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The University of Southern Mississippi

THE NIGHTINGALE OF AUSTERLITZ

by

Lindsay Marianna Walker

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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May 2010

ABSTRACT

THE NIGHTINGALE OF AUSTERLITZ

by Lindsay Marianna Walker

May 2010

The Nightingale of Austerlitz employs poetry, fiction, and nonfiction to articulate the theme of (mis)communication. A pliable, multi-genre approach was necessary to convey the urgency of two central characters' desire to connect despite the impossibility of doing so. Prose interrupts and challenges the set precision of poetry in order to embody the stops and starts—the literal and figurative breakdowns—of communication. The juxtaposition of genres dramatizes dialogue, silence, affective distance, and desire. Song, sound, repetition (using lullaby, referencing music, thematizing the ear) further assert the power of language as performance and aesthetics as consolation, and provoke a particular kind of attention to communication—how we speak and hear, who listens, and how silence signifies. The collection is accompanied by a critical preface.

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2010

DEDICATION

This dissertation would not have been possible without the love and support of my family. Therefore I dedicate this collection to my remarkable parents, Rodger and Patricia, my beautiful sisters, Traci and Katy, my wonderful aunts, Susie and Micki, and the rest of my family.

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The writer would like to thank the dissertation director, Dr. Angela Ball, and the other committee members, Steve Barthelme, Julia Johnson, Dr. Ken Watson, and Dr. Charles Sumner, for their advice and support throughout the duration of this project. Additionally, I would like to thank Greg Napp and Elizabeth Wagner for inspiring and understanding me.

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INTRODUCTION

Revolution – Repetition – Separation – Humor – Love

While free writing on the idea of *work* during a nonfiction class on Thursday January 24, 2008, my thoughts turned to Napoleon Bonaparte and how he must have been a very hard worker to have conquered so much of the world. The following morning while standing outside of College Hall minutes before teaching my first class of the day I was looking at a flowering dogwood and a phrase popped into my head: “The Guillotine Tree and its raspberry blossoms—tricorn, purple hats.” When I wrote it out in the margins of my lecture notes it formed a Haiku.

That afternoon I participated in the first workshop of the Blaine Quarnstrom Playwright Series. George Calhoun, patron of the series, stood in front of the class to introduce Kia Corthron, the visiting playwright. George was wearing a purple sweatshirt that had, across the chest, a silk screen image of Napoleon Bonaparte atop his horse, standards flying. That evening I went to a party at a friend’s house. It was one of those freezing, rainy, miserable January nights. While standing outside the front door with a few others, a little cat came up onto the porch and rubbed against my legs.

“That’s Hefner. He’s the Party Cat,” someone informed me. My relationship with cats, up to this point, had been lukewarm. I liked them but they never seemed too interested in me. This cat was different. This cat loved me. He followed me around, sat on my lap. I couldn’t have pets in my apartment and I didn’t want the financial, or any other kind, of obligation. But there he was.

“Cat,” I told him, “if I’m supposed to keep you, you need to give me a sign.” He didn’t do anything of course. “Maybe I’ll just take him home for the weekend.” My

friend loaned me a shoebox full of litter and a baggie of cat food. I carried the little guy to my car. He sat neatly on the passenger seat next to me, blinking. When I turned on my car the name of the song that popped up on the radio display was Al Stewart's "The Year of the Cat." I re-christened him Napoleon. On Wednesday of the next week, following Julia Johnson's suggestion that we try to write poetic sequences for workshop, I submitted my Haiku and a poem that appears here as "Coup de Grâce."

The idea for *The Josephine Letters*, my poetry manuscript, was born out of this sequence of events. The poems collected here constitute the bulk of that manuscript; however, there are important differences in this dissertation in terms of both organization and content, most notable is the inclusion of prose. Three personal essays and three short stories interrupt the set precision of the poetic sequences. It was my intention in interweaving the genres to compose a narrative as well as to illustrate links between the prose and the poetry in terms of voice and imagery.

The pieces talk to each other. They reinforce some ideas and contradict others. They lie and they steal from each other. Although my organizing principle was to trace a narrative arc and use the juxtaposition of genres to create a dynamic relationship between the pieces, a secondary goal was to illustrate my artistic process by setting the pieces in such a way that their connections, their repeated thoughts, words, and images, become obvious to the reader.

Yes, but why?

Because repetition is the single most rewarding and important element of a poem, a story, an essay—any act of writing.

Repetition? A fine thing to say, but do you really believe that? What about the element of surprise? What about characters who hand us our humanity? What about images? Rhythm? Climax?

Good point but if you think about it all of these elements—when they work—work through (or in deliberate opposition to) repetition. Surprise, for example, or “the lure of the weird idea” as my friend Greg Napp puts it, only has power when it goes against expectation. For example, E.M. Forster offers a famous and pithy example of the difference between a story and a plot: “The king died and then the queen died is a story. The king died and the queen died of grief is a plot.” Surprise offers this alternative: “The king died and the queen turned into a monkey.” In *of grief* we recognize the potential for a story that will touch our humanity—the effects of losing a loved one. In *a monkey* the rug is ripped out from under our feet and we recognize the potential for a story that will not repeat anything we have heard before. The first satisfies and comforts the “adult” in us (it works), the second delights the “child” (it plays). The bottom-line is that both operate either with or against our expectations. (Expect: to look forward. One must have a spot from which to look. That spot, when we see it again, will mean more to us than that look. This is what the repeater knows.)

In composition courses we reinforce the importance of an Introduction (tell them what you’re going to say), a Body (say it), and a Conclusion (tell them what you said). In writing classes we are told “Good writers borrow, great writers steal.” Steve Barthelme points out, “You can’t teach anyone something they don’t already know.” Behind all of these statements is an acknowledgement of the power of repetition.

Poetry is a genre of repetition. In Rhyme we have a repetition of sound: “The raccoon broke every plate / the monkey died of grief” is not a poem, whereas “The raccoon broke every plate / the baboon so learned to hate” operates, as Kenneth Koch notes, in the language of poetry. In unrhymed poems, however, we often find different kinds of sonic repetition. Take Pound’s famous image:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

“Apparition” and “Petals” contain harmonic vowel sounds in inverted order as do “faces” and “black,” also “crowd” and “bough.” The hard vowels of the first line, which depicts the actual image, are softened and repeated in the second, which depicts the symbolic, impressionistic image and completes the metaphor. The repetition of sounds, here in the form of vowels, is part of the glue that holds the two images, the two lines, together. In “The Orderlies’ Defense,” the first orderly’s final two lines repeat sounds in a similar way: “the lawn a tongue / the moon a lozenge.”

There is much to be said on the subject of repetition (much of it already said, of course, in terms more astute than mine (notice the use of rhythm in that phrase? Rhythm is a pattern of stresses. A pattern is the repetition of a form...)) but the material point, the crux of repetition, the source of its power, is its doubling.

Consider the proliferation of one word poems:

AWKWARD

But that isn’t a poem, that’s just a word!

POLYESTHER

There’s no such thing as a one word poem, you’re grasping at straws!

RACECAR

That's just an anagram.

Right on all counts. "Racecar," of the three, has the best chance of being considered a poem because it does two things at once. It spells itself forwards and it spells itself backwards. One could argue that the typographical anomaly of the three consonants in "awkward" gives it an energy we don't find in a word such as "tree," but a spark is not a fire and a word is not a poem. Two words (ideas) are the bare minimum for a poem's existence. A one word poem is, thus possible, but only in so far as it is able to hold two ideas (images, etc.) up at once—in other words to compound itself:

POLYESTERDAYS

To this we might add the title, "The 70's," (titles are the foundation on which repetition is built) and Poof! Suddenly we have a one word poem (a bad poem—what else to call a pun?—to be sure) in which the fabric that defined the fashion of an era is compounded with an inherently nostalgic temporal reference (ah, yesterday). Pushing the word play further we get POLYESTERDAZE—and are thus able to graft a third nostalgic reference onto the "poem," i.e. drug culture.

Yes, yes, how clever, but get to the point! What does this have to do with your manuscript?

There is, in my writing, a literal use of repetition. I repeat certain images (windows, coins, capes, wolves, knives), I return again and again to certain settings (carnivals, airports), I write in forms which demand repetition (villanelle, pantoum, sestina), and often in my prose I repeat syntactical constructions to add weight at the end of a story or essay ("until all the heat had transferred, until we couldn't guess who'd been

warmer, until it felt like we'd never been cold"). There is also a more figurative kind of repetition employed throughout this dissertation which hinges on the theme of miscommunication.

The relationship between repetition and communication may be understood by thinking about the "doubling" I mentioned earlier. To break it down: for communication to occur there must be 2 entities (speaker/listener, writer/reader) and the information must be exchanged through a common system of symbols (signs, language, etc.). In order for the second entity to "prove" that communication has been achieved, there must be some kind of repetition of the original message: the second tennis player can make any shot he wants as long as he returns the ball served by the first, he can't pick up a new ball—that's cheating.

What I have sought to do with these pieces is illustrate the power of communication by cheating. I wanted to convey the urgency of the characters' desire to connect despite the impossibility of doing so. My characters are terrible tennis players (communicators) though it's not always due to a lack of skill or desire. It is a problem of separation. There are various kinds of separation which divide the players: Josephine is separated from Napoleon not only by geographical distance, "Napoleon is carving a trail of angels across Russia's snows," but, in this world, by temporal distance as well. This is demonstrated by the anachronisms and contemporary cultural references of her modern persona: "Josephine hitchhikes to a trucker bar outside Tucson."

In "Nightingale," Anna is separated from Louise by her fear of societal and personal rejection: "I wanted to tell her... but you can't ever say anything like that. Especially not on your birthday. Especially not to the woman who's just bought you

spaghetti and wants you to be happy.” In “The Cosmonaut” Erika doesn’t know why she is separated from Tom and the desperation of not knowing is what drives her to Moscow: *“You may, or may not, be the cosmonaut...I don’t know how it’s possible [but] I saw you and it was you—without a beard, thinner—nonetheless, you.”*

Two of the nonfiction essays also explore themes pertaining to separation, “Shoplifting 101” and “Cowboy Up,” are narrative driven. “Shoplifting” focuses on a phase of kleptomania I went through in high school and the strains my deceitfulness put on relationships with my family, particularly my mother: “As I’ve gotten older I’m starting to see how much my dishonesty did, and to some extent continues to, undermine my relationship with my parents. I was not a pathological liar, but I did lie—all the time.”

