

University of Missouri, St. Louis

IRL @ UMSL

Theses

UMSL Graduate Works

12-2-2022

I Have News To Tell You

Jeanne M. Allison

University of Missouri-St. Louis, allisonjea@umsl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://irl.umsl.edu/thesis>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Allison, Jeanne M., "I Have News To Tell You" (2022). *Theses*. 429.

<https://irl.umsl.edu/thesis/429>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the UMSL Graduate Works at IRL @ UMSL. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of IRL @ UMSL. For more information, please contact marvinh@umsl.edu.

I HAVE NEWS TO TELL YOU

By Jeanne M. Allison

MA in English, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 1996
Bachelor of Business Administration, Baylor University, 1987

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School of the

University of Missouri-St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts

In

Creative Writing

December 2022

Advisory Committee

Shane Seely, MFA
Chairperson

Steven Schreiner, PhD

Andrea Scarpino, PhD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART ONE.....	1
budding branch.....	1
I want.....	2
Waiting in a New Café.....	3
i should stay with you.....	4
The Day We Told the Truth.....	5
All the Life the Blue Can Muster.....	6
PART TWO.....	7
be drunk with broken clouds.....	7
The Mother.....	8
She was no June Cleaver.....	9
Two Pictures from My Mother's Life.....	10
The Biscuits.....	11
telephone connections.....	12
Explosions.....	14
After the Quarrel.....	15
Give Me Silence.....	16
My Daughter Asleep in a Strong Spring Storm.....	17
PART THREE.....	18
someday your core.....	18
the approaching storm.....	19
When You Visit Me After the Trauma.....	20
A Day in the Life of the Patient in 632B.....	21
Nighttime in the ICU.....	22
As I lie on the table.....	23
After.....	25
Come, walk with me.....	26
hope mixes in the brittle.....	27
Dollywood.....	29
I would have played Johnny Cash for you.....	30
PART FOUR.....	31
a prism.....	31
the hummingbird.....	32
I Have News to Tell You.....	33
When Trees Reach Tall Into the Sky.....	34
In the Pause.....	35
shadows.....	36
When Looking Out the Back Window.....	37

Longing.....	38
PART FIVE.....	39
our hands clasped awkwardly.....	39
Cathedral of Trees.....	40
To My Mother, Gone.....	41
Death Watch.....	42
this is not how I imagined it would go.....	43
Yesterday I went to see a movie alone.....	44
The Aftermath of Chaos.....	46
PART SIX.....	47
birds caw.....	47
Utterance.....	48
A Tourist at Pentecost in Paris.....	49
We Will Be Fine.....	50
The Unexpected Quiet.....	51

PART ONE

budding branch
the red-winged blackbird's perch
returning

I want

to wear a bikini to feel
the ocean salt sting
my broken core
the flat stomach of my youth
replaced with twists and bumps obstructing
my once fluid body

to find life in the crevice of my scar
the big one on my abdomen
not the sane straight caesarean scar
but the one made when they searched
for the killing pain
protruding from the unlikeliest of places

to dare you stare at my midriff
muscles grown twisted with tendrils
on the left reaching
for those on the right
with knots thick and overgrown
fused into a body still
unrecognizable to me

This is not a clean scar sewn closed
but one roaming and wild and open
healed from the inside out
revealing where he looked for something wrong
here or there or on the other side
a tear that jags around my belly button
taking out infection as he went

to make you see this scar
not ugly and coarse and preferably private
but born of the ferocious search
for another lifetime of chances
to let that ocean sink into
whatever I have left
held in my butchered abdomen
alive

Waiting in a New Cafe

I wait for a friend for over an hour
missed the movie showing
so I walk to a nearby restaurant
not far from the river
one that reminds me of a café
in Italy years ago

patience strains under
the weight of my friend's indifference
I am angry until my pasta arrives
when it melts as the savory sauce
quenches more than thirst and hunger

I love to discover a new place in an old town
one I think I know perfectly well enough
my feigned knowledge masking
the reality of the overlooked

