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The University of Southern Mississippi

THIS ANIMAL

by

Elena Therese Tomorowitz

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2014

ABSTRACT

THIS ANIMAL

by Elena Therese Tomorrowitz

May 2014

This Animal is a poetic narrative about humans' animalistic instincts and how we use them to navigate our relationships with others and the world around us.

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2014

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer would like to thank the dissertation director, Dr. Angela Ball, and the other committee members, Dr. Rebecca Morgan Frank, Dr. Monika Gehlawat, and Dr. Luis Iglesias, for their knowledge and support through this process. A special thank you to the Atlantic Center for the Arts and the Juniper Summer Writing Institute that allowed the time, space, and intellectual engagement for the writing of many of these poems.

Also, thank you to the following magazines that published a number of these poems: *Guernica: A Magazine of Art and Politics*, *Fugue*, *Matter Monthly*, *The Bakery*, *The Moth*, and *Oracle Fine Arts Review*.

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INTRODUCTION

What are words worth? Poetry's weight in pounds is only as much as that of ink on paper. Poetry's physical mass is, of course, irrelevant but if poetry matters, how can we know? This question beckons me to write poetry just as much as it pulls me away. For me, writing is simultaneously a test of purpose and a search for a certain kind of truth—certitude not discernible through facts. Different from the worker who uses his hands to build something physical, whose work you can see and touch, poetry is vaporous and malleable; it can go completely unnoticed or seem meaningless even after hard labor has been put into it. Perhaps the most significant difference between poetry and physical labor is that poetry cannot be detached from the self in the same way that a physical object can. The poet's ability to create something complex and untouchable yet fully realized is matched with vulnerability because the poem's function cannot be objectified. This is what I find so difficult: what is my poem going to *do* once it has been printed, published, or read?

Marianne Moore, speaking of Hilda Doolittle's poetry, says, "There is a connection between weapons and beauty" (Longenbach 105). A writer seeks to make something powerful, to give words strength, by realizing that they have the ability to cut deeply into flesh. Poetry delivers the painful through the beauty of language. Death as a painful theme is central to my poetry, just as for numerous poets. Even a poem seemingly working against the topic of death does indeed touch on it at some level. This was exactly the case in the first poem of the collection, "The Day of Material Creation," where writing about roosters I heard crowing in the morning led me to think about skewing the Biblical reference:

The rooster crows four times
just to tell me that it's there,
that it is approximately 4 a.m. or later (1).

After writing the first stanza, I started to think about the darkness of an early morning and the hole one tries to avoid in the middle of a bed. These images inevitably led to the death-like line of “sinking into an abyss” (1).

The poet writes out of loneliness—out of the need to create something from emptiness. We can know Emily Dickinson's solitude and fears because of her obsession with death in her writing. In “There's a certain Slant of light, (320)” she writes,

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death – (Dickinson 258).

By exaggerating the effects of loneliness—the emptiness of the landscape, the shadows and their “breath,” Dickinson captures a truth about death through the vastness of the mind when confined to a small, solitary place. The equation thus becomes, death equals loneliness and loneliness equals death. According to Søren Kierkegaard the poet is, “an unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart,” and when people flock around him they say, “May new sufferings torment your soul but your lips be fashioned as before, for the cry would only frighten us, but the music, this is blissful” (Kierkegaard 43). A writer achieves the most satisfaction from writing during times of grief and the reader may find that a poem speaks a language of sorrow that she was otherwise unable to communicate. Writers continue to contemplate death in their writing because they constantly seek the right questions about it just as much as they are searching for answers. A writing mentor once told me to write the best poem you can every time you

write a poem. Writing the “best poem” is just as impossible a quest as answering questions about death, and this space of uncertainty is where my work exists. This collection of poems is intentionally fragmented or disconnected. There is no correct way to create or answer the questions, so I end up fumbling through writing in order to figure it out. Each of these poems seeks to create questions about death. All of the poems reflect on elements of survival, solitude, and the tender line between living and dying.

Where most of the poems do not explicitly mention “death,” words that contain a double meaning are used to imply this notion. This collection contemplates the intersection of instinctual and psychological survival. Don DeLillo’s novel, *White Noise*, asks the question, “What if we had no fear of death?” (DeLillo) This question led me to think about the difference between not having a fear of death and not being aware that the fear exists. The need and desire to survive is driven by the fear that we do not know what happens after life. “Paranoia” comments on the notion that fear of death is essentially an absurdity:

Jerry died of bruised fruit in New Jersey,
his brother had mistaken a harvestman [spider]
for an arachnid and left for Minnesota.
And all along he had fish eggs
buried in his ears, cantaloupe rinds
stuck in his larynx—the doctor
diagnosed it as meningitis (12).

This poem illustrates the difference between “fear of death” and “fear of dying” in the sense that the first is mental and the second is physical—actually imagining the somatic decline. It hypothesizes our fears and considers their irrationality. The opposite of “Paranoia” is “Instinct,” where the human is compared to the animal:

Like a thousand horses running in circles
and the sound of rivers and bees

I am tucked into pockets like a burial of juniper berries—
there are no candlesticks, no lights, no cardinal wings (4)

Humans typically do not act out of instinct, but instead focus their decisions on what is practical or rational. In writing this poem, I initially thought about how “criminal” and “animal” contain similar sounds. The parallels began there and led to a poem about how criminals often act out of instinct or survival rather than rational thought. A woodpecker creates air pockets around its brain when it is pecking into hard wood for food; this happens not because of thought, but because its body instinctually reacts to the situation. Humans function by being dependant on exterior forces and aid from various devices. Different from commenting on the “afterlife,” the speaker in this collection is entirely aware of the body as physical matter and not solely as a spiritual being.

