we are finally done.*

Summer

The stands and falls of Iris fill
my sight. They came in cavalcades
of blueish-purple and fuchsia. All
their mouths open and yawning
up to heaven, reaching for the sun.
I pull the weeds and sweat
collects under my breasts and drips
down my stomach. I lift my shirt
to wipe my face. I push all my hair
back away from my forehead and tuck it
behind my ears, the way you did, and I take
a moment to marvel at the garden.
I am always amazed by the iris. I turn
to call to you, to tell you how you were right.
I yell your name and wait.
The only reply is the soft sway of the iris
and those tiny whispers, all the small secrets
they tell the wind.

Picture Frames

Somewhere in a small town in England an old man carries a doll's house in his arms and it is some sort of offering to a world where it will become a home to a family made of wood and a girl's dreams. There will be small furniture filling its rooms; a tiny basin for washing, a blue sofa for sitting, and all the things they have ever owned or possessed will fill the tiny space.

Further away, I step out of your car to take photos and a cold English mist spits down. You wait.

The village offers me lines of cut daffodils, potted plants, a green slate roof and a burst of pink and yellow against the gray brick of this city. I think I could live here. I see myself with my children filling a small home with all we own and possess. Our blue sofa, rows of clothes and a few potted plants. I see us walking hand in hand to the corner park swinging our arms and skipping. Suddenly, I am snapped back to now, to this moment where I don't make up so many stories and I capture black birds in the sky against a church spire.

I want to frame my world in such a way it becomes understood. I take a few more photos; of the market, the city hall, an old lady with a red umbrella, no perhaps it was purple. Then I wander back to you as I always do. I slip into the car and your eyes are closed. You may have been asleep or not. You look at me and smile and say *Good?* in that way you do and I say *Yes* and I come into your arms. You wipe the bit of damp off my hair so tenderly and I know here I am home, in this place, in this moment and I don't need to own or possess a thing and it is good in that way that perfection can be, for just this moment, this holding, this space.

Triptych

It is a series of days.
She screams and pulls her hair out. She wants
her sadness painted like a bowl of rotting fruit.
She looks again and sees her far lover in the foreground
his arms out stretched. Still she turns away.
Has to be cajoled and pulled back to being.
She wonders if he was ever gone at all. So much
depends on perspective.

She cries. Kneels in a field of green wheat.
A single tree unfurls on the horizon. He's wiped her tears
and smeared the salt stain across her cheek. They have
both returned from different journeys. In the distant
orchard they lie on a blanket surrounded
by the scent of apple blooms, no it is oranges and farther away
a lavender field. A breeze stirs the grasses. The painter
fills the trees sagging branches. Again the fruit
is ripe. Each layer ripe.
The lovers hold the brushes and paint
each other's bodies with the moonlight.
Her eyes catch the last light as all things slip away.

The panels—never complete.
Some days she has to return
to the quiet orchard. It is her lonely
ritual. She pulls the fruit and holds
her dress like a basket—fills it full.
She will go back and peel each heavy orb.
Hands stained with scent and oils and she will eat
each and every one until the corners of her mouth
burn. Her nails full of pith her nostrils full of orange
What better way to fill than on this gorging.
She is made to wade through the field of chaff
Lost in the chin high grasses. She has to find
her way on feel alone. She hopes he waits
for her return. His eyes closed, mouth smiling,
and his arms wide, wide and open
like the sky.