I sit here
no longer paying attention to my friend
as the river moves ice chips downstream
the naked trees sighing in their overlook
as if exasperated with the coldness
of forgetfulness and inattention

the ice beckons me to look up
to see the world passing
folding back into another moment
and I wonder if I am living
a parallel life
somewhere

i should stay with you

1

when days are long and hard
and we hold the burden collectively
so close we breathe each other's air
we should die holding this grace

i like when you let me be alone
to settle in my skin
readying myself to love
the unlovable
the tired and bold
the cranky and scared
in your laughter

I hear you breathing in the distance
it tells me you're still there

2

let's take the revolution into our souls
carry it with us wherever we go
so there is no place away from it

i don't know what all the "shoulds" are
stretch them far enough and they break us
and yet they are reminders
that I should think of you before me
and then think of me before you

we should extend our hands
not our fists
that day when retribution
comes to banish the worst
of what we've become

The Day We Told the Truth

when you cleared up the half-lies and mistruths
and spoke with tentative compassion
I was surprised

not so much by the content of your confession
I've always known you were aware
but that you would finally confirm it
so matter-of-factly

I don't know what to do with this truth
like that hot potato game
we played as kids
I want to rid myself of it

Am I able to find the love
echoing behind our conversation?
the jangling of molecules I rely
on reverberating to the walls

Or does your confession only
stamp out my hope
solidifying finally
that the worst I have believed
about you
is true?

All the Life the Blue Can Muster

I hold your feet tenderly
even in my rugged places,
whisper my breath into your ear
when you think it is only the wind
or your imagination.

I am the fruit
you need to survive
my tomatoes and oranges
bring sweet bursts
of sustaining juice
emanating within you.

Why are you so cruel to me
and to each other?
I don't wish to die this way
I wish to live as long as the stars
and melt into a supernova's
mighty death
millions of years from now.

Even those who say they love me
trample on my most irreplaceable places
and my anger is felt in storms
where the wealthy survive
the strong get angry
and the poor and weak must die.

I do not mean for them to die this way
why can't you see
that I long to go in my own way
not shoved into the night
where nothing survives
where oxygen takes with it
all the life the blue can muster
and when it tapers out
we--all of us--are gone.

PART TWO

be drunk with broken clouds
let the gathering wind
calm the howling baby
watch the tall grass breath again

The Mother

cleaning porch windows
in the light of the rising moon
hands grow cold
in the faint purple light
disappearing in the sky
a portal into another day

she remembers familiar
voices from a distant night
the coo of a baby
in the glow of Christmas

the breeze grows harsher
chapping her hands
when last light
finally fades into night
as she comes back inside
to soft voices
trailing behind her dreams

She was no June Cleaver

even if she smiled when answering the door and wore cotton 1950s dresses that needed to be ironed when her first baby was tiny. early on she even wore shoes in the house, something she didn't require of her children. treated motherhood like a job, she told me, which required her hair to be done up and make-up on. but she was born in a shack with sod floors and her feet didn't touch the ground until she was two, because two brothers had died the Christmas before. she wasn't mild-mannered but fought her five living brothers for a place at the table. they said you could hear her shouting at neighborhood kids from three blocks away. patience wasn't a strong suit. she wasn't blonde and her husband didn't work in business. he was a teacher. she a secretary until she had her first child. there was no money for childcare so she stayed home. she banged pots in the kitchen when she was angry and if she was sugary sweet then you knew something was up. but she baked cookies, always, delicious cookies always.

Two Pictures from My Mother's Life

I listen to the muffled call of the neighborhood night owl as I sit
on the screened-in porch, pondering images from my mother's life,

faint in family memories: A baby—screaming in a basket
in a scorching cotton field of silence as terror ripped a young mother's heart—

a brother my mother never knew, the heat too much for his body.
Grandma never forgave herself for caving to the judging murmurs

of other women in camp when there was no choice
but to pick cotton with the baby at her feet. And a sister—

an aunt I never knew—calling my mother hot- shit-on-a-stick
because of her fierce way, forcing them to pay attention,

even the brothers getting ready for war. And Grandma's indulgence
of her tenth child—my mother—a surprise, supposedly dead

already after yet two more children died of a fever—one just before Thanksgiving
and the other just after Christmas. But the stillbirth never happened,

My mother's body tiny as a hand, a bright screaming light emerging
from a long and unholy night. That owl has outlived my mother now,

high in the sky at dusk as a cathedral of trees shifts in the breeze
over a gravesite chosen for the beauty of Dogwoods in bloom.