My poetic influences are deeply embedded in academia, where rules of writing overpower the artistic act of writing. I learned poetry that same way an artist learns painting by learning structure before adding form. The first book I was taught as a poet that truly had an impact on my writing, and urged me to think about poetry as a significant piece of culture rather than a form of expression, was Richard Hugo’s *Triggering Town*. A seminal text for many poets, this book describes process in a way that made sense artistically and logistically. Hugo’s advice for a poet to write off the subject rather than towards it gave me freedom to diverge from the linear writing path that had always made prose writing difficult for me (Hugo 2). Hugo also writes about the subject of sound and rhythm—elements that a young writer can easily get carried away with because of the temptation to use words only for their music. He says that a writer can choose two ways of writing: “One is that all music must conform to truth. The other,

that all truth must conform to music. If you believe the first, you are making your job very difficult” (Hugo 2). Music should not be forced, but music and truth should be tantamount to one another. This speaks directly to my process because my poetry is driven by the music of language, seen in my previous example of “criminal” and “animal.”

Where Hugo provided a guide for the “rules” of poetry, Hart Crane gave me the art. The unconscious act of writing is just as important as the learned one. The art of a poem comes from the unconscious and the math comes from the conscious. Marianne Moore famously stated that a poet must create “imaginary gardens with real toads in them”; in other words, imagination must be grounded in the concrete (Moore 18). Hart Crane uses the term “logic of metaphor” as a way to describe how to fit the imagination into a framework (Crane 234). In a letter to Harriet Monroe he writes that he is more interested in the “so-called illogical impingements of the connotation of words on the consciousness” than he is in the “preservation of their logically rigid significations” (Crane 234). I am interested in the nuances of language and their ability to evoke meaning for a reader rather than dictate meaning. Crane is not simply filling pages with illogical sentences; he is using his poetic license to further their meanings as well as to form them into a well-functioning machine. Later in his letter he writes that a metaphor’s paradox “is that its apparent illogic operates so logically in conjunction with its context in the poem as to establish its claim to another logic, quite independent of the original definition of the word or phrase or image thus employed... The reader’s sensibility simply responds by identifying the inflection of experience with some event in his own history or perception—or rejects it altogether” (Crane 235). This is the moment where

sensibility on the reader's part and the precision of language on the writer's part function symbiotically. If I write about a summer green suburban lawn, for example, the reader does not need to know the exact lawn I am imagining, but he does need to know what I am implying. Hart Crane is a master at this, and I admire how his language can be evocative without actually telling. Often criticized for being too sentimental, his poetry never becomes metaphorical or dream-like without undercutting with direct image. This was the case in his poem, "Chaplinesque" when he succeeds (or fails, to some) in using a "famished kitten" as a symbol to evoke sympathy:

For we can still love the world, who find
A famished kitten on the step, and know
Recesses for it from the fury of the street,
Or warm torn elbow coverts (Crane 33).

He then concludes this poem with the last line: "Have heard a kitten in the wilderness." Perhaps in titling it "Chaplinesque" he was aware of his poem's humor just as much as he was aware of its connotations.

My favorite poem of his, "My Grandmother's Love Letters," uses the "single white hair" as a way to talk about his grandmother (Crane 12). The image is so jarring and specific that he is able to write about topics such as his family and love life while still creating distance from them. He spares his readers the romance by never straying too far from death and darkness. His poems create an often water-filled and quixotic place where we can allow our minds to wander while still breathing in the world as Crane knew it. He creates a space that we can both reject and be attracted to at the same time.

Taking heed from Crane, my poem "Acquiescence" functions within this realm, but also attempts to create a cohesive poetic narrative featuring a strange and empty

world. It was written out of a particular moment when nothing special was happening, but the silence seemed particularly heavy and my senses were heightened. I was walking through a burned-out field that overlooks Lake Erie and I had just read Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. There was something about the music in his poem that led me to summon words for the sake of their sounds. Soon, I began thinking about the ghosts of houses that once existed in this field:

I am looking towards the lake
at darkness, I am building my house

there

in a great space of uncertainty.
The wind has built me walls but no windows.

Someone whispers

close your eyes, do you see fires? (10)

All I had was space so I began to invent things to fill the space, to make this empty moment something worth dotting upon later or musing in a poem. Poetry can be thought of three-dimensionally, so rather than writing in a straight line towards a goal, the poet writes around a subject. As with sculpture, the artist must look at the subject from many angles in order to fully understand it. The truth or meaning of a poem is always written underneath the first layer. Words become more than just symbols that provide information. A certain word can evoke the memory of a precise moment for the reader or it can mean something different when paired with another word. In "Acquiescence," the word "there" functions as the word but also provides a physical space for the reader to walk into. The empty space of the poem is further illustrated by giving it its own line and stanza.

The poem “Pioneer” depends on the same tools as “Acquiescence” where the power of the subconscious leads the poem, but here a narrative thread directs it into a completely different product. This poem began with an image of a pioneer girl in a tree:

I am trained to perch in the crooks of trees.
I like how my petticoat flutters up there.
I tug the bodice of my corset with one hand
and set the rifle into my clavicle
with the other and then I wait (2).

I then imagined her in a suburban setting. This poem stemmed from the language I was surrounded with while reading James Fenimore Cooper. The concept of a pioneer fiction led me to think about it in the sense of “pioneer” referring to early American history and to the novel as a new and uncharted form. I then transferred this idea to modern pioneers, who are inadvertently reverting back to early methods rather than attempting to adapt modern methods. This poem specifically refers to hunting, because the concept of organic meat and consumers’ new curiosity about how our food is produced ultimately asks us whether we should be killing the animals ourselves. Because this concept can seem trite, I decided to undercut it with the notion of fashion and vanity. The speaker in the poem is bold enough to carry her rifle up a tree, but she is still self-conscious and feminine. The reader is also aware of a “picket fence” which also implies the presence of civilization (2). This poem ultimately plays with the duality of our self-awareness matched with an unawareness of the environment surrounding us. Rather than wander off with the initial image of a girl in a tree with a rifle, I worked the poem until it could be read through multiple lenses.

The final line suggests that this poem is not just about a pioneer: “Only two geese

at midnight, only one within my range” (2). Even as the writer, I am unclear as to the meaning of the geese, but I know it is more than one simple metaphor. When language does not always communicate what it wants to communicate or mean what it should mean, poetry can become a difficult task. Assembling fragments of language onto a page to create something new is where I both struggle and succeed in my writing. There are moments when I despise poetry, because of what it does or does not do. A poem works to create meaning, while simultaneously challenging our understanding of language. The writer attempts to detach himself from the work and create something that has its own body so it can exist separately. If there is no answer to the question of poetry’s purpose, then maybe I am looking at it incorrectly. If it is not self expression or a political act for me then maybe it is something else. Gertrude Stein says, “It is a pleasure to know that there is so much English literature and that [at] any moment in one’s life it is all inside you” (Stein 8). Maybe poetry is simply what fills the body; maybe it weighs more than I thought.