Us and Matisse

I lie next to you, your hand covering my breast
flicking the nipple, though I hear your steady
breathing and know you are close to sleep. I'm reminded
of the woman in the Matisse we saw today at the Tate.
Whys was it under glass? All his work that I've seen
has never been covered. I said the glass
obscured the texture. You said Matisse was already
at his simplest. It was all about the eyes and hair
and the tired flowers in a nearby vase. You told me
Matisse had already brought it down to the basics,
for him perspective didn't matter and I suppose
it never does. Except to us, the viewer when
we are looking in. It was only then I noticed
her tiny feet. The way the pink floor sloped
some wrong direction. Though you were right
it didn't matter and I was drawn back to her eyes
I saw that dark swirl of ocean in them
some dark storm of want left at the edge.
It's no wonder she was an inattentive reader.
The same way I now lie uninterested in sleep,
most interested in the small details. The way
your thumb keeps time with your breath, flicking
and rubbing with each inhale. The way small words
purse off your lips as you fall asleep. The way my mind
can't slow when I'm with you. How I know
I don't have all of you and I just take what I can get.
How I know you'll go home to your wife
and I'll fly back to the states.
I don't want to be lost in a cloud
of perspective where I disappear in mist. So I ask
your now sleeping form. *How do you love me?*
You go on breathing the slow steady way
that you do and I too
am finally drifting under the glass
of sleep, imagining Matisse's exposition.
The last strokes as he looked in. His last
brush lining her eyes, the final crucial gestures
that bring us into the frame.

I could not stop thinking

so I listened to French opera
uncorked a bottle of Tikal Malbec
washed the dishes and left my hands wet
fed the dog again and he did not eat
so I sliced apples and ate the slivers
with an English cheddar
stripped naked and looked
at my form in the mirror
took a shower and the mirror fogged
so I used my finger to trace my figure
sleep was out of reach, I recited Roethke
I made up stories about you in California
I thought about your wrists
the thick bone and blue-green veins
on the smooth underside
I considered your hands
and the last time they touched me
the phone never rang
and I checked the connection

Memory

sometimes you are
a slippery fish
a hooked trout in summer
you surface try to escape your fate breach the surface
catching the glare
of sunlight on your side
then gone as quick as you came
you spit the hook
the small tear in your lip serves you
now you are layered like your scales
building one on top of another on top of another
until you can't tell which were the first silver blue cells to gel
to form
to shape
to sculpt you
the scar shows us which details
deserve
the most attention

Friday Morning

She wakes in a warm bed of light. She blinks
once, twice, takes delight in the way the sun

streams through the slats of the shutters. Shadows
cast across her breast and his chest. The outline

of legs beneath the sheets. The way the tree
outside the window curves like her body.

She is a leaf in flight rolling with the wind.
She turns, strokes a cheek, an eyelid, his lips.

Tangled again with her lover — she asks
why can't a poem just be about sex now.

She knows he leaves later, goes home to a wife
she to her husband in time to make dinner.

She presses her body against the firm
cage of his ribs. Wraps around him the way

the sun wraps around the day — we cannot
peel the light off the sidewalk we just wait

for the slanted shades of afternoon — get dressed
break our embrace and leave the bed unmade.

Nuance

It was the way they woke
each morning — fresh sun
in the low window — how she
sometimes found him watching

he kissed her forehead
she cooed good morning
he went down to make them coffee
she took her time waking

it was her upward gaze
his peeking over the paper
her feet in his lap as he read
she sipped her coffee in silence

she slid off the settee kissed his cheek
lingered at his collarbone and inhaled
she went into the kitchen softly singing
made toast and French omelets

the talked about Bennett
explored the lonely of their respective pasts
they mulled over the conversation
she glanced at him and smiled

he took her hand across the table
there was a bowl of fresh oranges

The George and Dragon

I

I was at the George and Dragon in Phoenix
of all places. They called it the *Quintessential
English Pub* and featured Guinness on tap.
That didn't stop us from showing up to play darts,
drink beer, and talk of dreams to see England,
perhaps when we were older. My friends and I
would don accents say *Pip, pip old chap.*
Have you seen the Queen? We laughed.
Ornamental oranges bloomed. I wore short shorts,
showed off my tan, and my twenty-something legs.
We all enjoyed the thick beer and fish and chips
and the heat. You and I hadn't met yet.

II

Early spring, you and I are in Wray near Bentham.
We walk hand in hand, in spitting rain through
the closed village center we laugh about finally
going out and all the shops being closed. Lights out,
signs turned over, windows dreaming of shoppers.
We duck into a market. Buy cheese and chocolate
and Absolut, giggle at the checkout, hold hands.
A man buys lotto tickets, he takes too long choosing
his numbers, we want to get home. We steal
glances and smiles. You pull at a lock of my hair.
After we pay we dash out into the rain, stop
in front of the real estate office, browse the adverts
behind the wet window. I think, *if only*. You squeeze
my hand tighter. We hurry to the car and drive home.