The Biscuits

No more biscuits
made the way that grandma made them
or even the delicious imitations her daughters made
once she was gone, each proclaiming their invention
as pure, the true recipe learned only by watching,
with the hallowed sound of God in their fists' pounding
in dough, covered in flour, then flipped over
and pounded again until they declared it ready.

Not too much pounding,
though, the advice echoed through
threads of conversations between
daughters and granddaughters,
or the biscuits will not turn out.
The guessing game continues even today
as cousins try to remember a pinch
of one thing and a dab of another.

My brother-in-law—the chef—says the key
to the biscuits is not in the recipe
but the open flame;
that's how they did it in those days, he says,
over an open flame in a cast iron skillet.

I used to carry that ancient skillet of Grandma's
around our darkened house when I heard a noise
after finding myself alone at night. It did not occur
to me that I could have killed a would-be intruder
with its molten iron, more than enough to stop a burglar.
I only knew it gave me power.

None of those remaining care to cook biscuits
over an open flame but they argue still
over who has the right recipe.
Never having tasted the real thing, I sit
on the sidelines eating well-crafted biscuits.

I consume and I cannot contribute.
I consume and I do not want to argue about it.
No, I say, do not tell me what you think.
Let us merely pound with our floured hands
and let the truth rise if it may.

telephone connections

I

I'd wrap the cord around my finger as I talked on the phone
attached to the wall in the kitchen
stretching the long winding cord
all the way to the living room
away from our mother
obscuring whispered conversations
soaking up private teenage angst
of crushes and high school parties
vulnerable to those listening walls

II

My friend Sadie had six older sisters
the oldest slept on the pullout couch
with her Norwegian boyfriend when they visited
and told us the truth about sex one day
insisting we sit down and listen
while she gave us the clinical truth
about pregnancy and diseases
and the proper use of condoms
she offered us a joint after her lecture
told us not to be afraid and to be cool
she just wanted us to know the truth
before it was too late

I was 13

My older sister was pregnant
and I wasn't supposed to know

III

She used to curl into a ball
at the foot of my bed in the midnight hour
afraid of the wild cats crying
outside your window and the hollow
loneliness in her teenage room
wanted me to make her feel better
and when she asked why I couldn't
I could only say

I am 10.

IV

Our mother, elbows on counter,
head in hand, sitting in the chair
in the kitchen
phone held up to her ear
I can hear your voice
from the other side of the room
for hours

V

today she tells me lies
and still expects me to make it right
to believe when no one else will
as we strain to hear each other's voices
on cell phones that struggle for signals

Explosions

every single time
you walked through the door
a little part of me died
splintered
shattering my bones
with a deep shiver

but the truth is
I'm still here
I'm not gone at all
even my bones survived
the explosion of you

wish I could make you see
that it doesn't have to be that loud
your voice
that you can be heard without screaming
that we were listening anyway

until the shell of your scream shattered
us into stunned silence
and that is our response
because we cannot find our voices
choked by the chaos
that surrounds you

I've stopped waiting for it to change
now you must find me
wherever I am
on the walking path
or in the kitchen
or in front of my laptop grading

you will have to find me there
and walk with me
help me with the dishes
or wait until I am finished working
a moment where you
are not the center
of our world

After the Quarrel

The zinc-filled sky broke into a slow
rung of thunder, shaking the quarrel from our limbs

as our heavy words sunk low within us,
like that long rumbling, sneaking through spring,

making even the earth itself flinch.
I left my diary alone that day,

tossing my thoughts into the thunder
that threatened our good time

when our angry words
slipped into the soft space between us.

On another day, I know, one with clear skies and warmth,
however fleeting, we will make our way

through the neighborhood, finding the bamboo
someone laid on the roadside. You will pick up

one lone pole and you'll try hard to balance it
while riding your bike, and our words,

rung in silent messages between us,
will cleanse our heaviness as we wait for each other.