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THE DAY OF MATERIAL CREATION

The rooster crows four times
just to tell me that it's there,
that it is approximately 4 a.m. or later,

that the sun will rise
but has yet to shuffle across
the flatness of my yard.

Instead an outline of Christ's face
hangs in the static black sky,
shaped like the dip in my mattress.

I continue to sleep S-shaped
along the outer edge
as to avoid that airy abyss.

PIONEER

I am trained to perch in the crooks of trees.
I like how my petticoat flutters up there.
I tug the bodice of my corset with one hand
and set the rifle into my clavicle
with the other and then I wait.

The pines above shed needles and feathers,
and below, the rattlesnake is beautiful enough
to skin, if only I could catch him between my thumb
and forefinger gentle enough between my thumb
and forefinger. I could save him for later,
sew his scales to my booties.
“Grow tired with me,” I call to him.
“Grow tired with me.”

I tip the barrel over the picket fence. Aim
for venison, the white flash of fur. In the thickness
of night, I steady myself on the limb,
fix the ruffles of my dress.
Only two geese at midnight, only one within my range.

THIS ANIMAL

My mind was as vacant as the moon
and in the presence of its bulbous shape,
I prayed to the grapefruit to save me.

Believe me when I say
that I ate only round things for a week,
ate only while wearing mittens.

The eggs and pomegranates rolled out of my hands
like small animals, palms flat displaying their delicateness,
afraid to break them and lose them at the same time.

This is what's left: all the fibers and juice on the floor.
I drank cold whiskey instead, my hands like paws
hugging the highball and watching condensation drip.

I called it Tom Collins, my mother told me on the phone
that you can't call any drink a Tom Collins
and that my drink was probably called whiskey on the rocks.

I called it Moses. I was eager for him.
I pushed the rim of the glass to my ear
and listened to the cracks of ice.

Moses was cold, and I thought I heard him
tell me to drink faster and with purpose.
It was like he asked me to give everything I had.

I walked out of the kitchen, pulled back the solid wood
door and moved into the sheets of rain.
In the stillness of night I saw this:

a scattering of bats,
families and families of them,
wings so soft you could barely hear them there.

INSTINCT

Like a thousand horses running in circles
and the sound of rivers and bees
I am tucked into pockets like a burial of juniper berries—
there are no candlesticks, no lights, no cardinal wings

If you are the animal and I am
the criminal, how would you sleep at night?
I carry diamonds on my backs
you swallow living things whole in desperation,

yet we are never released.

In darkness you tame manes, I catch flies for food,
you carry them into the wilderness.

Let's say we are both undesirable.
I'd follow you into thorns of bushes,
but stop with the gasp of your breath.

FLORA & FAWNED

As if I couldn't see the rabbit.
Whistling behind me, its inners
hung behind his back, his hand
clutching its paws like one slings
an extra sweater.

Neither of us liked using knives,
but his skills were much better.
I strung the machetes around my neck
like an Hermes scarf.

Should I blame the steel-
toed boots or pointy stilettos?
Which one makes me
a liar?

On a good day,
my eyes were a black raccoon's
with a more delicate ability
to slip through darkness.

On an average day,
I can carry myself
through swamps.

LAKE ERIE

It's hard to believe you're green again.
It seems your big body grows and grows

each year. And deeper still—
burying all the monsters and barnacle shells.

If nothing else, in the stillness of summer,
your glass surface reflects the sharpness of the moon

and your murky rockpool sweeps me up
and under and up again;

your lilt an effort to overcome.

THE LAND OF MISSISSIPPI

In this place you can ride the Ferris wheel.
In this place you can eat waffles.
In this place you can wear sandals all year.
You can pretend you are busy.
You can ask for less dressing.
You can make room for more eggs in the fridge.
You can fry potatoes into shoestring shapes.
You might wonder about the bees,
and the various ways beekeepers
keep all the good honey for themselves.
They'll say it's not true, but the beekeepers
are nonetheless crooks like everyone else.
Oh dear, you say on the phone to your mother.
Oh dear, I can't believe she's dead and dying.
I can't believe she never apologized.
But you continue to play soccer with your friends.
You are pleased with how you say the word soccer
with such ease, like you've said it all your life.
Like you were born to play the game.
And all this, you think, has made you deaf and dumb.
You excuse yourself from the table
during righteous conversations about righteous things.
You ask if everyone wants pudding.
You ask if the risen lord ever advised against gluten.

OUT WEST

The mountains, like arched cats, that I can barely see.
I'd rather be alive than dead,
a crash landing, an overt spy: in exchange for exchange.

When I handed him all my money, he said:
“the grizzlies smell the blood even *inside* your bones”.
For the rest of the day, I covered my elbows
with garlic and spread butter on my knees. We were

all unwilling to budge. This chatter misshapen
and eaten like herbs. I spell flower like tower, put masks
on my hair. I cancel boobie for barn owl,
let the salamanders braid my hair.

I had mistaken Kansas for Nebraska
during hunting season—traded guns for arrows,
polished each one with my lingerie nightgown.

All I have left is whole wheat bread for capital and woolen
socks for trade. Way out here—
the part only seen through binoculars,

bankers marry turquoise-gowned women, their
breath parched of sanctity, their eyes swollen, pinched
and searching, toothpicks marking the trails.

CITY OF WORDS

My mother is a frozen tundra.

My fingertips are filled with lead.

Let me address those moanings at night.

The difference between telescopic organs and a telescope.

The fuel pump isn't pumping.

The strangers are straining hard to hear through the ears of corn.

Friday never came. Oh, Friday!

The texture of peanut butter.

I am the winner of best breakfast, a dancer in fields, a tester of litmus.

A blue breasted bird the size of a teacup.

They have dogs the size of teacups now!