“Cowboy Up” details a Texas wedding I went to with my dad and focuses on the weirdly intense connections I felt toward the place and the people I met there: “I’d been drinking margaritas and wandering back and forth between the barn and the house all afternoon. It had been an odd day and I was having a good time fitting in and out. It all seemed very funny to me. When those girls arrived though, I became self-conscious. Suddenly my flip-flops were stupid.”

The third essay, “Lindsay’s ABC’s,” is a collection of alphabetized fragments: ideas, anecdotes, verses, opinions. I borrowed the form (and title) from Czeslaw Milosz in *Milosz’s ABC’s*. The ABC book is a Polish genre made up of short, loosely composed, alphabetically arranged entries. My topics range from AIRPORTS to KEATS, from the letter O to the way what you call a thing determines, to some extent, your relationship to it: “REFERENCE: At some point you have to stop referring to the males you like as ‘boys.’ It is not easy to determine the exact moment at which they become ‘men.’”

Likewise your ‘girls’ become ‘women,’ your ‘miss’ goes to ‘ma’am.’ One always feels ridiculous during the transition.”

What I have been trying to do with these pieces is follow Donald Hall’s call-to-arms in his essay, “Poetry and Ambition:” “I see no reason to spend your life writing poems unless your goal is to write great poems” (298). Thus I have tried to write “great poems.”

An obvious ambition, who doesn’t want to write great poems? How are these any different from your other poems?

Whereas my earlier work is characterized by its use of form and surrealism, my strategy in recent years has been to interpret “great” as personal and obliquely confessional poems and stories. The benefit of this project is that it has produced more deeply felt and fully realized writing. The drawback is that it has led to a strain of self-entertainment which is, I think, a serious criticism. Steve Barthelme best articulated the problem in a critique of my nonfiction, “Author likes to see herself onstage.” I have tried to eliminate such moments. However, this tendency towards exhibitionism, coupled with a predisposition to always be “winking” at the audience, continues to be problematic in my work. It stems from my anxiety of being misunderstood or taken too seriously. I am suspicious of seriousness or at least its side-effects—melodrama, hyper-sensitivity, self-indulgence, hopelessness.

The most serious subjects—loss, bad love, violence, death—are also the most humorous. There is nothing funnier than death, not the real loss of someone but the fact of it—it’s absurd! The ultimate non-sequitur. Procreation, too, any act in which cause and effect are so loosely linked. The illogical. Everyone is unlikely, thus everything is

unlikely, thus everything is funny. Seriousness hinges on a sort of logic which cannot look at how ridiculous its premises are. It has to stay focused to work. It is limited.

Pain is personal, humor is social. It would be pointless to assign value to one or the other. I love the idea of humor. I have much more to say on the logic behind it and why I gravitate towards writers (and humans) who have a sense of humor. However, I think the true value is a sense of perspective. Charles Simic notes, “The philosophy of laughter reminds us that we live in the midst of contradictions, pulled this way by the head, pulled that way by the heart, and still another way by our sex organs” (42).

As a final note, any writer worth his/her salt has some sort of trying preoccupation with the gender to which they are most sexually attracted. Shakespeare, Keats, Eliot—forget their literary legacy, the deep sensitivity we enjoy ascribing to them. Think rather on the “second best bed” Will bequeathed to the wife he’d all but ditched for a life in London. Think of Keats’s letters and what critics like to call his “ambivalence” towards women: “When I am among Women I have evil thoughts, malice spleen—I cannot speak or be silent—I am full of Suspicions and therefore listen to no thing—I am in a hurry to be gone—” And poor, awkward Eliot who balanced his studies at Harvard with dancing lessons in an attempt to compensate for his intense anxieties about women— anxieties he would vent in poems that hinge on a complete break down of communication and an intense loathing and fear of the opposite sex, poems like “Prufrock” and *The Waste Land*. The best literature centers on this anxiety in some way or another—the best literature is about love.

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I. STORY

Nightingale

*The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn*

-John Keats

Louise is having an affair with a married man. She says it's an affair but what it is is nothing. Their office windows face each other across Market Street and sometimes they wave. I ask her how she knows he's married and she says she only falls for married men, therefore... That's not logical, I say, but she is not someone you can tell things to. This has been going on for months.

I love Louise but it is an oscillating love, which is to say there are several moments where I feel nothing like love for her. Sometimes I can hate her but then she laminates a jig saw puzzle we spent a whole Saturday putting together and hangs it in her bathroom. I think I love her more in memory.

It was easier when Louise was married, for me. Now she and Michael are divorced and she has more free time, more phone time, more doubts, she's become insecure. I hate it. Marjorie, her fifteen year old, lives with her during the school year. School starts next week and Louise is taking Marjorie out tonight.

Louise knows I love her, though I've never said, and she uses it to torture me. Or, she doesn't know. I'm not sure which is worse.

Anna, he's cheating on me, Louise says when I answer the phone.

She calls at odd hours. Not that the hour itself is odd, it's one pm here in St. Louis, but I have been trying to work all morning and just now, just right now, have managed to get a little something going. So now she calls. Hello, Louise, what's wrong?

There's a woman in his office, she says, her voice low.

Why are you whispering? I make it sound accusatory.

I'm not, she whispers, There's a woman—she's a tiny thing, Asian, probably Japanese, I can't get a good look at her.

I hear Louise fumbling. Binoculars.

He's married, right? It's his wife, I say.

No, no, she says, *That's* not his wife. And I know I'll have to keep this going, ask how she knows and what she knows and why she cares, and I look at the receipts spread around me on the braided rug—the rug Louise and I picked out three summers ago on our Lake of the Ozarks road spree—and a little voice behind the louder voice in my head says hang up, hang up. Get off while you can, tell her the pilot light's out, tell her the postman has come, tell her you don't care about the woman who is not the wife of the man she is not having an affair with.

How do you know it's not his wife? I say.

Well, she begins, and two hours later—long after the Japanese secretary has left his office, long after I've given up on my work, long after Louise has lost the thread of why she called or what she wanted—we say good bye and I wipe my phone on the leg of my jeans and slip it into my pocket. I shuffle through the stacks of receipts on the floor feeling sad and spent, the way I always do after Louise calls. I work at a clothing department store and Fridays are my day off but every two weeks my cousin pays me to

organize the bills of lading for his trucking company so he can figure out his drivers' payroll. I was supposed to have this batch done two days ago.

This isn't going to happen, I say to one of the plants next to my front window and toss the pages I've been holding onto the rug. I stand and stretch—it's too early to call David, too early for dinner—but I want something. I grab my keys and let the screen door slam on my way out.

Timothy's Wine Cellar is the closest liquor store to my house but I'm in the mood for something different so I drive east on the Interstate. I cross the river and keep going. Ten miles outside the city I lose sight of the arch in my rear view mirror. The image of Louise dressed like a Geisha and servicing a faceless man in a suit at his desk keeps popping into my head and I press the accelerator.

I'm forty miles into Illinois and running out of gas so I stop at the Okawville exit to fill up, turn around, and drive back to the city, but when I walk out of the restroom into the foyer that divides the service station from its Burger King, I see John Malkovich sitting at a booth eating French fries. Is that John Malkovich? I grab a six pack of beer from one of the coolers in the station and take it to the register.

Is that John Malkovich? I ask the clerk.

Yeah, she says, bored.

I wonder what he's doing here, I say.

He lives around here, she says, Will this be all?

Gas on four, I say, Thirty dollars. I hand her two twenties and walk out to my car to start pumping. I can see his great silvery head inside the Burger King. I wish Louise was here, she'd walk right up to him and say something. It'd be clever and he'd laugh

and then I would know John Malkovich. I overfill the tank and gasoline slops down the fender onto my shoe.

Shit, I've overpaid by almost five dollars and should go back into the station demanding my change. But the clerk might say, tough luck, and then what will I do? I'll tell her I need that money. And she'll say, That's too bad you should have paid with a credit card. But I don't have a credit card, I'll say. And she'll roll her eyes and hold up her hands.

John Malkovich is standing now, he's dumping his garbage into the waste basket, he's opening the door. The trajectory he's on will walk him right by my car. Say something. Say something to John Malkovich!

Excuse me, I say to John Malkovich, Do you know what time it is? Oh, you are a stupid woman I think even before he points to the watch on my wrist.

Sorry, I say, I just wanted to say hello, you're John Malkovich. And I am an idiot, I think but don't say.

Hello. Nice day, he says. Does he mean *have* a nice day? Or it *is* a nice day? He's so tall. He's wearing sneakers, I don't know why that surprises me.

Drive safe! I call to his back, sounding like a maniac. But he turns and gives a creepy little John Malkovich smile and waves. He gets into a tan SUV and drives out towards the road to get back on the Interstate. He's heading east. I jump into my car, happy to have an excuse not to confront the clerk about overpaying. I pull out, careful to leave a reasonable amount of space between my car and John Malkovich.

I have to call Louise. Or should I wait until I'm done following him? Why am I following him?

You'll never believe what just happened, I say when she picks up the phone.

Hey, Anna, can you call later? I'm trying to roll Marjorie's hair but she won't sit still.

I just met John Malkovich. I was a total idiot, but he was really nice—he's tall.

Marjorie, quit fucking around. Oh, wow, that's exciting, Anna, can I call you back?

Yeah, I say, Sure. She's not a selfish bitch, I tell myself as I drop the phone into the cup holder next to my beer, she's not. But I don't really believe it. I wish I would have waited to call her. I can't remember the last time I drove this way and I've forgotten how flat Illinois is compared to the Missouri side of the river. Corn, corn, red rusty oil derrick, corn. There's a pig farm nearby and the stench of manure is so strong it almost smells nice.

Last month Louise took me to an Italian restaurant on The Hill for my birthday. Thirty is *nothing*, she said, Wait till you're my age. Louise is eight years older than I. She said, Wait till you really start to fall apart. I wanted to tell her I already have, but you can't ever say anything like that. Especially not on your birthday. Especially not to the woman who's just bought you spaghetti and wants you to be happy.

John Malkovich switches lanes and now there's a blue minivan between our vehicles. This is an adventure. You're crazy, I say to myself, you're impulsive. It's four thirty and I remember I've forgotten David. I grab my cell phone from the cup holder.

David? I ask, though I know it's him.

Hey, Anna.

I'm really sorry, something's come up. I can't make it tonight.

Oh, he sounds disappointed, not surprised.

I'm stalking John Malkovich, I say. I ran into him at the Okawville Plaza and I'm following him down I-64. Oh, wait, he's taking the exit for 57 South.

What were you doing in Okawville?

I needed gas.

He's probably got security or something.

No, it's just the one car. I'm not going to do anything. I want to see where he goes. Can we reschedule for tomorrow? I don't really want to but he sounds disappointed and I don't like that.

Tomorrow's fine.