III.

The sugar magnolias are in bloom, though England
is still cold. I walk out on the patio in your shirt
and watch lambs play in the field next door.
You watch me through the window. I come back
in, you pull me to you and we make love in the kitchen.

Later, you hold my coat up and I slip my arms in,
you smooth your hands across my shoulders.
At the pub we drink cask ale and order dinner.
Again, I am at the George and Dragon. I mention
the pub of my youth, serving Guinness and Shepards Pie.
I remember my twenty-something legs and smile.
We are warm by the fire and laugh belly laughs.
We talk again about home, mine in Missouri
and yours in Stockport, not too far from this village.
We hold hands across the table and say, we
are only disconnected by distance. Two days later
you take me to the airport and I cry as I turn away.
I am always quiet on the return flight.

IV

I often forgot my way in the Arizona desert.
I've been lost on the banks of the Mississippi
more than once. When I left England, the daffodils
here weren't yet in bloom. In your home,
they covered the rolling hills
and I took photographs. It is now two weeks later
and their laughing mouths mock me. In dreams
the sugar magnolia tell me about you. Those flesh
colored blooms. There is no place for me to call home.
Each perfect petal tears away from the whole,
each bud becomes some sort of exquisite fruit.
It is only with time that we learn
not all of them are edible, still
nothing quells the wanting.

Phoenix -- July 1987

Cotton fields dot random plots
around the city.
She sneaks past the 'No Trespassing' signs
squats in the dirt, breaks dry clumps with her hands.
She pulls the boll off the plant
and turns the tuft to string. She pulls and twists,
pulls and twists the fibers in cogitation.
She liked the rhythm of being young
in the desert. She said she'd knit herself a sweater
and make one for everyone she knew.
She forgot those small pleasures of trespass
the desires to create. For a long time
she let the yarns unwind and be gathered
for nests and mice burrows.

As she walked home a tumbleweed
taller than her crossed the street,
stopped for a green light, moved
with the "Walk" signal, stayed in the lines.
It paused at the other side,
the wind shifted and it turned left toward
the super market.
Later she told her older brother
'Even the weeds have places to be.'
He told her to 'get the hell out' of his room
and slammed the door.
Their mother had moved out the week before.

Later that summer, during the monsoons
Rolling thunder and long lines of lightning
illuminated peaks in the distance. A quick
moving river formed in the arroyo of the street.
She dipped her feet in to feel the flow around
her ankles, warm water and the grit of the road
collected between her toes. This was something
she could feel and wash away.
She tried to block the river with her body.
The rain stopped, the sun broke the sky.
She lay flat on her belly. Still felt
the heat of the desert day trapped in the asphalt.

She watched the puddles dry, traced mud swirls in the silt,
and all along the streets there were lonely rainbows
glistening in the oil slicks taking her
all the way to California.

Jogging

It was 'waiting for the school bus' time
when I ran today. What I learned
as I rhythmically strode past gads of kids
is that side ponytails are back in style
(watch out friends here I come)
boys still try to make themselves seem
more like men by slathering on scent
that you can smell from 20 feet away
(only slightly better than my sweat smell)
and there is still one rude girl who holds court
and demands everyone's attention
and in a flash I am there again — standing alone
while all the popular kids form a circle
to block me out and I see her there
at the bus stop. Scuffing her shoe in the dirt
perpetual frown and I want to say
ohhhh sweet girl don't worry
there is life beyond 7th grade — ohhhh
middle schoolers — ohhhhh memory

Gagged Up Owl Pellet

take your scalpel
and latex glove
dissect me
slice me open
gray lump
compressed fur matted
lift away the layers
covering my bones
traces of entrails
dried enzymes
pick out the clavicle
vertebrae skull
pelvis radius and rib
gather the pieces you need
to complete this skeleton