Was it the dog that ran off with the mantle or the moose that befriended a male with cancer?

He tried to lick my wounds, that soft tongue.

I told my secretary I was once a person of the world, a worldly person.

She put my orthodontist on the phone. He was also my shrink.

I'll fix your teeth, he said, and all that stuff in your head.

Gold or plaster? Platinum or forever young?

Feeling sad and feeling numb.

Land surveyor, breaker of wooden bones, maker of sounds, purser of lips.

It was the white female with the shark tooth necklace.

In a distant field somewhere.

In a place approving of the factory of widows.

ACQUIESCENCE

I am studying the language of my ancestors—
 a metronome of beans,
 smoke signals flung into the burning of a thicket,
 like the heavy weight of tablets—
 but I cannot hear the carving of stone,
 or the murmur of distant mouths,
 the tending of some flocks.

Cats howl above
 church bells,
 men kneel in mud without sinking,
 soak elbows in hot oil without scarring.
 It makes the air feel cooler than
 the pressure hovering trees.

I am looking towards the lake
 at darkness, I am building my house

there

in a great space of uncertainty.
 The wind has built me walls but no windows.

Someone whispers

close your eyes, do you see fires?

I see nothing.
 I see swirls of dust then I see nothing.

Use my fingers as bristles,
 because I never learned what they were for.
 My hair bleached by divinity.
 My hands as useful as the Lord's,
 orchestrating men and women
 to produce something similar to creation.

Wouldn't knives be beautiful?
 And wouldn't God be beautiful
 if he were to press a pipe organ into my side,
 manipulate it on Sundays
 for disciples to hear before they start running?
 They shall inherit the sounds.

I have opened a birdcage inside my chest.
The birds look like they are running
and their feathers don't float
they flee
higher than I can catch them.

Underneath these tuft-like clouds
are people dancing.
I can see them laughing, twitching,
pushing bone into bone.

PARANOIA

Jerry died of bruised fruit in New Jersey,
his brother had mistaken a harvestman
for an arachnid and left for Minnesota.
And all along he had fish eggs
buried in his ears, cantaloupe rinds
stuck in his larynx—the doctor
diagnosed it as meningitis.

Katrina lied to her mother in Rhode
Island about drinking milk daily.
She died shoving calcium tablets
down her throat the Wednesday before
Thanksgiving. It wasn't long ago
that milk was delivered from cow to home
in glass bottles, elegant like wine.

Eager to impress his wife's mother,
Randolph stopped traffic in Arizona
in an attempt to fly like in a dream.
If he had a thick epidermis
or a rounder skull, he would have lived
to attend her funeral wearing black,
her face gently wrapped in gauze.

And all this time we've found only
one glowing satellite circling this place.
We tossed out a few more we invented
and asked for a public kind of privacy—
let us stand naked in an open field,
photograph our untouched skin
and use mirrors to deflect the sun.

BORDER PATROL MUSEUM, EL PASO

She bends over, sweeps near our feet, opens the door to shake out all this dust, squints at the brightness of the sun.

The visitors touch and gape, they buy souvenir socks, they teach their children about America, they sit inside a helicopter and pretend to scout for criminals.

I rub my thumb on the brassy button of my jeans.

There are four things going on in here:

1. She is from Mexico, her children were born here, she speaks little English, her husband was one of *them*.
2. She owns a motorcycle.
3. There are cockroaches crawling in and out of cracks in the walls, this is where the heat leaks in.
4. America, like this museum, was built on the ability to have many things inside all these stacked up bricks.
5. Her jaw hurts from smiling.

As we exit, we drop a dollar in the glass box.

FOOTBALL STAR

Dear champion,
your school is on fire
and you are here
passing balls
in the field.

Even after the lights
shut like steel eyelids
on the eve of your mother's wake,
your hands clamp
onto the dry-sweat leather,
finger stroking stitches
between every move.
Your pale legs are transparent
in this sea of khaki-colored grass.

Tomorrow, your father
will pat your sturdy shoulder,
ask if the aspirin
had a strange taste
when taken with orange juice.
He will notice the twinkle
like your mother had, in you.

And you will, I suppose, leave
a bag of rotten eggs
on your brother's friend's friend's
doorstep later and run away giggling.

It's funny to think
how different we are,
yet we all know when eggs,
like produce, are past the day to eat.

MASS MATHEMATICS

Hot or not but she still
got shot,
swallowed the first,
then a second
vitamin the day before.

We remind ourselves
to track red blood cells,
to count our weight by pounds,

to remember that evil is a number,
but evil is a pattern too.

We are strong
like carbine,
sturdy as a box of rocks,
square like a phalanx of soldiers.

When I glanced over my shoulder last night
I saw a fighter.

I mean I saw my jacket,
fashioned to look like my father's military uniform,
hanging in the doorway.

If I add up all the arms in my room right now,
there are 4.

THE GREAT DICTATOR

These leaders are all brunette and isn't it strange.
 If you stop and listen you can hear a whistling between the teeth,
 a generic sound of gentle laughter.
 You can play their white hair with a toothpick and make music.

Get yourself together, are you the only two willing to oblige?
 Mark ten, mark with a letter B,
 X if only necessary.

This is where I wonder why women never grow whiskers.
 The kind that are stiff and sprout from the upper lip.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we didn't have persecution?
 I mean, permission. I mean let's rehearse percussion!—a clanging of metals, the music of
 cardinals,
 little hands clapping.

We're surrounded by sterile bodies and food stored in vinegar—
 tomorrow night we jump ship and bathe ourselves in salt water
 until we lose our natural shape, too.

This is no time for knitting comfortable socks, no time for matches.
 Hurry up, though, it's time.

All these train cars will take them away.
 Find your ticket to claim your things.

The air is undeniably cool this evening.
 Cool once meant aloof.

Let us say dirndl.
 Let us slice clouds with knives.
 Let us tap our pockmarked legs with pencils.

Or invent a new way of adding up numbers.
 Numbers once meant numbers, or was it the other way around?
 Something doesn't quite equate.
 Sometimes a river is in doubt which way to flow.

Where there is no sun, no carpenter ants, no, there is little music to be fond of when you
 come or go
 or come to go
 or never return.