We hang up and I shake my head at the tall, white obelisk in front of the Mount Vernon strip mall. David is my boyfriend, sort of. I bring him home to Kansas for family Christmases and he takes me to Arizona for Thanksgiving but we aren't serious. It's nice to have someone to fill in the blanks though, when people ask. My mother doesn't like him and that helps, makes us seem legitimate. Are you going to marry him? You can't raise your kids Jewish, you can't convert, he better not... And we are legitimate, in a way, we're friends. Close friends. He's the only one I've told about Louise. He says I don't know what I want.

I tried to tell my sister, Jaime, who lives in Chicago with her husband and two fat babies, but I called Louise "Lou" and changed all the pronouns. Anna, she said, don't be stupid. This Lou might never leave his wife and then where will you be?

I pass a prison on the left. There are inmates in the yard wearing light blue shirts and dark blue pants. On the other side of the highway is a community college. I honk my horn and wave to both sides.

It's not dark yet but it's getting there. John Malkovich takes the exit to Benton. I'm taking the exit to Benton. What now? Are you really going to follow John Malkovich home?

He goes left at the light and I signal right. What now? I open my third beer and roll down the window. Good bye John Malkovich. I glance in the rear view mirror, Good bye Benton. The air is hot and I'm driving into the sun. I flip the visor down and follow traffic west through corn. There's a tan pick up truck in front of me.

I only follow tan colored cars, I say aloud and like the sound of it. We pass through a one stop-light town called Christopher. I say, There's nothing left but corn in this world. No, that's melodramatic, I think, that's pushing it.

Welcome to the DuQuoin State Fair!!! The pickup takes a right next to the blinking sign and I follow it into the parking lot. It costs five dollars to park and the five I wasted at the pump stings again. I'm a coward. Forget it, I say, and I park next to the tan pickup on the grassy lot. A teenage couple slams their doors on either side of the truck and the skinny driver slings his arm around a little blonde in a green halter top. His bare arm across her bare shoulders—I shiver a little and chug the rest of my beer.

I walk through row after row of cars toward the entrance gate. The roller coaster is clicking up its one big hill in the distance. The sun isn't down yet so the colored lights are washed and all the sounds are mixed so that you hear a steady jagged hum and it

smells like barbeque and cut grass and gasoline and I feel better than I have in a long time.

I'd like a corndog, I say to the woman in the concession trailer, Do you have lemon shake-ups? She shakes her head and points behind me. There's a little stand with a sign for Ice Cold Lemon Shake-ups, except the "d" in Cold is missing. I hand the woman my money and she gives me a corndog that has a cornmeal horn sticking up from the top.

That one has a horn, the woman says.

I like it, I say and pull a few napkins out of the silver dispenser on the metal shelf under the window.

How long does the fair run? I ask the lemon shake-up woman. She smiles and shakes her head. She doesn't know.

You're speaking English, she says in an accent. I nod. She hands me the paper cup and I give her a thumbs up which is difficult with the corndog. She laughs and waves bye-bye and I wish I could stay and talk to her.

I find an empty picnic table under the beer tent next to the corndog trailer. A band is setting up on the stage but most of the tables are empty still. I straddle the bench and face out towards the Midway while I eat. There's an overweight redheaded woman in tight jeans and a rhinestone blouse carrying a tambourine towards the stage. She doesn't look anything like Louise, who is lean with black hair. I held a tambourine in New Orleans last spring when we went to Mardi Gras and sang dive-bar karaoke.

Come with me on stage, Louise said, You don't have to sing. Louise is the best singer I've ever met so I stood behind her and danced and spanked my hip with the tambourine while she belted Joan Jett's "I Love Rock n'Roll" and I watched as the crowd

fell a little bit in love with her and afterwards she made sure the men who bought her drinks bought for me too, then later as we left, she slung her arm around my neck and kissed my cheek and said, They named this state after us. They did? I asked. Yes, she said, Their last great work.

I don't finish my corndog and the shake-up leaves a film of sugar in my mouth. I'm not really having a good time anymore. But you've only just arrived, I tell myself. So I buy a beer and start walking down the oil and chip paved Midway again.

Hey Mama—Get it done, the carnie at a drop-the-duck-in-the-bucket booth says to me in a low voice. I snap my head around and he nods, but he's not really asking for anything so I smile a little and wink. He whistles.

It's dark now and high school kids are gathered in little clusters around the spinning ride that's blaring hip hop. I don't see anyone else walking around alone and I imagine it sets me apart. I pull my shoulders up straight and keep my eyes forward. I pass another row of carnival games but no one else says anything to me.

How many tickets do you need to ride the Ferris wheel? I ask the man in the little white ticket booth.

Five, he says, With an armband you get unlimited rides for the rest of the night. The man is sweaty and there is an orange, oscillating fan clipped to the edge of the counter in front of his face.

Ok, I'll take one of those, I say. I hand him a twenty and stick my arm through the window. He seals a blue paper bracelet around my wrist. His hands are rough and look like work boot leather next to the skin on the inside of my arm. Thanks, I say, but he is looking down at the twenty.

The Ferris wheel line is so long I buy another beer before going to stand in it. There is a young couple with a toddler ahead of me in line. The little boy looks at me over his dad's shoulder but doesn't smile.

Can't take that on the ride, Honey, the blond boy working the wheel says in an Irish accent and points to my beer. He's just loaded the couple and the toddler into a cart and moves the lever to bring the next one down.

No problem, I say, and tip my head back. I swallow the rest then toss the paper cup into the garbage can.

Brilliant, the boy says. He leads me to my cart and offers his hand when I step up but I don't take it. No rocking, he says. No problem, I say as he pulls the lap bar down. He grabs the front of the metal bar and gives it a few violent tugs to make sure it's locked. He lets the back of his hand graze the side of my breast when he lets go. I say, I hope that means I get an extra turn. And I can't believe it's come out of my mouth but he doesn't seem fazed. Yeah, I'll give you an extra turn, he says and squeezes my knee.

Later, I'll find out his name is Owen, that his father is Irish and his mother's American. He'll be going back to Ireland after Labor Day. He'll tell me he's twenty four, that he likes older women. And when he jumps down from the cab-over bunk to use the bathroom in the RV he shares with two other men the next morning, I'll find his wallet, find out he's really eighteen and that it doesn't matter. I'll grab my jeans from the foot of the bunk, pull out my last, crumpled five, switch it with five new, crisp feeling one dollar bills from his wallet, and be gone before he comes back.

But now I stare straight up as the cart rises and I can't believe how clear the sky is. The town spread around the fair is small and dark and even the bright lights below

can't keep the stars from looking like a handful of crushed diamonds scattered across a bolt of velvet. The wheel turns and I see people watching other people ride and I feel like all I need is a single red balloon tied around my wrist and I will officially be the loneliest looking person at the fair.

Owen raises his eyebrows when I get to the bottom. I hold up my index finger and loop it around a couple times. And if Louise were here I would tell her, We can't be friends anymore. Why? she'd ask. Because it's not fair to me. And she'd say, Well, it looks like a fair to *me*, and then I'd laugh and love her again and it's just hopeless. I can't even imagine it. No, no, there's a limit. I think of the married man in the office, of Marjorie and Michael, the others I've had to share her with, the ones to come, and that gets me going, that makes me angry, or starts to, then my phone rings.

I've put it on vibrate and it makes me jump. I'm almost to the top again and I know it's her and that for once I won't answer, but I can't say for certain whether I'm being mature or feeling sorry for myself. The edges of everything go blurry and, for a second, it looks like the world is on fire. Then I blink and it's fine. Everything's fine. Even Louise, who by now is wearing her peach colored robe; who by now has brushed her teeth and is getting ready to climb into bed. I see her robe falling in slow motion from her shoulders. She'll leave it on the floor till morning. She'll wonder why I haven't answered, why I haven't called her back. Where has Anna gone? She'll ask, tossing from one side of the bed to the other, punching a pillow and trying to sleep, Who is she with?

II. POEMS

Austerlitz and the Lost Correspondence

Two days after their wedding, Napoleon left to lead the French army in Italy. Throughout the campaign, he sent Josephine several intensely romantic love letters. Many of his letters survive while very few of hers have been found. It is not known whether this is due to their having been lost or to their initial scarcity.

I.

Milan, April 1796

*Josephine,
There are many days when you don't write. What do you do, then? No, my darling, I am not jealous, but sometimes worried...*

I live in a mailbox.
It's a little outside the city.

There is an old man who directs traffic
at the crosswalk in front of my door.

He's unofficial. He has no uniform.
Here they have stoplights already.

Someone he loved must have been run over
at the corner. I have eaten

all of the pineapple slices.
I don't want anyone to yell at me.

II.

Verona, July 1796

*...one of these nights your door will open with a great noise;
as a jealous person, and you will find me
on your arms.*

The world has become a series of legs.
People wear nicer clothes here.

Soon I will buy boots and more cake.
That's likely to be a bit expensive.

Rêve de moi. It is difficult to be obscene
with a mailman who is not

one's own. I screwed the bookshelves
into my wall. Not much left to do.

III.

November 1796

*I don't love you anymore; on the contrary, I detest you. You are a vile, mean, beastly slut.
You don't write to me at all; you don't love your husband;
you know how happy your letters make him, and you don't
write him six lines of nonsense...*

You must wonder at the size of my books.
Currently they are filed between my eyelashes.

On each page a different letter.
I stole them from you, of course,

every one. What choice did I have?
There wasn't room for us both in this *boîte*.

Lady in Love at the Laurel County Fair

The flyer by the 4H display says the magician will take the stage at seven: “Don’t miss The Amazing Jimmy Dixon and His Chinese Torture Illusion where the lovely Patricia will be sawed and pierced with swords—No strings!!” It’s not much of a fair, still I feel sorry for the twelve of us in the magic show audience and for the aging magician standing there in his silly cape.