Necropsy

Somewhere in France
maybe the River Dordogne
or perhaps the Lefèbre's pond
birds are being scooped out of the water
dead swans lifted like drowned babies
heads lolling — feet curled
crying tongues now stiff in their mouths
and small Wood Ducks
become floating parcels
plucked and carefully wrapped
in black plastic carried away

perhaps this is happening everywhere
small pandemics of the soul —
even birds have to concede
so why not in this confluence
or at the mouth of the Rhine
they leave their mate circling above
calling to them — like you left me
all frantic — crossing bridges
crossing streets
never again able
to get to you

Wound Care

To clean the wound you have to be willing
to lick it. Reduce yourself — animal —
and go at the lesion with a cleansing
tongue. Let the rough of the mouth lap the sore.
Take time to reach the edges. Be careful
with the raw oozing center. But don't worry—
the pus is part of you already. Drink
it in like nourishment. Use it in your
body as ointment for your soul. Congealed
infected cells are permeable and ready
to be re-released into the corpus of you.
They wait to move through your system.
When cleaned properly the wound becomes
part of you again—absorbed.

Beginnings

When All Else Failed

I wanted to be avian, to need to fly in order to eat.
I wanted to swoop down, dip the lake and rise,

talons full of fish. Slippery with life and slippery
with death. I'd love the first thing I grasped

I'd land and pin the catch with claws
and rip at the soft belly. Push the indent

of the flailing fish. Now gutted. Limer red
entrails, grey stone of want, yellow bile leaking

and the beautiful cornflower look of the gills.
I'd peck those delicately. Wash of lust

on my beak and sated or perhaps just satisfied
I'd lift again to the sky with a screech,

with the pumping of wings and heart in rhythm,
with an awareness of even the most subtle wind.

The World of the Body

Vast expanse of wheat field
pushed over by wind
seed head sissing against seed head
stick skinny stalks dried by baking sun.
Everything moves towards water
the antelope, the herd of wild mustang
cows at the end of a day,
entire civilizations flock to the wet
wanting thirst-quenching satisfaction.
This wheat reaches up in the rain, shafts plumped
and that which is not absorbed runs off
becomes the trickle of stream
gathers and forms, as water attracts water.

Eventually rain fills a slow moving river
each curve undulating under stunning sky.
A girl sits on the bank and dips her toes in.
With a finger she traces an eddy,
swirls silt into a frenzy and watches
the separation of sediment.
She watches the body join while it pulls away
the molecules bound by more than just charges.
She rolls her pant legs and submerges her feet
lets the shiver quake her body.

Writer as Hero

You must wait for black to slither
to the hall, wait for the aftermath
of the slain. It is as if you swallow bees
and they buzz behind your eyes
cast visions and interrupt —
Unferth sits on one shoulder
of your conscience laughing,
on the other, in a flowing gown
Queen Wealhtheow weeps for her king.

You must feel the red smear of pain.
See the lines of twisted entrails.
Prepare the untangling of this twisted mess.
or crawl away downward gaze,
if you could face yourself
when the sun rose, knowing
you ignored the stench of rot.

In a dark place Grendel waits.
Among the mosses and ferns
on the swamps edge, he salivates.
His mother chides and he goes to get
what he wants, knows his fate,
the coming revenge. Still he trudges
towards you. When he comes
could you face yourself in the mirror
if you didn't let the acid blood drip,
if you didn't rip the arm
from its socket, if you didn't hang it
from the rafters for all to see?

My hope (after trying so hard to change my fate)

that with evaporation
things might transpire

that the water could draw me up
out of me like steam off my body

that I might stop eating the seeds of the pomegranate
foolish captive like Persephone

that the time I was with him
wasn't entirely wasted

that the ocean won't lose the tide
and the seagull still pecks at washed up horseshoe crabs

that him stealing my body
won't kill me

that this pond becomes home to tadpoles
and the frog song soothes the naiads

that I might become one whole being
again after such a great loss

that the forest doesn't always catch fire
after feeling the flare of lightning

Storm Chasing

You can chase storms in a 1981 Volvo station wagon —
watch ball lightning form over a field of cotton,
and drive faster than the rain to try and catch the spark.
All you need is enough gas, and maybe a friend
who will sit on the swings with you later,
talking about life after seeing this blue orb bounce —
while he secretly wishes to kiss you.
Then you can turn your back to him,
let him miss your lips and kiss your cheek.
You know he'll chase storms with you
no matter what. He wants to love you,
but you won't let him. Why would you
ever let it come to that when you can race
along washed out Arizona farm roads —
windows down, rain screaming in at your face
and your own hot hand on your thigh.