CAPTIUA

She took herself to her favorite bridge and

played with the bridge

She is another lonesome.
 Another pornography.
 Another ugly sweater.
 A face-down quarter,
 your unlucky charm.

She makes no sound. She has
 no voice. She is:
 indivisible.
 She is.

Making poison.

She has been stripped
 of her belongings.
 She cannot keep up
 with nutritional ethics. She stops taking her daily vitamin.
 Does she have enough iron?
 Can she live without oils for the skin?

I. She.
 She. Is one word. I.
 One letter, even smaller. We.
 Can be even better.

A quartz set into sterling.
 She mispronounces
 Azerbaijan as: I want to be rich.

The problem is:
 Medjool dates look like cockroaches,
 but that has nothing to do with it at all.

She is wrinkled like their brittle skin.
 She is a frantic mess when smashed.
 She asks for crème fraîche to douse herself.

She says: crowned fish.

How art thou.

Thou art scaled serpent.

mountain, her, field, field, mountains, grass, road and road and road, there is him,
mountain, road, ocean.

USPS

No: Liquids.
 Hazards.
 Perishables.
 Shoes.
 Strings.
 Gummy bears.
 Fragiles.
 Mylar.
 Carbonation.
 There.

There.
 An invalid in there.
 A body.
 Packed in a box.
 The connection was lost.
 Misguided.
 She should
 instead swim,
 converse.
 Shall she
 alleluia?
 You. She.
 Are tied by twine.

Twine. You say this:
 She is mine.
 Cadillac.
 Kid leather.
 Cardiac arrest.
 Car accident.
 Should she sailboat,
 carry the child over her head,
 blame the newspapers,
 or use them for umbrellas.
 Her house sank/has sunk.
 The others.
 What about the others?
 Did.
 Denied it ever collapsing.
 Shall she tour the countryside?
 She.
 Will.
 Rot.

If blueberry skin can sink
then where does the matter go?
All asunder.
Rock. Paper.
Rock.
She jammed scissors
into her thigh.
She, or you.
You. Doused
her limbs with rubies.
Callused.
Marked. She.
Will lather herself,
would soothe
a scar
with chamomile.

Bent.
Embarked. Now.
She: a voyager.
Many moons ago.
Those ruddy-faced celestials.
Hardly approachable.
Covered in masks.
She, your face.
Marlboro. You.
And it.
The box.
Pet palmettos.
Cut breathing holes.
You. She.
Something lifted us up.
A savior,
who can *drive* through you.
Or *you* through him,
and captured
in the tea leaves
cupped in your palm.
She needed help
getting out of here.
She needed
a heavy package
to bear.
It was like
she smoothed

her skin
in grape seed oil,
polished her limbs
with stone,
weighted herself
and said,
dear lord,

I am lost.
I am stifling.
Hot.
A breath.
Yours.
Hers.
It.

FRAGMENTARY

You know why the caged ficus weeps
 Whether the fronds revolve around the pale light
 You look cavernous your skin nearly silk
 It is prepared (like food is prepared)

within a space inside the lungs as having no relation to human life

One night he pulls the trigger hands raised, releases himself
 Buildings are tall birds saw reflections of themselves

And the worm is in man's heart swollen a red delicious

In literature, the conclusion should appear in the introduction
 and does

Heinrich von Kleist planned where he was going
 His novel existing before it was written

He taught himself the word absurd the streets are paved with immaterial truths
 We dream only of heavenly meadows and suns adieu

A shot to the head a field dabbled in white bloodworts

he ought to be pressed in a book.

TRIGONOMETRY

Let's say beauty can be calculated
like the weight of air or the ink in pens.
If the dictator marks his face at night,
an indication that he's grown
into his moustache, then he will
fail at becoming a lumberjack—
will subsequently apply for compensation.

Let's say beauty equals the thump
of your coffee-colored heart. You need
milk and sugar now more than ever.
You need a short skirt, tan arms,
skinny legs, a marginally expensive pet—
your green-tailed sunbird, matched
to your grand grand marquis.

Let's say you hardly made the deadline
to get your braces removed,
you waited all these years to pawn
those frosty whites for oranges.
You need it now, more than ever,
nitrate-free batwings to cover your eyes—
your thick, black, fuel encrusted eyes.

PERSONAL MAINTENANCE

I am in Louisiana talking to my therapist.
He says, "You cannot define yourself by land."

We sit in his office and imagine alternatives of myself—
paddling myself through oil spills or lighting sparklers by myself in a field.

Once in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia,
I danced through a ring of fire.
There was nothing but the endless stretch of dark.

I thought,
if I find myself here again,
it will be because I have nothing else to ask for
but to cover my face in dirt.

SUMMER VACATION

What if the ocean
stung like blood,
and does,
its salty licks,
lick.

If it lit me up,
threw me into the air
like a firework.

There is nothing worse
than distance
when you don't know
how to swim
or your legs are weighted
with stone.

And this is all I can reminisce,
as I sink sink sink.

This, she said, is a peanut butter
sandwich.
A sandwich gets stuck
beneath your tongue.

FILM

When I was five, I leaned over the gate
looking into the rush of Niagara Falls
where my mother said, "Don't fall in."
Just like that, in this funny voice
like she was encouraging me to fall
and that if I did, my mosquito-bitten
bony body would resurface again.
And everyone would laugh
as I was spit back onto land.
Or maybe I could have clunked around
in a wooden barrel all the way to the bottom.
They would have at least found
some shrapnel of wood.

Later that day on the ferry
I stuck my head out of the swirly, watery mist
wearing a big yellow raincoat
and holding a disposable camera in a Ziploc bag.
With my arm outstretched I captured
a part of myself in front of the falls,
a slice of that unbalanced crescent moon smile.
I wasn't afraid of the water then.

I wonder what it's called
when your chest claps the surface
and for a moment, the water holds you up
before dragging you in.

HOUSE SITTER

I am in your house again
while you're away,

your couch bare.
The smell of your leather
hovers in the foyer.

I write words with your Sharpie
on the bindings of your books

and there's refrigerated jam
that I'm welcome to.