“From mystic India to the Ivory Coast to the Cape of Good Hope, we bring to you tonight upon this stage the act that has dazzled nations! Experience the magic, the wonder and mystery!” implores amazing Jimmy Dixon. He waves his hands. A cane begins to dance, though the string, from my angle, is visible, and Patricia

seeing it too, shimmies to distraction. At 62, Patricia cuts an unlikely gal Friday, though she shares with the cape some fluidity and she’s tender when she pulls the bow string at Jim’s neck. She tucks the cape inside a crate downstage and takes the mic to find a volunteer for Jimmy Dixon’s Famous Handcuff Trick. “In order for these magic

chains to work,” he chants, “you must believe in magic. Say ‘I believe in magic!’” The child is sullen though Patricia manages to coax the phrase from the girl. But Jimmy Dixon conceals the cuff release so poorly behind his second cape that even the child laughs as she runs away from the stage. Afterwards, a juggling of rings, cups and cards, a dove, a string

trick. Behind us, high school girls parade in string dresses and cork-soled sandals, working amber-magic fingernails through their humid curls, and all the world’s a stage, of course, but Jimmy’s losing his audience, and if it weren’t for Patricia slipping off her mules, I’d probably leave too. The card and cape show over, she climbs into the long black box with *Jimmy Dixon*

and *Chinese Torture* air brushed on the side while Jimmy Dixon grabs his knives. Spotlights out, the stage is lit by a string of muted bulbs and we hush ourselves because, cape or no cape, we are seeing a magician for the first time tonight, and it’s not magic just a man who, after all the years of disappointment, has gotten his Patricia into the box again. He might cut her, he might save her—it’s all staged

of course—the cape, the knife, the dim bulbs. But what gets us is the magic behind Jimmy Dixon. Call it *Pride Swallowing Woman! Love Without Strings! Patricia Sees and Stays!* We believe in this woman: her magic, her stage.

Opening Night

-After Joel Brower

So this is loving a dentist, she thinks, and he washes his hands again. And he washes his hands. She is seated with knit scarf coiled at the neck. He threads her piercings with dental floss, loops wax strands into bows to give his tongue employment. Her lobes absorb the mint smell and turn purple at the tips.

So this is loving a dentist, she thinks, and the old orchestra cracks its knuckles and tightens its strings. And the old orchestra swells from the pit. She takes off her clothes and lies on the rug. He brings a knife and bowl of fruit, tries to peel an apple in a single curl but fails. She crosses her legs at the ankle.

So this is what it's like to love a dentist, he says, and quarters the apple. The fruit has nothing to do with foreplay. The fruit has nothing to do with foreplay. She imagines neighbors. Enter ox-cart of desire. A jar of pennies jingles in the corner while they rehearse their marvelous business on the floor.

So this is love and that is a dentist, she reasons and does not pretend to be impressed. He calls her from the shower where his hands are being washed and the old conductor climbs out of the orchestra section and the apple core browns in its bowl and the shower's steam rises as a kind of applause.

Curtain Behavior

*“O, ‘tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet”
-Hamlet (III. iv. 209-10)*

Ah, velvet ears.

How ill-equipped you are for these clackety train-wrecks of language, the slangs and echoes of outlandish jargon, and how brave. Most faithful sentinels. Forgive this mouth its endless openings and rehearsals of sense. It cannot see you in the wings. It cannot imagine you are not a lorgnette or some other type of decorative glass. No ironic detachment, it cannot omit. No cousin to sea-shell, snail, or snare drum. It plays the fool. And you, discrete in your perfection, your endless siftings for punctuation—o periods, o corks, o perfect revenge: to suspend in doubt, to hold uncertain, to be the two great question marks that hang at either end of every fact we take for truth, and every thought we entertain.

Drums

“Forget what you know to be true,” said the box,
 and he twisted his waxy, red ear—
 picked mud from the between the toes of his claw
 and plunked out a tune on his harp.
 Up from the dumpster, shimmering silver, the nickels
 took to the gray dancing streets.

“Truth is the easiest thing to forget,” said a street
 while it waltzed with an oven-like box.
 The opera house pigeons dropped all of their nickels
 to signal delight in the dance. They tuned their ears
 and clutched their throats. They harmonized high with the harp,
 strumming the power lines over the city with knobby red claws.

“Truth is the memory of iron things,” the claws
 of the bathtub muttered and clenched. The streets
 below were filled with balloons, the bath saw the harp
 through the glass, threw open its faucets and boxed
 its deposits. “It’s not everyday you see an ear
 fly away,” said the tub and his tears fell like nickels.

“We lie,” said the bandit masked troop of gray nickels,
 flipping into a fountain to tear holes with their claws
 in the white marble basin. The fountain’s ears
 rang and the green fire hydrants blew up in the streets,
 the pigeons flew back to their swank opera boxes,
 cinching black capes at their necks. The harp

strings snapped and the bathtub gasped at that harp
 falling back past the glass. And the stars, like the nickels,
 chewed right through the evening, tore holes in the box
 of the sky. The moon clenched its claw
 round the buildings that stabbed up from the street.
 A throat was cleared by an articulate ear.

“Who cares if it’s true, as long as it *is*,” the ear
 mouthed into his can. The message shivered up the harp’s
 taut cord to the dumpster who chuckled and nodded. The street
 laid its circles back down on its sewer lid bed like the nickels
 who rode it. The shadow of a crow like a claw
 crossed the night and folded the flaps of the last cardboard box.

“All sound and no sense!” screamed the ears of the box
 which tickled the claw and he dropped all his nickels
 in a coin slotted harp that called role to the still beating streets.

Painted Dolls of Martinique

Island girls
have their
mouths
sewn shut
early. It is
not pleasant

to be able
to speak. So
the lead stitch
is cast. So
a knot
begets the
garland. At

twelve
our first mouths
are sealed

white. We
replace them
with wax lips

from the drug
store, we paint

our eye
flowers,
we learn
other mouths.

Manifesto for Clumsy

Jealous, after Fozzard's legs gave out
in fourth grade, I took a Louisville Slugger
to my own kneecaps. I was interested

in the failures of the body, not success.
Years later when his girlfriend's neck
snapped beneath the ATV she'd flipped,

I was equally impressed. My applause
lasted the full ten minutes it took her
to walk from one end of the gymnasium

to the other on the night of her coronation.
You see it everywhere: the Norwegian woman
of 1941 to whom shrapnel lent a German accent,

the synaesthesia of a defenestrated man
his ability to recite pi to the n^{th} , Mama Cass
who learned to sing after one lesson

from a lead pipe. These are our superheroes.
Is it any wonder we've grown to see barriers
as opportunities? Barricades are useful

when you can slam yourself into them.
Self-mutilators, blood-dopers, trepaners
and dreamers—Pilgrims of Violence, I'm with you all!

Proving daily the ability to walk through walls
is only a matter of bludgeoning the brain
into forgetting it can't.

Free Fair Parade

-After Dora Malech

With puberty came the urge to give things to boys.
In the band room supply closet I'd wait for the trumpet
boys. I'd give them both a dollar. I cannot tell you why.
Our town was an old egg in a skillet, our town

was a strip mine abandoned by coal men. My neighbor
got tall that summer. We made prank calls to psychics
when his parents were at work. We tried on the big dresses
in his mother's closet. I stole novels from my aunts

and practiced cleavage squeezing my arms together, holding my own
outstretched hands. I took white tank tops from my older sister,
locked the bathroom door. In eighth grade Science I let Skyler
brand a smiley face on my arm with the silver head of a Bic lighter.
There were so many things you could do with a boy! I blame

Aqua Velva and Velcro binders; I blame janitors in jumpsuits with limp
mustaches and panther eyes. How I'd follow the trumpet boys
to their classes and wish I was older. How I'd find notes on the floor
with "69" and "doggie-style" and hold them until I got off the bus.

I turned thirteen the day of the Free Fair parade. Josh held my hand
in line for the Cobra, the lap bar pressed our thighs, night swiveled
above the baseball diamond. Josh won a cap gun with a spinning
cylinder and an orange trigger. He let me hold it, let me have it.

Josephine Bathes

adding to the rings
skin she's sloughed around the drain
one for every year

The Graduates

All life begins with a coin
tossed into a can,
so home is a hole
we crawl from.

We start talking stars.
We gather our ladders.
Underestimate mother.

Our feet far
from earth, get stuck, get
stuck in her mouth.

Our thumbs work the meat
at her temples
in shifts; slowly

her jaw
begins to unlock.

III. ESSAY

Shoplifting 101

A firm believer in the character-building power of extra-curricular activities, the summer before I turned seventeen I took up shoplifting and turned all my inner-resources toward the dark purpose. On the outside I was this cheerful, outgoing high schooler—inside I was rubbing my hands together and cackling.

Every July throughout high school I participated in the Prairie Scholars Program in Jacksonville, a mid-sized corn island in central Illinois, home of MacMurray college. The brochure I used to convince my parents to send me featured glossy photos of studious looking teenagers in orderly classrooms with eager smiles and raised hands; in another a group of girls sat together on a blanket in a grassy quad leaning in towards each other propped on arms while boys played soccer in the background—the captions hyped the camp as a great educational opportunity.

In some respects it was. We took classes in web design, built catapults out of egg cartons, popsicle sticks and other assorted garbage, discussed the political underpinnings of Springsteen lyrics; however, what the brochure couldn't mention is that sending a teen to gifted camp is like sending a drug dealer to prison. The real education occurs when the lights go out and the cell doors shut. This is not to say camp consisted of roving gangs of leather clad nerd-thugs smoking joints behind dumpsters but there was plenty of unsanctioned “cool” rubbing off just the same. That summer we took a field trip. They bused the whole camp to Hannibal, Missouri to visit the birthplace of Mark Twain.

When I say I “learned” how to shoplift I don’t mean I acquired a special skill, in fact, sneaky has always come rather naturally; I mean that I learned it was an option, an interesting alternative. Before Sarah—my savvy, new, platinum haired, pierced friend—whispered, “Cover me,” and shoved a ceramic steamboat into the side pocket of her leather shoulder bag it simply had never occurred to me to try it. Once I saw that it was something people actually did, people I liked even, it didn’t take long for me to align. It’s similar to the experience of not noticing the weather until you hear someone mention it—all of a sudden it *is* hot. I guess you’d call that the power of suggestion, though Sarah never suggested I steal a thing—I probably never would have if she had. I didn’t take anything from Pudd’NHeads gift shop that day, or from the camp store later that week. I don’t actually remember the first item I took, but I know it happened not long after I returned home from camp and not just once.

Many people assume all shoplifting is the same but this is not the case. For example Sarah could have taken that steamboat without calling my attention to it—if she had cared about the steamboat she probably would have been more inclined to keep it secret. She didn’t. Sarah was a thrill-seeker shoplifter, one who steals for excitement. Often thrill-seekers work in groups and are almost always teenagers. The method Sarah used is called palming, which is the concealment of an item in the palm of one’s hand. Later, the item is stowed in one’s pocket, purse, or leather shoulder bag. Sarah’s instruction to “cover her” is known as shielding. Popular among thrill-seekers, shielding is a strategy that involves multiple participants; one or more accomplices shield or block the thief from view of the store clerk.