Hinge

You let the screen door swing out onto our sunlit yard. And allow the refrigerator door to swing into the kitchen, bringing butter and milk closer to my hands. Hinge, you open the gate, snap back, and keep the dog in the yard.

Swing on the hinge and occasionally it sings. What a fun ride the door or window get to take on your account. Sometimes, screeching like an owl, you remind us of your importance. Still we turn away and forget while pushing the door open and again hearing your cry, until the thousandth time, then we remember you too have needs.

You are the mouth of a Jaw Fish, the flapping wings of the Sharp Shinned Hawk, the extension of a White-tail doe clearing a fence. Hinge you are the crab's sideways sidle, a bivalve beating its body pushing water through his small muscle to swim rhythmic with the ocean. Push, hinge, push hinge.

Even in our bodies we hinge. Vacillate. Go back and forth between things. Pivot around points. We hinge when we squat to pick up dark earth or pluck a flower. We hinge when we reach for a lover. Flaps in our heart have hinges, these kind rarely wear out. Your articulation helps me hinge around myself. My mind hinges half a dozen times a day — around what to wear, or eat, or who to love and how.

This Garden Grows

I. Fall

Bombus impatiens, asleep on the job.
I found you curled up on a pillow of pollen
inside a fiery orange marigold.
I see these fat fuzzy bees in our garden everyday.
Dusk came quick and a little too chilly before
this one could fly his pollen full sacks home to his hive.
These were the kinds of things I noticed that fall.
I never worried about the sting of the bees,
I worried they needed blankets.
How could I fashion one, with a leaf and
sap and my tears?

Will these images you have planted
be forever imprinted on my body and senses?
Every time I smell the sickly sweet lilac
you once picked for me will I only remember
how quickly it wilts or will I be able to recall
the the tiny perfection in the flower's purple clumps?

Sun streams burnt orange through our family room drapes.
I sit folding clothes and watch
the sneaky shafts of light play on the pale rug.
They are reaching beneath the edges of things,
plying the fringe of my dreams. The baby cries,
I go to him and leave my thoughts to collect
dust with the other mysteries under the sofa.

II. Winter

I have listened to every song I own
in every minor key, including Elgar's
Cello Concerto in E, and they all sound
happier than I have been in two sets of seasons.

III. Spring

After such a long winter I am surprised this Dahlia
from your mother's garden returned from last year's stock.
The seeds had to be planted by the wind,
now that your mothers hands have left ours.
This huge bloom spans my two palms, burning orange and red.
I challenge that you could never grow a thing
with that black thumb you flick at our world.

IV. Summer

I've gone west. I arrived after the fragrant
white blossoms of the orange trees came and went.
This was a smell I knew all my young years
and it could fill every space of my body.
So much, I remember as a child I thought the
smell sounded like the buzzing of bees
and just thinking of it put the taste
of flower and a hint of orange on my tongue.

I pick a fresh baseball sized orange
from the tree in my new yard.
With an old eagerness I throw the peels
in the freshly clipped grass and I bite
into the thing whole, pith and pulp
and seeds on my teeth and tongue.
Juice drips down my chin and the sticky
sweet smell stays on my hands.
I offer it to our son, now four, he laughs,
it is fun to see such silliness in me.
I know he wonders where our fat bees
have gone and why our garden, now arid,
has lost some of its color. I take him into my arms,
hold him, and tell him I will fashion
him a blanket out of grass and sky and dreams.

Mountains Out of

Sometimes I enter the day with so much humility
I feel like I'll disappear into a crack in the sidewalk

while there I climb on the back of an ant and ride it
all the way to the edge of the hive. I peer over

the lip of the mountain and teeter on the granules
of sand. There is a deep hole for that ordered society.