I'll look back at you, with your hands
off the handlebars, balancing that bamboo stalk

and you'll flinch when you notice me watching,
I, the critic of your mind. Sometimes, I yearn to disappear

so I can watch you longer
unnoticed, unflinching

and perhaps, one day,
we will understand.

Give Me Silence

for I need a bit of peace from you
in these quiet luscious mornings
when I drink my coffee

I find myself slightly repulsive
knowing I don't visit you
anymore

you lent me your shame
when I was too young to understand
it clings to me still

I can't seem to scrub
it off my clothes
and even my skin

I'd rather see the juicy
green leaves in spring
rather forget all this ugliness

I know I might not see you again
so send me a piece of our past please
the part we should choose to remember

give it to me still
and your anger
leave it go

My Daughter Asleep in a Strong Spring Storm

She wakes to noise of the sun cracking its eyes, she says
commands me to send the cold, grey wind away,
begs me to explain where the hidden flowers stay.
My answers disappoint so she drifts back to dreaming.

Leaning over, I kiss her soft furrowed forehead
and stroke her hair while French songs sung
by a Minnesota blues band waft down the hallway, sung
with a little bit of moonlight
 amid the scent of stale books and coffee.

It's all I have to give.

PART THREE

someday your core
rung out from too much commotion
will flinch at the thunder
your story makes

the approaching storm

a lone goose
standing on a patch of ice
in the middle of the Basin
contented
soft waves lapping
at its feet
tempting the ice to melt
the wind gaining a chill

an afternoon in February
a shadow still

When You Visit Me

After the Trauma

I slink deep into silence
not wanting you to see my rising panic
your dark deliberations
trampling on what's left of me
and your conversation pours
straight
through my skull
down my spine
until nervous words find a home
in my weak interstices
landing on the soft spot
of the bruise beneath
my scars

I try to remember not
to cover my ears
to silence you

your fear dances with my organs
shutters my heart
plugs up my lungs
coats my insides
with trembles

A Day in the Life of the Patient in 632B

Today is the day the tired nurses talk quietly over me,
standing on either side of my bed. I see only one face, so young, the same
one who gave me "something." My scattered brain can't follow
their words and they don't notice that I'm awake, as they each grab

one side of the mat I'm lying on. I feel myself lifted and scooted up the bed,
turned, and gently set down, slightly on one side. I can tell by their rhythm
they've done this many times, their duty a habit now. With the same precise
movements, they cover me up again, tuck a rough blanket around me before

they hurry away and I drift off to a clumsy sleep. Later,
I open my eyes to see my friend sitting next to the bed. I try to speak,
to thank her coming but no words eek out of my mouth. The drowsy drug
takes over and when I wake again, she is gone. Eyes barely open

I make out the shadow of my father sitting in a bedside chair, reading
a book with pages so thick that I know, even in the fog of drugs,
it is of our history, broken, and I slip off again and this time I see
a flower smashed into the ground, forgotten—
I halt to pick it up before I lift up and fly away, again.

Nighttime in the ICU

They turn the lights low, change the sheets,
wash me as best they can, avoiding the tubes and drains.
One of the nurses heats the wipes, a small kindness.

She cleans my back, my arms, my legs. Warmth seeps
into my skin, blanketing stiff muscles—
the one thing any of them does to me that feels good.

After, the nurse covers me with a heated blanket,
and I try to settle, not ready for sleep,
watch the TV screen and wait for my husband to return

as he does each night. He kisses my forehead and hugs me,
twisting around wires and tubes, before he settles
into the flimsy chair beside my bed, reading a book

by the dim hallway light and I doze, wanting to speak,
knowing he doesn't expect me to when the morphine kicks
in and I fly to an uneasy dream with Julia Roberts as a guardian

angel or witch—I can't remember—in a darkened sky over a stream
that ocean liners mistake for a waterway so they get stuck.
I hate closing my eyes.