A less common technique is the use of a booster device. A booster coat, for example, has big pockets sewn inside. Booster pants, booster skirts, booster baby-strollers, whatever the article of choice it will generally be large and baggy to conceal merchandise. Note the familiar sight of store-clerks trailing people in trench-coats. Wearing items out is another popular method. In the dressing room the thief layers stolen clothing under street clothes or rolls items up and secrets them under their arms or between their legs—a method known as crotching.

I am predisposed to vices of a clandestine nature and tend to do wrong only when no one is looking. I don't know if it is ironic or natural then that I have issues with guilt, "a Catholic way of seeing things" a friend once told me. My memory is predisposed to collect and dwell upon moments of shame, wrong doing, confrontation. My head is predisposed to recognize these only in terms of the number and nature of people who witness them. In other words, if a tree falls in the woods—I'll hear it if *you* hear it.

It's not that I am without morals, but I don't draw hard and fast distinctions of right and wrong in matters that do not concern anyone besides myself. Call it a sliding scale of morality. I knew it was "wrong" to shoplift, but it didn't *feel* wrong because I wasn't hurting anyone by doing it. And I simply could not make myself believe that anyone would be harmed by my stealing a travel sewing kit or two from Wal-Mart. Unlike a political shoplifter, those who steal in an effort to protest corporate power, I wasn't trying to stick it to anybody. I was performing.

Like many children, when I was young I often had the sense that I was being watched. As a result most of what I did was done under the assumption that it mattered, or at the very least, was noticed. If I had known at the time that this sort of juvenile

egocentrism is so common it actually has its own term (The Personal Fable: a belief held by many adolescents telling them that they are special and unique, so much so that none of life's difficulties or problems will affect them regardless of their behavior), my conviction was such that I would have turned even that into “me against the world” evidence.

The reality is that what I was doing and the reasons I was doing it were not as profoundly bad or as profoundly interesting as I imagined at the time. I was what you would call an addictive-compulsive shoplifter. This thief is characterized emotionally by repressed anger and often exhibits signs of other compulsive addictions such as overeating, shopping, drug use, or gambling. She often gives to others and doesn't take care of herself. Typically, she will steal items that are inexpensive. If caught, she will show guilt, shame, or remorse. Often, she will breakdown and cry when confronted.

If you asked me now what drove me to confess to my mother that I had shoplifted, I would probably tell you it had something to do with atonement, but that wouldn't be the whole of it. Despite the fact that I had amassed a sizeable amount of merchandise over the six months I'd been stealing, I had never stolen anything I couldn't afford, partly because I was afraid to steal large items but mostly because that would have defeated my purpose. I didn't care about the stuff, I wanted the get away. I wanted the devastating secret that would guarantee some final showdown or at the very least, some useful inner turmoil. The lethal boredom of adolescence is somehow made bearable when you acquire a “deep dark secret”—sex, drugs, steamboats, whatever. Like many a novice writer (what better metaphor for a self-conscious teenager) before me, I confused gritty with interesting, amorality with authenticity. I fell in love with my own plot device.

At some point, however, things changed. After three months of stealing without so much as a side-ways glance from a store clerk or a tripped EAS alarm (those beeping upright rail things planted on either side of a store's entrance), I began to question what it was exactly that I was getting away with. By the fourth month the aura of gifted camp had completely worn off and my habit was beginning to seem unglamorous. I was putting my reputation on the line for chap stick and no one seemed to care.

At five months I realized I wasn't doing it just because I could—I was losing control. I would walk into Target and tell myself that I didn't need a mood ring, I didn't need a mood ring. I would walk past the mood ring display. I would walk past it again. Detour around the shampoo aisle for another pass. Alarms in my head would go off but my hand would take over and I'd have palmed a mood ring by the time I left the store. It becoming a problem.

When my mother gets angry a strange vertical wrinkle appears above her eyelid, like a wick. We were standing in the kitchen that Saturday morning when I delivered my confession—my dad and sisters had gone to the hardware store and I'd worked myself up to the “now or never” moment. I always had this hope that when I confessed something to my mother that she'd realize the courage it took to come forward and would keep that in mind before addressing whatever wrong had been brought to light. This is basically the Golden Rule of sitcoms (one of my primary vehicles of worldly information at the time). But my mother was not a sitcom, muumuu or no, she was General Patton.

Typically, when mom is mad, she yells then lectures. Sometimes she'll get worked up again and Goddamnit and so on, but eventually I break down and cry, and she relents. Things went a little differently this time. She demanded to know what I'd taken.

Apologies weren't going to cut it—she was going to make me return it. Pride demanded refusal on principle—the principle being my intense fear of humiliation—however, the situation was a bit more complicated than she realized. By the time I confessed, I had been shoplifting regularly for over six months. There was no way I could account for *everything*.

Mom was standing in front of the refrigerator and behind her head I could see the Empire State Building magnet that I had brought home for Dad from New York last Thanksgiving when I traveled with my drill team to dance in the Macy's parade. I thought of the American Flag torch lighter from the Statue of Liberty gift shop; the blue silk blouse and pink t-shirt I'd shoved into a shopping bag in a boutique whose name I couldn't pronounce. I was never able to wear either as, in my haste, I grabbed the wrong sizes. The catalogue went on: silver hoops from Target, a purple eye shadow pack from Walgreen's, a "forgotten" toaster I wheeled out of Wal-Mart on the bottom rack of the shopping cart, ink pens, compacts, Twizzlers, diet pills, air fresheners to hang in your car... As I noted before, the items themselves were never worth much, but their accumulated value was, if not staggering, certainly close to the tax-payer sum it would take to prosecute me.

She knew I was wavering. "What did you take, Lindsay?"

At this point I realized she was reacting in the singular. She interpreted, "I've shoplifted, Mom" to mean "I've shoplifted *once*." One could argue that since I'd already given her the "bad news" I might as well have just come clean with the "worse news." I was in survival mode though and was going to say whatever I could to lessen the fallout.

"I took a bracelet." I hadn't, actually.

“From where?”

“Claire’s.” Also untrue. Claire’s was small and full of hawk-eyed shop girls. I’d never even tried.

“Get it.”

I turned around and walked to the foyer, then stomped up all twelve stairs. They’re carpeted and don’t really make much noise, but I was angry and embarrassed and I wanted to seem indignant. Upstairs I had moments to produce a bracelet that didn’t exist. Among the assorted crap my sisters had dumped on me when the older one moved out and the younger moved into the good bedroom was a jewelry box. I pulled out a tiny drawer and picked up the cheapest looking bracelet I could find. It was a loop of rainbow-colored plastic flowers that looked like cornflakes strung together on a white elastic hair tie.

“Here,” I said. I tossed the bracelet at her, and she held up a finger to shush me. She was on the phone, and the yellow pages were open in front of her. Above the phone was a bronze-framed copy of the Serenity Prayer and a list of emergency numbers that my little sister had crayoned when she was five.

“Yes, my name is Pat Walker. My daughter stole something from your store and she’d like to return it...uh huh...we’ll be right over.” My stomach clenched and I mentally dug my heels into the kitchen tile. She could yell all she wanted. She could beat me with a hair brush. There was no way I was going to let her force me into that mall.

She offered but didn’t insist on accompanying me into the mall. I could have not done it. I had resolved to not do it, but once I got out of the station wagon and into the building I didn’t stop. It was not a casual moment and although what I expected

(confrontation, humiliation) terrified me, the idea of ducking behind one of those big potted ferns to make sure Mom hadn't decided to come in after all, checking my watch to see if I'd allowed a believable amount of time to pass, worrying all night that Claire's would call and ask why I hadn't shown seemed worse.

I've never liked Claire's or any of those fuzzy, purple, claustrophobic shopping mall jewelry stores. The walls are covered in fur, feathers, and stuffed animals with slightly provocative slogans stitched across their bellies, like *Wet N' Juicy* or *Tickle My Fancy*. They are hot inside and smell like vanilla icing. There are too many rotating displays too close together, all covered in shiny, sharp looking objects. They make me feel large, uncool, awkward. It was worse when I was a teenager and there were other girls my age in the store or a clerk who knew how to wear glitter and looked like a senior. I am still a little intimidated by the aloof and sparkly high school girl.

There weren't any other customers that afternoon. I walked straight up to the counter. The clerk was about my age and pretty. She had a shiny, black bob and a long neck. I don't recall exactly how I opened—something about my mother, the phone call. I rushed through an explanation then tried to hand her the bracelet. When I held it out though she didn't take it from me, she just looked at it.

I remember, clearly, her reply. After a moment of considering, she glanced back at me and said, nicely, "I don't think we carry this anymore?" She looked confused, apologetic even.

"Yeah." I said, "I took it a long time ago." Her expression didn't change. I'm not the type of person who is comfortable with silences under most circumstances. I don't know what I was expecting that girl to say. Looking back I can sympathize. There

probably wasn't much protocol for that type of situation. *What*—I imagine her thinking—*the hell?*

At the time, I panicked.

“My mom—I mean, I wanted to return it. I felt bad.” Nothing. Finally I blurted, “My mom’s crazy. Sorry.” I stuck the bracelet in her hand and walked out.

My sisters love this story. It’s become part of our family lore, one of the jokes that gets pulled out again and again. One of many—sneaky Lindsay. It didn’t use to bother me but as I’ve gotten older I’m starting to see how much my dishonesty did, and to some extent continues to, undermine my relationship with my parents. I was not a pathological liar, but I did lie—all the time.

I don’t shoplift anymore and it’s not only because of the Claire’s incident. My mother’s intervention, while humiliating and effective as a short term deterrent, eventually wore off, and I stole things again—quite a bit when I first left for college, then less, now not at all. I like to think I’ve grown into my morality. I also believe that I have become less brave as I’ve gotten older—traded in “dark secrets” for those quirky inconsistencies, the nuanced contradictions, that make for a believable character (read: adult). Like everyone else, I’ve come to accept (even appreciate) the fact that my actions, private or otherwise, don’t matter that much in the grand scheme. I like to tell my parents that the truth has versions and that despite all the lying I turned out a very honest person. My dad (the engineer) rolls his eyes when I say things like this, but my mother seems humored. Even General Patton knew how to put on a face for the cameras.

IV. POEMS

The General and Josephine, Part I

*Baby, baby, naughty baby
Hush, you squalling thing, I say
Peace this moment, peace, or maybe
Bonaparte will pass this way.*

-19th c. British lullaby, stanza 1

Napoleon is carving a trail of angels across Russia's snows. Josephine hitchhikes to a trucker bar outside Tucson. She enjoys a solo game of pool. Each time she pockets the yellow ball she does a shot with the man from Boston. When she bends, her cleavage reminds him of his sister. He draws a map in hyphens on a cocktail napkin and leaves with his hands in his pockets. Eli, the bartender, tacks the napkin to a bulletin board behind the bar next to a rodeo flyer and an ad for a lost sheepdog. Josephine pushes herself against the jukebox, strokes its lit sides, feeds it quarters as if Communion.