I am taken to the queen and introduced. I scream
and run for my life when faced with

those worrisome jaws gnashing side to side.
I do not stop. The further away I get, the taller I grow

first the height of the blades of green grass, then eye to eye with
dandelions and daffodils, each step I am growing larger

getting further away from the humming mound of earth.
Soon I am taller than the trees and now they are the height of

wild flowers and I can use the roof of this house as a seat.
I pluck elms and birches and blow the leaves away. Make wishes.

Wishes as big as the sky. They fill the universe
with something so large I have nothing left to do,

but explode. Tiny pieces fall to earth
become the ant hill, become the soil,

becoming a warm, soft cover under which I hide.

What do I need that I cannot carry in my heart?

My six year old daughter tells
me she wants to be Buddhist
though she won't be a vegetarian or
give up her doll house
and she is conflicted about even this
so I tell her buddhist strive
for perfection but do not attain it
she asks what it means to strive
and she leans over and tells her brother
about suffering
and how him wanting things
he cannot have
is part of life

just now
I feel the weight of this pen
and decide to sell all the things
in our house or give them away —
let them become someone else's burden.
We sit on the family room floor
the dog in my daughter's lap
me holding my boy in my arms
and telling him he needs a hair cut
and I love him and my goodness Jack
you are growing up
way too fast

While reading the Bhagavad Gita

I am in this body
only once
even as I read the text
I am
in this particular body
of words only once

I am in
this body of the world
only this body
once.

Nothing
there attained
ever untiringly tread this path
if I I
were the wise I would act now
even follow
for the *and*

with time come these
better imperfections
what will force the selfish
the great enemy
hidden is
the Knower

I know
I am
in this body
in this in
in this body
in this text
only once

this body

 this body

 only once

 Even the text tells me

From loss of discernment one becomes lost

repulsion toward that great calmness

 one's thoughts established

who calls for peace when roaming can wind

 whosoever objects of such desires

peace fills a world

 without that state having only being

one reaches

 only once

I am in this body

 I am

 in this body of order

 this

 body of lines

 this body

 only

 once.

Waiting for You

*"Beautiful my desire, and the
place of my desire." -- Roethke*

Waiting for you
is like watching
a peach become
ripe on the branch.
Each day, test the flesh.
Push the skin to feel
the give. Fill
with the anticipation
of the nectar.

To know this waiting,
that this peach will fill,
is enough. I grab at it
and inhale.
The tickle of fuzz
on my lip holds me over.
It's the promise,
just a whisper now,
of what that flesh will yield.

Nourishment

Sometimes I eat peaches picked straight off my tree,
the flesh just yielding to my tug. I bite into them whole, let
the juices drip from my chin, laugh when it splashes
on my bare feet. Hours later I still feel my toes sticking
together from the sucrose glue. That night when I am
soaking in my bath I wiggle my toes and point them,
draw them up out the water and see suds dripping
off my legs. I look for meaning in the shapes
of the bubbles, like I do in the clouds I see on walks
with my dog. When I first got the dog I told my kids
I wanted to name him Lorca and they laughed
saying *we'll call him Glorca. Glorca, Glorca* they squealed
and I laughed too, then tsk'd.

When I feel more my age I eat peaches in nice slices
with a fine piece of grassy English Cheddar, not too sharp,
and if you took the time to really know me, you'd know
I make peach jam and eat it on toast along with my morning
coffee. You'd know I don't use sugar anymore because
I like the loamy taste of the liquid, and the milk I occasionally
add cuts any hint of bitterness in my day. You'd know
I cook nearly every night with ingredients from my garden.
I am careful when choosing the things that go into my body.

When I was young I took the time one needs
to eat whole pomegranates. I held the heavy orb
in my palm. I didn't always love that garnet
fruit, sometimes they were bitter in my mouth
but I enjoyed breaking open the hard rind with a rock
and picking each pulpy seed from the pith, biting it
and shooting the remains out between my teeth.

Practice

While we waited for your brother we walked. A creek ran parallel to our path. Our shadows long at the top of the hill, we laughed about being giants. You ran ahead in silhouette. *Come on mommy*, but I had on the wrong shoes for running and not to mention the wrong bra. You stopped to pet a small white dog.