I peel calluses from my skin
and the cold cream and coffee
spills out of my mouth as I wash down
a collection of prescription pills.

Cat paws my denim
fingernails retract
mouth opens
releases a hum.

The fan flicks, sounds French, moves the hanging fabrics.

Everything else fits into a specific shape
like it was born there.
Everything else is in Chinese,

and I am trying to make, make myself comfortable.

NEW YEAR

Disappeared: unidentified forms of mold food that can be swallowed
 Newspapers occupied by words easy listening programs on the radio
 Music that follows meter a grounds for holding hands

Honey, pass me that great American novel, next to my cantaloupe.

The Victrola is playing, the yellow russets are cooking to a crisp

Disappeared: my watering lungs the wintered perfume on my abdomen
 Where you touched me I lost all memory for sleep
 Black lace strung across my chest your blistered fingers unreal
 Today: you are unreal.

Disappeared:

Honey, pass me the dish of palmetto bugs. They died while trying to analyze Camus
 but I enjoy their texture between my teeth.

Though my face isn't harmful, it's asymmetrical, unpleasant aftertaste.
 You tasted me once, lifted my shirt over my head
 said:

the tragedy is the everyday hidden behind my knees
 said:

the locusts have disappeared
 but will return in the year of sharp-haired beasts.

RITUAL

Girl eats boy for dinner
but doesn't finish vegetables,
takes a role on a British sitcom
as the local deadpan baker,
and invents a new way of lying
to herself all before midnight.
Girl washes hands with vinegar
to preserve them in jars
kept on her nightstand.
She hugs herself goodnight
and kisses a picture of Brian
Williams before bed because
she enjoys the intimacy of
nightly news, the same way
she enjoys the feeling of bread
crumbs between the sheets
and trails of egg yolk
between her fingers.

She holds a mirror to her nose
to connect the pores
and counts to ten
between breaths.
She counts to ten
between every single
piece of dust that floats
past her lids,
and yet she still
only sees the color grey.
And yet she still
ties her feet together
every morning
with twine.

SIMULATION

I cover his body in knits
and afghans. He plays the part

of the politician, I play the part
of the pollution, hovering over

him, pushing cigarettes
into his mouth. We aren't yet

married, but he wants
to be the one on top.

We play together like birds
with heavy bodies.

He can't seem to get off
the ground without falling.

My bones aren't hollow
enough to make me lift.

I am the never ending ending
and the bones, they never get thinner.

POEM WITH THE OCEAN ON FIRE

She wears nothing but the loose wedding gown,
lets after-rain fog sink through the holes of its lace

like two falcons sewing between magnetic fields,
their hollow bodies lost in the vastness of mist.

He pulled on every organ, pressed his fingers
into her thigh, sharp as a Victrola needle.

They played a meticulous game
of tearing pages from phonebooks, hundreds of them,

heavy as a bungalow, blessed by rain, milky ink—
a muddled marriage of black and black.

She moved with the tick of the metronome,
pinned feathers to the rims of her eyes,

let the salty fur of the mink hide
all the other empty places of flesh.

GREEN

There's a photo of you, a girl
modeling in a room so decadent like swaddled in gauze

My bitter envy, my blond, my long suede limbs
I put candles between my teeth, if you want

leave everything and nothing
else to be forgiven, my skin shows my long years,

yours is steel and razor smooth.
Here is a mound, here is a mask, a seeded tamarind

I am good without sun, without air
I am digging through bins, lifting each little bone

Here is my simulacrum vertebrae, cow shins,
to build a new vessel, a body

divided up into squares,
laid out like confiscated weapons, you will say

presenting presenting presenting

HOUSE WIFE

The dress is black and blue
and I am obsessed with it.

I turn the pages of the catalog
forward a few pages, then back,

over and over. The rayon
dress looks static soft and I touch

the page until the paper is worn white.
I own you, I tell the dress.

I imagine what it would be like
to dance dressed in a bruise,

my eyeliner matched to navy,
my lipstick a bald pink.

Wishing my hair were long enough
to braid, I twist pieces around

my thumb a hundred times
pulling out all the flailing strands

piece by piece. All I want
is a dangerous reincarnation

of the night we covered ourselves
with blackberry juice and slipped

around the house like dying moths escaping
the claw of the cat. Desperate

for light, I weakened first,
arms wide-spread on the kitchen floor

one hand reaching for your face, the other
sunk into a puddle of my own game.

FORTIFICATION

At some point
he tore
into her lace
with teeth.

She wondered if
all animals seek
the delicacy
of flesh.

She drank water
from pools,
covered herself
with burlap.

Like the moon
could shelter
her from cold.
The crickets,

nourishment.
Or else bury
up to the neck
with mud.

POEM FOR THE BALTIC

It is hardly unfair for me to say
pistachio, without offering up a shell,

all these round things, a brown m & m,
they say in Latvian, sounds like a rock

gulped and caught in the relief of the throat,
but they don't have those colors bright there—

my oh my, like a heavenly place gauzed in white
hundreds of swans stranded on floating ice

or the hot hot center of a phenol flame.
If there is one thing difficult for a barnacle

attached to a sinking barge to say,
it is, "I want nothing to do with you"—

a body drowning in bed towards sleep
breathes west, away from the spouse's neck.

THREAD-COUNT IN C

There are hundreds of people in this bed
hiding under duck feathers
and other shavings from birds.

We compare hair to feather.
We touch quill to the apertures of skin.

All of us, hundreds of us.
Teeth and wrists play minuet against sheets.

We are protruding like elbows,
though unable to tear through quilts.

There is no space for me in this bed.
There is no space for me
amid this cacophony of bones.

MARRIAGE

And add to this
 the wifemachine.
 Plays mechanic.
 Does impossible.
 Add flight.
 Add airmachine.
 Add acrobat.
 Add motion detector.
 May day. May day.
 Put this thing in reverse.

Add hairspray.
 Search for breathing animal
 with magnets.
 Change this:
 the motion of a record.
 Upon finding mismatched socks,
 she moseyed on.
 She said:
 narcoleptic misdemeanor.

Episode 1: lock all the locks,
 put computer under bed,
 place head on wooden block.
 She said: sharp teeth!
 before slapping
 herself awake.