Revolution

The Guillotine Tree
and its raspberry blossoms—
private tricorne hats

Serrated Edge and the Cave of the Fist

Did you kill the shark with your love
hands? I've seen interlocking zipper

teeth, but I haven't seen your pinky
for awhile. Something echoes

a bit too strongly in the Cave
of the Fist. Oh, do not ask. Let it go,

pupil—you'll never get the banana
out of the gourd, the hole

is too small for anything but a limp
flipper and it'd be a shame to cage

your hand, what with it looking
carved by water out of marble and all.

The General and Josephine, Part II

*Baby, baby, he's a giant
Tall and black as Rouen steeple
And he breakfasts, dines, rely on't
Every day on naughty people.*

-stanza 2

Napoleon has run out of extension cord. He fears a withdrawal. It is difficult to keep up the soldiers' morale without the neon lights. He orders baked chicken that night and gnaws a drumstick with his baby teeth. The bones fall to the snow in the shape of a four-pane window. Again he sees the sheepdog crossing the mountain in his dream. He wakes to find his hand crusted with saliva, salt dissolving his fingernails. He tucks one palm against his warm, oval belly. Lifts the other as if hailing a taxi.

View From the Tower

My watch, the moon's
prison searchlight
cuts the city
like a rumor, wind
and garbage trade
their dry and static
secrets.

Some drama's shadow
padlocks the face
of a stranger below.
Reminds me of what
it is to be caged, to have
to care.

The General and Josephine, Part III

*Baby, baby, if he hears you
As he gallops past the house
Limb from limb at once he'll tear you
Just as pussy tears a mouse*

-stanza 3

In heels and a white halter dress, Josephine stomps the snowy sidewalks of St. Paul looking for an exhaust vent to Marilyn Monroe herself over. She's already frozen when the man from Boston finds her, except for the billowing skirt lassoed about her tight hips like a white, floppy hat. It is difficult to maneuver her shape into the backseat of the sedan. He stands her in the corner of his living room next to the Christmas tree. Watches the skirt for hours, mesmerized.

The Attraction of a Country

Here's a spectacular winter:
blue dusk, a beautiful woman.
Grab your Sundays—lit cash
machines, paper sea, and silver coin.
Sleet sting like fractions of wasps and such
like matters. Forget snow
angels, flat brides, butterfly skeletons.
Marry your waitress! Her thigh flutters
lovely underhand. In the hive
of your chest hovers a young bee,
and in your second heart, no less
than seven torches of wind.

The General and Josephine, Part IV

And he'll beat you, beat you, beat you
And he'll beat you all to pap
And he'll eat you, eat you, eat you
Every morsel snap snap snap!

-stanza 4

The postcard reads *Dear Eli, we found her*. The return address is Boston. The bartender pins it to the bulletin board above the coupon for buffalo wings then postures in a doorway, italicized. The last waitress leaves. He unplugs the jukebox and wipes spilled salt from the bar with a wet, white towel. The hour before sunrise is usually his favorite but the image of a lasso swirls his memory. The little general on the sheepdog, the cardboard cutout of a star. He is sure this is not how history will paint them, but the postcard tells a different story.

Josephine in the Tower

“The danger, on the contrary, lies in the subtle instant that precedes the leap...”
-Albert Camus

Heights frighten me, or rather, I'm afraid of myself
at heights. I know why the road chicken crossed.
It's what puts my palms to the stove burners,
my tongue to the blade. Not a question
of danger, but a call to the edge.
The fact of the cliff. Its
simple imperative—

After the Terror

good to be a stone,
dimmer than a star—tough coat,
impregnable core

V. ESSAY

Lindsay's ABC'S

AIRPORTS. The great intensifier. If you are dirty you feel more dirty in an airport. If you look good, you look better in an airport. If you are sad, sadder. Tired? Hungry? Tall? Airport makes you bone-heavy, starving, enormous. This may only be true if you are traveling alone. There is no where on earth so lonely as an airport.

BATHROOM. All over the world people are enjoying their bathrooms. And why shouldn't they? Look at the fine silver faucets, the ceramic curve of the tub. A warm rug for your bare feet. The astonished toilet. A switch wired directly to the overhead bulb and a mirror to watch your face flash as you flick it on and off, on and off, on and off.

COMPOSITION. The basic tenets of good writing—originality and clarity of thought, language, and purpose—are as valuable in an email as they are in a rhetorical analysis of a 17th century husbandry pamphlet or a ten-minute play. In my view, however, the connective tissue, the basic DNA, of every successful piece of writing is an individual's ability to create an emergency and act in it. In fiction we call it plot, in drama we call it action, in literature courses we call it entering the conversation, and outside academia we call it getting to the point—the bottom line is that until the student (the novelist, the scholar, the mechanic) learns to approach all writing with immediacy and purpose she will never be able to see “academic” writing as anything more than a discrete subject or medium of evaluation. The challenge of the writing instructor then, as I see it, is to present engaging material through the lens of specific and practical writing strategies. In

a lesson on word choice I ask students to rewrite a daily horoscope moving from vague predictions (“Don’t let infatuation or exciting risks interfere with your monetary prospects”) to specific language (“Wait till next week to ask out the girl with gold earrings from French class”). I want to help students see writing as more than an isolated task. My aim is to teach them how to locate an idea, a question, an emergency in a text and give them the tools, encouragement, and confidence to act.

DAD. He took me to a toddler swim n’ gym class in my earliest memory. There was a pair of rings dangling from the ceiling and when it was our turn instead of holding me up so I could grab onto them, he stuck one of my legs through each ring. I was swinging high and thinking, What a clever father I have to think of doing that.

EMPATHY. Yesterday I watched a carpenter bee light from an azalea bush and drill himself over and over into my picture window until he fell, stunned, to the sill. I waited for him to recover, then longer, because I thought he might do more with which I could relate.

FOOD. I have a friend who is obsessed with food poisoning. She won’t eat food that’s been sitting in a car for longer than it takes to drive back from the restaurant. You forget it for five minutes after coming home and you can forget it for good. Once, on the

morning after a party she threw, she came into the kitchen and found me leaning against the counter with a Styrofoam bowl and plastic fork.

“You aren’t eating those beanie-weenies that have been sitting out in the crock-pot all night, are you? That’s disgusting!” My friend has an impressive talent for drawing quick and accurate conclusions. Maybe she was right.

“It’s a crock-pot of beanie-weenies, not a jar of mayonnaise,” I reasoned. She shook her head. When I lived behind one of the Subway’s in town, she used to tease me in front of our friends that I got my supper by rooting through the dumpster for left-over meatballs. And although I was delighted with the joke—the idea that my indiscriminate palate and reckless abandon for convention somehow set me apart, made me different, maybe special—I’ve become much more conscientious of my eating habits. There’s a fine line between eccentricity and crazy. I didn’t *really* want to be known as the “girl who eats garbage.” I will never, for example, tell this friend of mine that once during baton practice, when I was ten, I ate a green Skittle I found on the floor in the grade school gym. I remember spotting it in a pile of janitor-mopped dust and pencil shavings and thinking, as I brushed it off and popped it into my mouth, it was the sort of thing I should keep to myself

GRAVITY. There’s something about sleeping in a hammock which is more comforting than sleeping anywhere else. I guess it’s the feeling of being suspended, perfectly balanced, rocked. Symbolically, one could draw womb-like comparisons—a crotch-net slung between tree-legs. Disturbing as that image might be, the material connection is

about balance, not biology. A hammock is a tiny defiance of gravity. Not like the epic battles of skydiving or space travel, but a small rebellion.

HAIR. How it punctuates the head. Wild exclamations! The Prufrockian period—bald and manly. A girl's lovely comma. Question marks and semi-colon. Body hair in its infinite hyphens. Sexy chest. Mammal Back. Smoothly shaved dolphin legs. Eyelashes like paint brush tips. Hair—the body's first and last miracle.

IRONY. Years ago, in England, a man was hauling a stack of sheet metal in the back of his lorry. He hit a bump in the road and one of the sheets slid out from the back neatly slicing off the head of a motorcyclist who happened to be following him. The muscles in the cyclist's hand contracted at the moment of decapitation causing him to accelerate past the truck. The driver, seeing the headless motorcyclist pass his window, had a heart-attack and died instantly. As every death contains some irony; so, every irony should contain some death.

JUNIOR HIGH. In Junior High I used to give Josh Miller, the boy I had a crush on, a dollar every day. He took it but never asked why and I never explained. This went on for months. I'm still not really sure what I was doing, but that's true about most of Junior High.

KNIVES. When I told my parents I'd been hired by CUTCO I couldn't understand why they weren't thrilled.

“Kirk Heidshmidt, the Branch Manager, said I was the most qualified person he’d seen.” Kirk was lanky, clean-cut, cute. I was twenty that summer, and he wasn’t much older. His suits were crisp and too big for him. His eyes moved around a lot and he had a weird habit of squinting them up when he blinked and keeping them closed too long, like he had dust in them.

“Just don’t give them any money,” Dad said. He always knew, somehow, what to say to suck the air out of my sails.

“Well, actually, you have to buy your own starter kit...” I explained the situation matter of factly.

“How much?”

“A hundred and twenty dollars but it’s just to borrow the equipment and you can get your money back when you stop working but Kirk says most people choose to keep the merchandise because it’s high quality and worth a lot more than what the sales reps pay for it.”

Dad told me it was a pyramid scam. I told Dad it was a legitimate marketing strategy which capitalized on the availability of college students during the summer. He told me I wouldn’t make any money. I told him I would earn fifteen dollars an hour even if I didn’t sell a thing. He told me he’d done sales and knew what he was talking about. I told him this would be nothing like selling filter presses for EIMCO and his comparison wasn’t valid. He told me to go for it then, that it’d be a good learning experience. I told him I needed to borrow a hundred and twenty dollars.

LOUISVILLE SLUGGER. Ah, my trusty, silver, softball bat. I tried to break my leg with you once. I iced my knee and slammed you against it. I'm sorry. I was jealous of a boy in my class with crutches. I am jealous of everyone I know for one reason or another. Why can't we have it all, slugger?

MOM. I was about to perform at an important piano recital, and I was nervous. Sensing my distress, Mom took her brown trouser socks off of her feet and put them on her hands. I was sixteen. We were at a University. Other people were around. She made her sock puppets talk to each other (they had a little disagreement). It remains one of the Great Performances.