We watched older kids at a track meet throw discus and shot-put, and pole vault. That rising up into the sun and down again, you asked if you could try. I may or may not have mentioned danger. I bought you a can of *Coke* — which I rarely did — because it was finally a warm evening after such a long winter. You smiled ear to ear and said, you were *just like a grown up*.

The sun slipped lower and the long grasses whispered something to me about youth. We circled back along the same path, I smiled the whole way, even when you sat down and said, you wouldn't budge unless I let you watch TV when we got home. *No, my sweet girl, there won't be time*. Your scowl deepened. I was thankful you were seven and easily distracted by a pile of limestone rocks in a drainage ditch. You turned the rocks over one at a time, looking to add to your collection, and chose one with a family of pill-bugs. Asked if you could bring them home, and if I had a jar for your 'insects', as if a jar were something I could conjure or should keep on hand. I said I didn't have a jar and instead made an envelope out of paper. You carried all ten of them home, tiny parcel, and smiled the whole way.

My hair blew into my face, the smell of fresh fescue fell over the soccer pitch, you ran ahead again, *Catch up Mommy*. *But wait*, I said, *I have to write you this poem*. You laughed, *oh Mommy*, and only stopped to pet a golden retriever who jumped straight up and high like a Jack rabbit and you imitated him later at bedtime, your blond hair floating up and down as you jumped on your bed.

That night after you slept I put your pill bugs into a jar with some dirt (from a healthy plant, as you suggested) and small rocks we tumbled last summer. I covered the top and poked holes in the lid. I looked them up on-line because I knew they were not insects, but isopods of some sort. I read they could live for up to two years. I flashed forward and I flashed back and I wondered what we would feed them and if we'd have them long enough to name them and if we did who would write their eulogies when they died.

Paper Cranes

For her I fold a red one.
Take the square make the ends meet.
I fold in half and half again and turn
the paper over. See the peaks?
The mountain fold, the pressed corners,
two petal folds, and with practice I find
each turns necessity.

I crease and fold, crease again and unfold.
With each pleat I say, *I love you*.
I say, *take my kindness in your arms*.
I say, *take these tiny motes of my fiber*.
With each finished bird I am filled
and I grant a wish or small trespass.
I give five more minutes of song
at bedtime, read an extra book,
scoop them up and dance
around the kitchen. The ritual
of the folds shows in my breath,
each completed crane takes me
closer to the light, but my intentions
are not those of Icarus and my wings
are not glued with wax.

For my son I fold another, but I turn it
inside out. It is white where it should be blue.
I hand the bird over and he hugs me
forgives me my imperfections. Over breakfast
I tell them about a Japanese legend
that says if you fold one thousand cranes
you get a wish. I tell them I know
just what I'll wish for. They are superstitious
and do not want to know. They tell me,
only nine hundred ninety-eight to go and smile.

I crease the paper, turn a simple square
into a bird that will fly through their sleep
or their day. Perhaps it will someday light
on their conversation, *my mom folded*

me paper cranes as a kid.

While they sleep I sit and fold
one hundred more. I have mastered an ancient
rhythm and when they wake, they see
I have strung the cranes across the kitchen
window on filament. Each bright
and sharp in their wing span. Each bird
magically floating in morning sun. Each inverse
revers fold moving closer to perfect.
Each neck and tail pulled, each wing unfettered.

Caught in a Midwestern Snow Fall

A man watched from his kitchen window as an owl grasped a sparrow in its talons. The owl squeezed the prey, later there was a script of blood that the man read like a sacred text.

Across town a man took a woman into his arms. He squeezed her and said hello. They smiled and laughed and talked until three a.m. The woman held her breath sometimes. Held his gaze. She was learning how to read him.

Two red shouldered hawks held onto a telephone wire. The wire bounced in the wind.

Snow fell around all of them in heaps.

The owl ripped the tiny bird open. Steam plumed from the small birds chest. The heart was devoured along with the feathers and bones. The man did not turn his head.

Across town the man led the woman to the bedroom. They made love. Later she cried and he held her. She read his silence like a promise and leaned into his warmth. Their breathing fell even together and finally they slept.

The red shouldered hawks lifted in tandem. Flew off, wings in synch, into the biting storm.

Snow fell all night and all of them woke to a landscape they— at first glance— did not recognize.