My hand tightens around the holding cross someone slipped under
the covers and I hear my husband's hushed voice talking with the night nurse,
the one who later tells me I'm lucky because her ex is a not a good man

like my husband. Later, he leans in to whisper that he'll stay as long as I need,
and I submerge again into that dark sleep, clinging
to the someday when everything just might turn out all right.

As I lie on the table

my breast covered in blue goo,
I wait.

I'm struck by how quickly
I acclimate to being a patient again.
To being uncomfortable.
To poking and prodding.

The technician won't let me shift positions,
just in case they need more images.
As she leaves the room, she tells me
it's not necessarily a bad thing
if the doctor comes in
to deliver the results.

This is when I begin to get nervous.

I know enough to know
that they've seen something,
although I tell myself it's just routine.
After the technician leaves,
ending our idle chitchat
I let my mind wander, for a moment,
to what the next few months will be like
if there's something wrong.

My back aches as I hold my body
in the twisted position she put me in,
even though she's given me a pillow
and a warm blanket.

Air escapes my body in relief when she--
not the doctor--walks back in the room.

Everything is fine.
It was just a lymph node.
A lymph node.

I struggle to wipe the goo off of my breast
after she leaves me alone
the medical lingo fading with each swipe.
The stickiness won't go away,

makes my bra cling to my skin
uncomfortably
when I dress.
Later, a shower washes it clean.
For now.

After

Through the old stone entryway
the smell of recognition
I walk into the church
where we married
familiarity dancing around me

the pictures of life I missed
pinned on the bulletin board
rustle in the whoosh
of air conditioning

*Is this what it feels like to be a ghost?
To walk the halls of your own life?*

I barely feel myself walking
the soft damp on my cheeks
a fixture (I cry all the time now)

*but ghosts don't cry
do they?*

in this small piece of earth—
recently distant to me—it's as if nothing
has happened to me at all
I see the life that went on without me
as it one day will again

and I glimpse other lives
almost hear those who left too soon
as they walk down these halls
marveling at the beauty of a church
and its people and flowers
and the mourning within it
watch it without quite being part of it.

The ghost in me subsides
because my tears are real tears,
rolling down my warm flesh
prickling my skin
refusing to forget

Come, walk with me

in Forest Park with
the sun beginning its long
descent and the baby fed
feel the warm breeze on your face.

Watch the people in paddle
boats in the Grand Basin
and, for once, let's not think of all
there is to fix; to stand
in the sun is enough.

I want to walk, but even so,
watching the dots of people
milling around the pathway
drains my battered body.

So, let's walk a little, then;
tell me only that we can stop if I must
and push the stroller while the trees
and the flutter of the wind
buoy us as tiny drops of fountain water
land on our skin.

Down the long path
we will make our way;
I will stop at a ledge
overlooking the Basin
and every molecule seeping
into my body
will give me strength.

I might have missed this, I will say,
and, when you put your arm around
my frail and battered bones,
I will know, again, that while
I might not have been
I am.

hope mixes in the brittle

purple clover flowers peeking
through rigid branches fallen in the yard
I am reminded
it was a year ago this week
I cleared out my office

time wears a little differently now
we in our house are used to being
home all the time now
each retreating to our rooms
staring at screens they say
will hurt us somehow

what has this year brought--
 death escaped and late nights
 dimmed lights and old habits forgotten
 new ones lodged in their place and
 will that couch ever be the same?

but this is meant to be an ode to this year
which brings with it the grace
of long-awaited freedom
where my feet itch to move
so I dance in the extra

bedroom that is my covid office
slipping on dropped papers
forgotten bills and last year's
grades and tripping over the dog's new bed
the one meant to calm him

I hear a knock at the door
another delivery bringing more books
and cleaning supplies to stumble over
for now I leave it on the porch
in the leaves dead from last fall

and I think about taking us
to the beach in South Carolina
where there's a Ferris Wheel
we will forget about Zoom
perpetually unmade beds

and the year we lost
to keep our lives

Dollywood

We set off to the mountains
a landscape drenched in summer
sweet air and sunscreen
destination Dollywood
a long drive for a rollercoaster ride
and maybe a glimpse of the woman herself
*

we drove through Nashville our teary-eyed
daughter homesick already
stopped at Jerry's Art-O-Rama to cheer her up
spent \$200 on paintbrushes and canvases
after 20 minutes of pulling art supplies
out of the cart as soon as she put them in
*