NAPOLEON. When I leave him alone for a weekend, my cat rebels. He shreds paper towel rolls and drags toilet paper like a banner through all of the rooms. He puts his toys in the water bowl. Some of his toys are plush. Some of his toys are little rubber sharks, which is funny. He sharpens his claws on the curtains and sofa. He does not forgo his responsibilities in the litter box though. He is a good cat. He is always doing things to remind me how lucky I am to no longer be a stray.

O. Certainly our best looking vowel. But, as the Irish have proved, it cannot compete with a hard "A" in terms of sound. Crazy Jane. Morose Ophelia. (I know whose hand I'll be holding on the hay ride.)

POETRY. It is paralyzing to think about. I have no idea how it works or why. I don't know why I write it. I know that most of it is terrible—both my own and others—and yet, and yet, there have been miracles. Devastations. Life. And so I come back, every Sunday, put in my offering when the plate is passed and wait for some words to move me.

QUESTIONS. Four year olds ask, on average, four hundred questions a day. You will know more about the world at age four than you will at any other time in your life. Then you will start to forget. You understand the unlikelihood of your being as something significant. You have some success with an answer or two. You are an expert. Then you throw out questions in the hopes that someone will throw them back to you. You spend most of your life scratching your head. Why don't they understand? Someday you will see how little you mean to the world and how much it means to you. Meanwhile, your ears keep growing.

REFERENCE. At some point you have to stop referring to the males you like as “boys.” It is not easy to determine the exact moment at which they become “men.” Likewise your “girls” become “women,” your “miss” goes to “ma'am.” One always feels ridiculous during the transition. It is a curious thing how a term defines the kind of relationship you are supposed to have with the referent. The way, when you call someone by their name, you feel self-conscious. The way, when someone calls you by your own, you feel loved.

SCENARIO. Mom worked in a prison as a drug and alcohol counselor in a men's facility. She led groups on drug abuse and anger management. Often she gave the group a

scenario: Pretend you're in the 20 item or less line at Wal-Mart and you notice that the man in front of you has 21 items in his shopping cart. What do you do?

"I'd dump the asshole's cart over," one man said.

"I'd hit him in the back of the head with a can of corn," said another.

"Yeah but then you'd go outside and his buddies would be waiting to shoot you in the parking lot," said a third.

"Well I don't go to the Wal-Mart's where people are sitting around in the parking lot waiting to shoot me."

My mom had a special way of connecting with the prisoners. They loved her.

"I raised my good girls and now I'm raising my bad boys," Mom said to me on the phone. It was her birthday and she and my dad were having dinner at a Chinese restaurant. I could hear my dad in the background.

"Hey, tell her that a hundred and fifty murderers, rapists, and hardened criminals sang "Happy Birthday" to you today," he said.

"Can you hear him?" Mom asked.

TULANE UNIVERSITY. I don't understand how all that time passed. Night after night I would plant myself at one of the concrete tables in front of the dorm. People would go in, people would go out. Smokers would sit and talk, drunks would stumble, cars passed, ash trays filled up, a bit of gossip, a quick word or two with a boy I liked, a professor biking home, someone handing out flyers for a show uptown, someone burning a piece of cellophane or foil torn from the top of a cigarette pack. When I think about that time now it's always night, always muggy, always florescent lights, concrete worn smooth by blue

jeans, a Bic lighter in the pouch of my hoodie, and something exciting on the verge of happening.

VOICE. On a nighttime flight to Hattiesburg I was stuck in the next to last row of a small plane surrounded by young military men headed back to Camp Shelby, a local army base. They were loud, reckless, obnoxious—pack animals, really. They teased the flight attendant, a Larry, mercilessly. They mocked a nice gentleman who tried to engage them in conversation as well as an older lady who asked them to be quiet. I pretended to be asleep the whole way. My disgust was not without pity (who knows what kind of horrors they'd be headed for, why shouldn't they act however they liked if they were going to war?), but also I was scared of them. When we landed and the cabin lights went up, I pulled my book out of the seat pocket in front of me. "She's got a picture of a polar bear," said the most obnoxious one of the group, sitting directly behind me. I ignored him. "Oh, it's a book. I thought it was a picture of a polar bear," he said leaning up close to my shoulder, taunting. I turned and said something innocuous, like, yeah, my traveling polar bear picture. But what surprised me, and him, and the rest, was the tone of my voice. I recognized it as my mother's. Nothing like it had ever come out of me before. It was low, and even, and cold, and something else—my own bona fide Don't Fuck With Me voice. The obnoxious one didn't have anything to say; he sat back. The others looked a little worried. It was remarkable. "Sorry, we can't take him anywhere," one of the boys apologized then, wonder of wonders, they shut up. We taxied to the gate, the handlers unloaded the stowed carry-ons, the front half of the plane slowly unloaded. Speechless!

How wonderful to discover something new about yourself, something useful, some untapped instinct to keep you safe from wolves.

WATERMELLON. Please do not ever tell me what you dreamed about last night. I may nod and smile and pretend like I'm interested. But what I am thinking is how I wish I were wearing socks so I could take them off and stick them down your throat. Unpleasant when you consider that if I were wearing socks I'd probably be wearing those sneakers that make my feet smell like corn chips. That's a smell I've never understood but then, what's to understand about a smell? And why should the scent of watermelon gum take me back to a toy aisle in K-Mart when I was very young and playing with a red matchbox car on the white tile? And why do you keep going on and on when the world is literally brimming over with all these socks and smells and matchbox cars?

XYZ. When I was a guitar, sleeping in cases didn't bother me. Now, as a sliding shed door, the slightest echo rattles me. On one side I have a veritable flea-market of lawn implements. On the other—the world. Or at least this bright corner of the back yard (you may recognize it by the inscrutable privets and fine roses). What more could I ask? I have very little to complain about. Well, that's not entirely true—at least not the part about being a guitar or a shed door. I've actually been contracted by YKK zippers and have made it all up to get close to your fly. Word is there may be a rival zipper on the rise. For all we know you may be a part of it. For all we know it could be your idea. Full disclosure: when I said I didn't have anything to complain about—I was telling the truth.

VI. POEMS

The Josephine Game

Port Maurice, April 1796

Josephine,
By what art have you learnt how to captivate all my faculties,
to concentrate in yourself my spiritual existence—
it is witchery, dear love, which will end only with me.
To live for Josephine, that is the history of my life.

I one you on Thursdays and at both elevens, and often
 around dinner time.

I two you during evacuations
 and afternoons when it rains. But not on Sunday mornings
 or days when ladies
 play Euchre.

I three of myself while you are thinking of food,
 or the army, or a hidden switchback
 trail back over the mountain.

I four to hate you like a steam piston hates. Though later,
 love again, and the engine block.

I five someone with your kneecaps!

I six like the woman of another, though it's probable
 most of my days aren't spent in pursuit
 of the gardener.

I seven like a cattle catcher cow-powers
 down train tracks.

I eight the slump that was in the ice chest
 since Labor Day weekend. I feel old
 and delirious and purple.

I nine all the bubbles in a bar of soap.

I ten you with holly-hocks. I ten you
 with holly-hocks. I ten you
 without remedy.

Josephine at Carnivale

Hortense and I pigeon the seaside town,
 versed in trade: photos, postcards, baguettes.
 The promenade gone garland with parades,
 subtle mountains gray the basin, stiff as the beard
 of an elder. Wasn't it February?

Hadn't the waves turned arthritic already?
 We broke from the revelry to cross the level
 sand, to touch that sea before we left and from the rim
 we watched a bus, *Dipartimento di Scienze Psichiatriche*,

from which a group of fragile Italians in orange jumpsuits
 debarked. Starched orderlies in white held hands
 with the old and shy, herded each citrus slice
 across the strand. *Viareggio*—Road of Kings.

One man, in a plastic helmet, face buckled snug
 in the sling of a chinstrap, broke from the pack—
 sprinted across the stretch. And it seemed a guilty thing
 to watch—the big males chasing him into the waves.
 Like the dinner party scenario where you open the wrong door

and find your host on the toilet. I have no other way to tell it.
 They are not mine, the words to explain that man's face
 as he pounded loose across the sand in his plastic crown, the joy
 he screamed before they took him down.

The Orderlies' Defense

His other self is a piece of chalk.
Everyday he says nothing.
I hate Carnivale for him.
Better long hours in the ward.
Better black inland nights.
The lawn a tongue.
The moon a lozenge.

He can be very quiet.
He can behave.
I do not mind the water or the cold.
Or the chase.
Though he has gotten faster.
That sound he makes.
Haunts my year.

Lament of the Elder Sister

O younger brother,
 undisciplined boat,
 face trembling in alcohol.
 From the kitchen you leave forever.
 I have to imagine lists of things to love:
 green halters, clove cigarettes, vowels and gospel—

O green kitchen gospel,
 you leave younger brother
 trembling in undisciplined love.
 I have lists from clove cigarettes to boat
 halters. Imagine the face of forever—
 two things: vowels and alcohol.

O halters of alcohol,
 I too imagine green clove gospel
 in kitchen cigarettes and forever
 things. Face lists, undisciplined brother,
 you have the younger boat
 to leave vowels trembling from love.

O younger love,
 face the undisciplined things in alcohol;
 kitchen clove and trembling boat.
 From green lists leave gospel
 to cigarettes' halters. You too, brother,
 I imagine, have vowels of forever.

O Forever,
 the trembling love
 of younger things, you leave brother
 and I in halters. Have clove alcohol,
 kitchen cigarettes. From vowels' green gospel
 imagine undisciplined lists: to face, to boat...

O Boat,
 you face the halters of forever
 trembling. I leave in vowels, have gospel,
 clove cigarettes and love.
 Imagine undisciplined green! Alcohol
 lists things from kitchen to younger to brother...

O—the vowel of cigarettes, clove lists, gospel. Imagine forever,
 you undisciplined boat. From halters into green trembling. Face alcohol
 and leave, younger brother—I have kitchen things to love.

The Bone Church

“You must see the bone church,”
 a friend told me before going to Prague, though

 it’s not so much church as chapel and far less
 macabre than the name suggests. After all

 we’d toured Terezín the day before—
 the concentration camp from which 80,000 Jewish

 Czechs were fed to Auschwitz—and the Children’s
 Museum with its sad crayon drawings and tiny

 wool coats hung behind glass. *Kostnice* is kitsch
 in comparison—a bone coat of arms, a chandelier

 of vertebrae—the remains of 40,000 plague victims
 culled in pyramids at the four corners of the stone alcove

 like Tim Burton oracles. No mass grave, this.
 Even the churchyard tombs are whimsy-laden;

 the grave of a cab-driver, killed in transit, sports
 a steering wheel! Flowering vines garland each plot,

 headstones lean on one another’s shoulders like old
 friends, like crooked teeth, like any minute they’ll break

 into song. And on the far side of the iron fence
 stands the neighborhood—close tucked and oddly normal,

 though no one’s home. It’s Saturday and they’ve escaped already
 (into the woods) with their rubber boots and wicker baskets

 to pick a few morels from the 10,000 species of mushroom
 of which, I’m told, every Czech knows by heart.