Episode 2: the black cat
 has insomnia again.
 They are devising a plan,
 something about
 popsicles in the ear.
 Something about
 the raven tethered,
 the liminality
 of subliminal space.

Episode 3: the onions
 have gotten soft,
 get the defibrillator.

Add this, the knotted pine
 smiling. She kept on all the lights

outdoors, left nothing
 to become a shadow.
 She drugged herself.
 She dragged herself
 off this boat,
 she said it was a dream,
 then got back into bed.
 Was flattered by all the geese!
 Feathers!
 Covering her face and hands.
 She's going to grandma's house,
 and she's bringing this—

Episode 4: a finger trap.
 Ease up.
 No one is going that far.
 Grandmas don't exist
 here, in the west.
 She left hers in Ohio,
 with all the other Slovenians.

If hindsight is twenty-twenty
 the wife is twenty-twenty-thirteen.
 The new wife,
 the everything wife.
 She made cotton-eyed swine today,
 and fell asleep in it.
 She said, my caramels
 are covered in bacon. Why?

Add this, the indecision about walking,
 a bloody swelling from the hip—
 this is where it hurts
 when she moves.
 She moves side-to-side,
 arms akimbo.

She says, this is where we live.
 Our home.
 This is 1-2-3 Mockingbird Trail.
 Even more—a badger coat!
 Neatly hung
 and she arranged her
 walking shoes
 next to the pointy ones—
 worn once.

How much do I weigh? she asks.
Well, 2,480 ounces,
all thick-and-pretty.
She climbed up the foothills
and measured herself there,
one half mile from sea level.
She weighed 2,479 ounces.
Finally.
And taller than the cathedral.
She made it.

She thanked the choir.
She thanked the supermodels.
She thanked Sappho
and put everything,
while fingers in her ears,
back in its intended place.

SIGNIFICANT OTHER

Outside they heard
the muffled sound of the .45
shot inside this tiny room,
walls thin as cardboard.
It was a bit of romance,
caught and tangled.
His hand hooked to my mouth.
My arms, match sticks,
flicked and fired.
The suburb otherwise quiet.
I showed teeth.
He showed the whites of his eyes.
and I shot another round.
Keep aiming, he said,
just above my head.

By gun, I mean fingers
and by bullets I mean gravel
and by shoot,
I mean throwing rocks
over and over again
until one might hit
the ridge of his brow,
the other, his throat.
This was all for fun,
me and him inside this house.
Keep trying, he said.
You're bound to strike.

LAST MEAL

After reading the front page of The New York Times,
his mind wandered to news of the desolate sort.

Eyes slimmed with the rhythm of traffic—
the typeface today seems small.

He could feel the rumble of earthquakes,
the movement of crowds pushing through streets,

saints being ordained by other saints,
a choir of criminals dressed in shades of white

when he realized he forgot to leave a note.
He created a poem in two parts

torn in half on a notebook page,
soaked from coffee spills.

It was a sonnet only thirteen lines before he realized
it was becoming a sonnet. Perhaps it needed a turn.

Earlier that day we met for a meal at noon
in a café swelling with other desperate hearts and artists.

He said he'll have his spring mix with dressing,
light on oil, heavy on vinegar.

His fingers coiled around my wrist, his fingernails
tinted blue like mountain caps.

Rainbow trout, he said, is difficult to swallow
when all the bones are left for us to manage.

ABSENCE

She built
a pile of pillows
in place
of the husband
and covered
herself with them,
like the weight
of his breath,
as if a body
were just a tent.

SEDIMENTS

I live in your ocean now I am sitting on waves
beneath the pockmarked face of a goddess.

There is no pain but the salt in my mouth
and the waves in my ears, like heavy cursing.

I am the rock that lets water slide beneath me—
tips me upward. I am fragile, darling.

In this (space) that is both limited and
with possibilities, everything is unforeseeable to him.

Thoughts like lives will bubble to the surface
will foam
will become a divorce.
will turn to particles
will disseminate.

If it were sufficient (i.e. long enough to cover the feet)
would be too easy, would be like life, would be barred

Hart Crane tried with boat once, tried without boat
then it worked.

And other lives lurking, long necks hunched, hair like threads.

PROVISIONS

I saw you at a funeral,
your face painted white
and I was wearing your things.

You turned me inside out once,
covered my indecency with pink
raspberry jam and glazed me with sugar,

then turned me back into a person
asked if I would like to be eaten
or if I was hungry instead.

I didn't know what I'd prefer at the time.
But now you are crunching the seeds
that you licked from my jaw

and I am dripping with muddled fruit
as we both watch the buried being buried,
a body mistaken for polished bronze.

PASTOR OF NOTHING

a sermon of leaning on lecterns, I told the space of broken bodies

to first empty themselves of breath

to second open their hearts to orchards of growing grass

to third believe in the air surrounding the fields;

this is where you will find a lifetime of growing things,
a bushel of open-ended questions.

TIME TRAVELER

i.

You look tanned, he said once.

Thanks, it must be all the leather I'm eating when I'm hungry.

I get hungry in China.

I get hungry overseas.

I hopped a Cessna, flew the nest

to the next hostel, rubbed elbows with chickens.

ii.

Where will I go when my feet

are no longer planted

or my toes lighter than air.

My bones heavy,

my body filled with storms.

A muzzle and a larynx tied with ribbon,

teeth, a black hole already.

Matches and a rope didn't stop him

from talking to spirits

drinking moonshine or taking the reigns,

so to say.

That's what they said

when they didn't know what to say.

Tongues coiled to prevent strokes

nails painted in a color called midnight blues.

Caught carp in nets, my words melted-together and curled up at the edges.

I'm a fortune-teller, I tell you about the weather

in the room upstairs when no one is looking.

A room filled with castles, bears, Senators

and other imaginary things.

Carpe diem, we said in unison, as our heads exploded.

Pass the sleep aids please and a glass of Coke.

Outside the space is bigger than inside,

we know what the outside has chained to its fences

and in that great big country they chose me.

Eyes and ears clipped and seated to listen.

Please believe me, please belittle me.
 Make me into an ice pick, pink salt, a shard of glass,
 adjust me on your television.