Dollywood had cold unheated pools
colorful umbrellas and a sit-down
restaurant serving homemade Southern food
and rollercoasters
hours later our daughter bought
a stuffed eagle
before declaring the day over
*

on the way back to Missouri
the earth heated up with the runaway sun
and I thought about how
we're stuck between raging climates
restless warmongers
deathbed fevers and wheezing
*

my hands now
rung out from too many chores
flinch as I try to write in my diary,
seem to quarrel with my mind
*

when my skirt sways in a silent breeze
I vow to stalk my words
until I find the right ones
for you

I would have played Johnny Cash for you

singing "Jackson" with June Carter
at San Quentin in 1969, just like I did for my class
one day before we all went home. I've discovered
though many didn't know Janis Joplin,
Jim Morrison, or even Jimi Hendrix,
they knew about Johnny Cash and the prison
concerts. When YouTube went on to play
"Ring of Fire," a young man from the next class
slipped into the room and announced,
"Wow! That song
has been in my head all day.
It must be a Johnny Cash day!"

Feels like a time capsule to think of it now
from the "before" time when we met
the students in person and were ushered out of rooms
by the next impatient class and I played music
for them all, just because. and we shared pop culture
from our respective generations
while the next class eavesdropped
and Johnny Cash appeared in the thoughts
of strangers.

PART FOUR

a prism
obscured just enough
to make us listen
for music

the hummingbird

turns away
from the Rose of Sharon
flutters at my office window
her wings buzzing as they do
I wait
for her to spin away

but she buzzes longer
as I stay there
separated by a dirty windowpane
eye to eye with her
in my stillness
I watched her flurry

in time
the inevitable happens
she flits away
pulled by the fragrance of the Sharon
I have no witness
no snapshot as proof
only a memory

my dog sighs
bored with my subtle
antics of delight
lifts one eye open
as I move away from the window
like the hummingbird
tingling with life
into the new day
aware

I Have News to Tell You

Along a walking trail by my daughter's school
you can hear the children playing. The trees beckon,
as if calling a lover from long ago. There, today,

I glimpsed a deer—a young fawn—quietly walking
through the woods. At first a little nervous—I don't like meeting
stranger on my walks—I saw its behind, casually inching away,

shielded by the leaves and branches of the trees. She stopped
when she heard me, and turned. I tried not to breathe.
It was then that I saw her face, young and inquisitive. We

stared at each other a moment, which passed, as moments
do. I could still hear her steps, even as the noise
of the children grew slowly louder as I turned toward the school.

Just minutes before, in the quietest part of the trail, a blackbird flew
by and I saw the bright red spot on both its wings. It landed on a branch
in the middle of an embankment. The red contrasting with the midnight

black of its feathers. Then gone, away to another perch
on another branch, looking
for another admirer.

After my walk, in the parking lot, the pavement's heat boiled
in sunlight, and the sun shone on the cars, reflecting its sheen
in the summer shimmer.

When Trees Reach Tall Into the Sky

As I move closer, I can see the leaves
stretched long, a triad of branches holding a platter
the way a waiter does but without the clatter
where, if you look, this hand holds all belief
between the sky and earth, and it receives
a hint of longing among the forest chatter
with butterflies' swishing orangish yellow flapping;
and, my purpose forgotten, I wish only to perceive

the boldness of the claim, desire arising
from the ground itself, the moment right
before I halt a spell to watch the dance
of birds and monarchs in wild dependent chance
and know we struggle strong in our intrusions
and, muddled by complacency, the stillness.

In the Pause

a sunset walk will
stop our conversation

and with dismissive eyes
you'll look away

I'll dance a prayer
and on another day

I'll try again
when I can't share of what

I mean
concerning you
I'll only see

a quiet porch
a pause made clear
then strains

to hear my mother's voice
through dirty piles

of plates and knives
as late day sun
through panes

shines strong and casts
a tainted purple light

on all our struggles
crumbling into night

shadows

remnants fall deep into winter snow
leaving scant evidence of existence
for shadows do not fall at night
and we are made to wonder
just who it was that came close
to the house during our fitful sleep
sighing in steep darkness

the shadowy prints left
in what should be pristine
snow that would allow us to forget
about the world beyond
our windows

the print is deep enough to be a man
hiding around the pin oak tree
that teases us by dropping heavy limbs
on our roof and our patio
big enough to cause harm if one
were so unlucky to be standing under it

we stand in the snow now
looking up at feeble limbs
our feet crunching sparkling snow
with a load of acorns buried underneath
in our patch of land
the wild tolerates our presence

we are not the same
as when we started
our shadows real now
not to be shaken
carried within
hoping to awaken

When Looking Out the Back Window

at night I can't see the owl I hear
but a faint outline
of the sandbox on the porch
a playground for unwanted crickets
who nestle to the bottom
waiting to surprise me one summer day

I thought the neighborhood owl had left us
run out by wild turkeys and boredom
but tonight in this rare quiet moment
I hear him in the distance
the bellow of his hoot rising
above the trees
reminding

and now the house is almost quiet
as the calls of the crickets
seep in through open windows
and that owl says hello or something
beyond the words within my reach

and I am sure he speaks to me directly
in rising moonlight still
and I would call to him if I could
in some primal way to say

I am here
too

Longing

in the soft slow space
between the shells of obligation,
for a moment of escape
to the tiny park down the street
where there's a sand pit
my feet want to sink into.

On my way, I met god
in a whisper, caught
in a fresh breeze of silence
rustling through weeds
on a scraggly path not meant
for catching anything.

Flapping birds' wings
stole my attention
and the whisper was gone.
I long for a day when I
can disappear again into
the silence of whispered wind.

PART FIVE

our hands clasped awkwardly
the harsh beeps of the monitors
breaking

Cathedral of Trees

I sneak away for red geraniums to place before her tomb
resting under the sighing cathedral of trees

You can visit if you want
she once said of the gravesite
chosen for Dogwoods lining the path

but I won't be there

Still
each year I wait for those Dogwoods to bloom
for her birthday

To My Mother, Gone

I didn't know I loved
the early morning when darkness lingers,
with murmuring voices and coffee smells,
or the leaves skimming virgin snow, landing,
for a moment, on a child's sandbox.

I didn't know I loved the slow walk
through the neighborhood with a newborn,
the smell of dirt and budding geraniums
softening the deep crevices in hardened memories.

And I didn't know I loved the lullaby
that you sang to me, the words
mangled by time, but that melody, rising
at your death, makes me wait for you.

Or maybe I knew these things all along
and I waited until this steely absence
emerged to remind me, the indentation of you
permanently nestling a groove in my life.

Death Watch

we wonder how we will make it
as we fall into the path
muddied by canine footprints
newly fallen leaves
a yellow topping on the black pavement

the morning mist crowds my thoughts
leaves softly falling
on the cold concrete
maybe that is what our own
falling will be like
as we slip away from this world

hard to know when the slipping
gains its momentum
when the mist hits
the tree like rain
but disappears before
it reaches the ground

this won't last
this latest passing
but the uncertainty
causes my organs to vibrate
slightly inside my body
a steady and consistent movement

and the crosshairs furl into the sway of the day
the bending threatening to break us

this is not how I imagined it would go

first one must free oneself
from the lies of naysayers
especially those that come from inside
your own brain
with those tired lines that settle
in the mind's crevices
hiding

*

a baby's smooth skin
unwrinkled by stress and sun
curiosity reaching out with each brief
brush of the tip of the finger
and each day learns one more way the body can move
one more pathway discovered anew

maybe they are the best of us
before we're tainted
before we've given up
before we face the devastating faults
of those charged with caring for us
imbued with a love that is at once tragic
and hopeful
sustained with feeling and action

*

at the end was the moment
when without notice
she slipped away
as if she needed us
to be looking away
for her to take that last breath

she tried to tell us earlier
said she was going home
she shook her head at our protests
and gave herself a new name

the shock of it was the worst of all
although we should have known
but that's not how
it happens at the end