Who will be the first among us to give up,
 to empty our bags, build a ship,
 cut the grass.

Faces made of Teflon
 their fingers a fiery furnace.

In ancient times, they didn't have words,
 wasn't worth the heartbreak
 when all they wanted was a wild boar,
 a tree branch big enough to hold themselves up on their journey.
 They were trying to make it to 2012,
 patiently waiting for soup, that's all.
 Bay leaves turning in circles.

The moths, the trees surrounding me
 is what we have left, when we're floating

up in space somewhere
 in twenty years or sooner—

my mind already paid for,
 my house cleaned and sorted,
 crystal cats tagged and priced accordingly.

Airlift my limbs from cellars
 all nine of them, give them names.

iii.

At some point you will be forgotten, your name
 written on balloons and carried
 away by a girl,
 only everything else will be black and white, the girl's hair
 a screaming platinum. She will look
 into the eyes of the camera and ask
 where you've been, when did your house
 catch fire and did you light
 the candles in memory of your children?

In that house made of stained glass
 you will find rooms full of air and smoke,

a glimpse of your childhood when you felt
the presence of vapors in your bedroom at night,
your mother's voice, a book of fables recited by heart,
the floor covered in carpet the color of waves,
your knees pushing into it,
hands glued together, eyes holding their breath.
In this pain you petition for pleasure.
Hello, the door creaked, as if every question was answered.

ELEGY

They seemed more serious than your life back then:
lost keys, an infestation of moths, the cracks in your sink.

Melted snow is just water but water came first.
Water bills kept coming too.

And even then, your arms remained the same length.
Your breath evaporated into spring.

I wanted your car, but it seemed silly to have it now.
It's hood, a faded purple.

I didn't know where to hang your sweaters.
I thought I could still use your shampoo.

You were once advanced in math.
You liked the metal of money on your teeth.

There was nothing to celebrate in May anyway.
I slept inside your house until they came.

COMFORT FOOD

1.

We ate biscuits and let the crumbs fall
between us onto the sheets in bed.
His bed, a mattress on the floor.

He said, my dog is in the closet.
I didn't know you had a dog, I said.
It was a statue made of glass shattered at the torso.

We filled the room with cigarette smoke
thicker than goosefeathers.
It covered the windowpanes.

2.

He never finished remodeling his house.
The floors felt like dirt trails.
The paint was a peeled orange.

I found his letter two weeks late,
stuck into the roof of my mailbox.
You have red lipstick on, my mother noted,

then walked away laughing to herself.
I didn't know what else to do in a time of grief
but hide my lips with the color of jam.

AIRPLANE

It departs and takes with it
a few more memories
of coming and going,

weighing about 22.5 pounds
and strapped to each shoulder
like the mule who never says no.

WERE THIS WORLD AN ENDLESS PLANE

nothing. There is little else and this is where I
enter the picture, where I tip-toe around glass until reaching the lake, a lake. I
wade into the lake up to my thighs and soak a second baptism.
Baptizing myself again and again, I
have no sins left. There is nothing now for me to do here.

Then there is a smoky exhale from the water. I
prop myself up against this fog, take field notes from the field. "There is basically
nothing"
I write.

In this field, trails are marked with snowflakes. I
drink my coffee without milk, black and this lead colored liquid looks invisible
against the darkness of the clouds. I baptize myself again with hot coffee
turning the white snow, the white clothes, the white white perfectly black.
I am in a silhouette against the field, standing in winter, against the flat lake.

"There is all this," I write, "and there is nothing. I am the destruction. I am the
destruction

and then nothing. And in my wild wateriness of isolation, I,
above all the hunted creatures,
begin to believe in perfection.

THIS LAND

Strung
across the desert like bees carrying out an invisible task, thin lines cross to make a new
American god.
He is the telephone.
He is on the telephone.
He asked to be connected to the future.

Dial star-zero.

Passing through states like walls, like hearing a thump in each room, a heartbeat.
This is your country.
This is where you count stars.
This is where you meet the maker.
Handmade goods, like all the furniture is in your house, stored and polished for your
children
and your children's children.
We are connected by matter.
Each one of us, caught on strings, splinters, hooks.
Hung up soaking wet, waiting to dry before the mold sets in. Taken down from the
rafters, limp,

we are useless objects,

we are.

This is a brief guide to trying everything once. To have the ability to never try it again.
I will read what I wrote in my Moleskine last year.
I will stroke all the water from my hair and put clothespins on my ears.

WHITE NOISE

I am the patron saint of heart attacks,
an aorta worth pennies
tossed in a turquoise blue fountain.

You huddled in the humid light,
water up to your armpits,
pigeons scratching your feet.

You wondered if you were afraid
of the escape or if you were afraid
of your fear of the escape.

You walked those inked skylines
like a tight rope, pointed at the beauty
of the moon with your middle finger.

You never used the word creator
but hung onto one
like a fishhook stuck into thick skin.

Every evening you unclothed
then clothed me, wrapped fleece
around my head and laughed—

With this softness, you said,
with this softness you cannot hear
the clashing of invisible bodies at night,

the stiff leather of my belt
was once a bloody massacre.
And in my own virgin labor,

I breed more questions of death
where light means the end.
A hungry body crawls towards light.

O SOLITUDE

He cornered pennies in his knickers,
dripped whiskey down his larynx,

burdens buried arrows in his lungs,
solid ash and smooth. He bled in fields. He bled.
He is despicable. He is otherwise incapable.
He incarcerated himself with feathers.

I should not write at all, he said,
let's ink our wings with pigments.

He wrote sea change on walls, in letters,
with a needle on his fingertips.

My timbres collapsed in the woods.
He said I was hideous, that I should
stay away from quaking hearts,
pack my parcels, my marking pens

and bury small pieces of my kill.

EPILOGUE

My fingers were once familiar with your fault lines
still I can see feel your sunken frame.

Meet my mouth at midnight, take me to Los Angeles,
feel my feathers, offer me a dawn, a setting sun.

It's time to put you to rest whether winter, whether fall.
You're just another normal day turned dark.

To the red-breasted sapsucker: how do you sleep at night?

warm milk before bed