Yesterday I went to see a movie alone

A movie no one else wanted to see
with Isabelle Huppert as Frankie
and gorgeous actors walking around
a Portuguese resort town

The ending scene alone is worth
the ticket price to me
where Frankie asks friends
and family to meet her atop
a steep rocky hill

She arrives first with a struggle
her husband following more fatigued
and the rest finally make their way
up the rocky path not speaking
with Frankie watching

When the last arrives at the top
Frankie turns towards the ocean
as the sun begins to set
and watches silently until the sun
slips behind the horizon

The shot goes wide taking in all of them
spread out on that hill
some wanting to be close to Frankie
others wanting a distance

One by one they join her
as she turns toward the path
slowly making her way down
the mountain as sunset turns to dusk
some follow immediately
some waiting until almost
too late

The camera fixes on the wide shot
until they all make their way
down the rocky hill
a pause as unbearable

as it is beautiful
for Frankie is passing away
and they all know it

Watching this scene
I feel a piece of my father slipping away
for he has lost a part of himself already
he will lose more before he dies
he may even lose himself entirely
and me as well
as if something is pulling his soul
out of his body
before his body finally dies

*I do not want to know
what this means to me*

but I will follow him
reluctantly
into what comes next
this harrowing
that we face
before he leaves for good

And when he turns toward
what is next

I will wait
hang on to the moment
until it is almost too late

The Aftermath of Chaos

death still struggles with the last word
having taken hold on that bright day
stealing needed words to say
their stories yearning to be heard

they survived so we forgot
but they still hear the bombs
and bodies falling into tombs
just outside the photographer's shot

Is love as strong as death, as poets say?
it's true their sorrows seemed to bloom a chance
but when I left that place I tried to learn to dance
just to find another way

PART SIX

birds caw
into the winter
silence

Utterance

pared down
cradling light
less narration
than a hard-won gem

then shared
provoking
some hidden feeling
evoking truth often
too close to see
somehow a light stumbled
upon amidst shadows

a prism
obscured just enough
to make us listen
for music

A Tourist at Pentecost in Paris

I

The tourist scans the horizon for the Eiffel Tower
from the crowded hill leading
to Sacre Coeur as preparations mount

The tourist thinks the church activity normal
hailing from an American city
with a church on every corner

Till the procession gathers
the churchgoing tourist
asks another onlooker what is going on

Pentacote

he says through an accent
she can't place

Embarrassed at her forgetfulness
she wonders at the procession, tangled and new,
the snake of it winding through the crowd

II

The cathedral attendant is serious about silence
shushing us as we step into the stony air
where a choir is singing
and words spoken collectively
in a language other than French
sift through air against the chorus
of our shuffling feet

I light a candle
for whom I don't remember
and sit in a pew to take in the smell
only candles and stone can bear

We Will Be Fine

we are holding back tears
calm seemingly
even in the chaos
like a waterfall held
between two mountains
peaks black like slate
carved cliffs with spats
of snow sliding down
to kiss the water
at the bottom in the valley

*

what do you see
with the orange sun blazing
through the trees
the fire left for us to tend
can you bear it
and not look away

*

the chilled wind blows
hope disguised
in our tepid first steps out
the gravel path is different now
unaccustomed to our presence

*

what answer can I give you
sweet child
for all that is wrong
I have no answers
only trust

*

that we will be fine
when the air is warmer
and the spray from the water
a welcome relief
from the heat

The Unexpected Quiet

I want to see your silhouette
in the sliver of moonlight,
through the window
revealing the secrets
you hide even from yourself

We make it up
this need to push through life
as if it somehow makes us better
while we dismiss that niggling feeling,
that begs us stop for a moment
in the warmth of an early autumn day.
Look at the caterpillar scooting
at your feet and the butterfly
announcing another day
in this precious place.

Will you notice
the drop of an acorn
from an old tree
swaying as if to get your attention?

This whisper, humming
against the windy noise
of chaos streaming through our days;
this unexpected quiet
shows us where to go
to find the life
we crave.