Address to the War Council

We're all fools stumbling around in hospital gowns. Grasping at ties. Looking for walls to press up against. Fearing those doctors, real or imagined, always behind us, shaking their heads. Sadly, there is no cure for this.

Or perhaps, we're the doctors, grasping our heads with palsy hands, pressing ourselves into cures, and our gowns, lost, stumble around in search of us.

No, here it is. The ghost of cures ties us to walls. Shakes a finger at what we doctor. In the background our hospital gowns tremble, fearing us fools. Curiously, this is no imagined sickness.

Cogito

“He is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgeteth what manner of man he was.”

-James 2: 23-4

We keep our faces in the mirrors we know.
We find ourselves in congress; we concur. We matter.
We think we're very clever—studies show.

We believe in our theories. Our theories show
that we are clever, oh very, we think, we chatter.
We hold our facts up to the mirrors we know.

Our records indicate the same. Where we find error, we grow!
We cast our pearls to study scatter.
We think we're very clever: studies show.

We come to our theories as pilgrims come: in droves,
in shiny buckled pilgrim hats, wood boats, tunics tattered—
we find our faces in the mirrors we tow.

We wow. We did not ask to lead. It humbles us to prove
that this is so. We have the big ideas, we are duly shattered.
We might be clever. We don't know, but studies show.

Of course we're only human, of course we err. We ergo.
We keep our focus on what matters,
we keep our faces in our mirrors. We know,
we know—we clever, we study, we show.

VII. STORY

Andersonville

-after Jordan Sanderson

It rained keys. For weeks it rained keys. We reinforced the umbrella webbing with sheet metal. We turned on our blenders to drown out the clinking of brass on shingles, brass on concrete, brass on windshields.

The neighbors left first. We watched them drag rolling suitcases across the layer of keys in the driveway. Later, you disappeared.

I waited at the window. I waited in the foyer. I grabbed your old motorcycle helmet from the garage. The snow shovel was still hanging next to the broken chainsaw on the wall where the clutter gets piled. I padded the shoulders of my sweater with old t-shirts I found in the black, plastic garbage bags from last summer's rummage sale. I flipped down the helmet's visor.

Keys pinged off the crown of my helmet and the blue face of the snow shovel. There was no sign of their letting up. I scraped keys into a pile by the street all afternoon. Heavy work. Sweat fogged the inside of my visor. Red welts popped up on the backs of my hands.

At dusk I scaled the waist-high pile of keys. I sat on the summit in my stuffed sweater and my stupid helmet. I wanted a vantage point. You weren't coming back and I wanted to watch. I missed the air. I wanted to swim. I wanted to feel little gold teeth under my legs.

VIII. POEMS

Letter 114

Verona, November 1796

*Josephine,
What important affair consumes the time when you could be writing to your good lover?
What affection smothers and sidelines the tender and constant
love you promised him?*

Dear N.,

Every evening a newsboy with scabby knees and a lisp tosses a sprig of purple wild-flowers through my window. How bizarre! Can you imagine that it's actually a chicken's bone that he throws? The boy himself is but a cricket. And how unaccountable. We both know that you took all the windows when you left. *For the campaign*, you murmured sleepily in bed the night before as I snipped at your mustache with my scissors.

Telescope Head and the Lights Fantastic

-After Anna Deavere Smith

Dear Newton,
 My lover can uncrack eggs and promises
 there's no such thing as being alone.
 He tells me need gives us identity,
 asks to brush my hair. Is there no end
 to his useful advances?

*Dear Josephine,
 You are full of faulty
 reflections, you lack
 a light.*

Dear Newton,
 Lately, I don't wear anything
 under my blazer. The voice in my head
 calls for loud music, red gum,
 sex at the oddest hours. Will the moon
 always have such a dramatic effect
 on my pants?

*Dear Josephine,
 It is a circle of confusion.
 You are not really suffering.*

Dear Newton,
 Could I be the kind of planet
 that holds a better one inside?

*Dear Josephine,
 If you're counting planets
 and two look like one—
 you've blown it.*

Malade du Biscuit

Do you have any idea what lightning would do
to a cookie?

Suspected of adultery in early Mesopotamia,
you and your lover would be tied and tossed into the river.
Only the guilty sank. One more excuse for the cookie!

Red balloons on a white mailbox and mother wagging a finger from the station wagon's
window, *never more than two at a time*.

There were seven different words for *cookie* in ancient Egypt—
none for *virgin*.

My cousin draws her cookies with arms
and legs. She is a doctor.

Who wouldn't want a cookie on an elevator?

Cookies in the kitchen. They fall often, roll across the yellow linoleum under the lip
of the dish-washer. You have to get on your knees to reach them. Cookies love that.

Frogs in the night-pond chirp Krishna. Oh, Krishna.
you are Cookie Monster blue.

The God of swing-sets
is all for cookies.

Aragoto—actor of ancient kabuki.
One tough cookie.

If you eat cookies in bed
you sleep in sand.

Cookies have extravagant attachments to old chairs and wet teeth.

A cookie can't pray.
It waits for the refrigerator
to kick on. It chants: milk,
milk, milk, milk.

Josephine and the Breakfast Club

Tolentino, February 1797

Josephine,

*Not a word from you; good God! What have I done? You are sick and don't love me!
Do you think my heart is made of marble! Or does my suffering interest you so little?*

That I can't believe.

I doubt you sometimes and the place you last reported you were.
So I've become that idiot you sometimes see

at airport terminals. So I've become
the iron skillet's popping grease.

Science is little able to account
for this sudden increase in gravity.

For example, pouring coffee has changed.
Penelope says absence makes the heart grow fatter.

Newton says everything more complicated
than hydrogen came out of a star,

apparently meaning you. Someday
they'll discover the heart is more

egg carton than fist in the air—
icon d'triumph. That's how I want you

to picture all of my sentences ending
from now on (big fist pump), okay?

To Do

Tolentino, February 1797

Josephine,

*You to whom nature has given spirit, sweetness, and beauty, you who alone can move and rule my heart, you who knows all too well the absolute empire you exercise over it!
Write me, think of me, and love me.*

Duty:

I'll bring the camel thread you man the needle.
We'll doff the yoke, the load, our eggs; the hassle
of old is thusly smirked. Let's blow the whistle
on every scumlucked fuck who rocks our cradle.

Fancy:

Love, you spin king's gold to straw (your treadle
pumps all night), and how that witch'll bristle
when we devour her gingerbreadcrumb bustle;
I'll envy your Hansel, you'll welcome my Greedle.

Aim:

In dreams you are the grizzly bear I wrestle
and the trooper wearing tan who calls the fight.
I'll don the apple-hat you bring the dart.
We'll picnic on the zenith of some castle.
You shear a princess whose braid is too tight,
I'll hijack a zeppelin that's shaped like a heart.

Josephine Swims the Channel

*The star grew pale; I felt the reins slipping from my hand, and I could do no more.
A thunderbolt could alone have saved us, and every day,
by some new fatality or other, our chances diminished.*
N.

Let's shave each others' heads and promise love,
LOVE! The sweetest of life's jellybeans, rare
as nightgowns dancing on clotheslines, glow
spackled stars—all the nonsense one can bear.
Tell me of crowns in the sails. That raw
carrots grate to gold. The lake boat in halts
still trembles for oceans, for salt on the prow.
Promise one raft when the big ship goes under.
Promise one flash before this all falls to hell.

Four Pages of Nice Things

Verona, November 1796

*Josephine,
In truth I'm worried, dear friend, not to have received word from you.
Quickly, write me four pages of nice things to fill my heart
with sentiment and pleasure.*

1.

Sasha had her kittens yesterday.
It was indeed the yellow skulking tom.

She's hidden them inside the walls and has lost interest
in the kitchen crickets that come in from the alley

(not that there have been many).
It reminds me of that story you tell about your sister

hiding under the bathroom sink for hours, sobbing.
You still don't know why?

2.

Tonight you decide
whether to pawn the fog machine
or sell your ferocious plasma, *For the campaign*.

I'd like to buy you a new hat. Something knit
and floppy and yellow. I'd like to make you

a mixed tape. I'd like cassettes again
to be in fashion. I'd like to lend
you a Walkman and an hour
of roads. I'd like to know

you would sit still
if your blood weren't filled
with tigers.

3.
Look at me, I sat for one whole hour
on the Ferris wheel last week.

The magician tied a red balloon to my wrist
after he finished sticking the knives
into his lovely assistant.

The balloon bobbed like a bean
and in my other hand I held a wand
of French blue cotton candy,
 (like mattress ticking)

my little cloud. For one instant
I felt like a good queen.

(If only I'd had someone beside me
in the cart. If only the wheel would
have jammed when I was on top.)

4.

They wouldn't let me leave
with my balloon and it felt

like watching you go again—
when the magician's assistant
scissored the string from my wrist.

I never took my eyes off the red dot,
still, somehow, it was lost in all the blue—

the miracle:
the moment
it all disappears.

IX. STORY

The Cosmonaut

I am on a plane to Moscow tonight. I will land at Sheremetyevo International Airport at 7:10 PM. Tomorrow I will take a train to Shchyolkovo and then to Star City—the military township where the cosmonauts live. I will find Roman Romanenko. I believe you are him. I left a note for you in spray paint on the front door. My fear: you will come back for a moment and I will just miss you. I don't have much to tell you really, nothing you can't guess. I love you. I don't love anybody else. I am always looking for you. Maybe I should leave it at that. I often think that if I were the sort of person who could leave things alone, or unsaid—

I looked up the definition of "solarize," finally, and you were right. It has nothing to do with snow. Still, it's a white sounding word, you have to admit that. You don't have to admit anything, I'm sorry. I keep drafting this letter. I can't get it to sound right. Every time I sit down with a blank sheet I fail in a new way. I begin with something I think you'll find unexpected or meaningful—like the definition of a word that has nothing to do with anything. Who gives a shit about "solarize"? I don't know why I think it will remind you of that first winter when we lit the bedroom fireplace but forgot to open the flue and the smoke came into the room. I opened all the upstairs windows and went down to get a fan from the garage. You found open windows irresistible. You threw one of my sneakers out and then you threw the other one. I came back upstairs, frustrated with the smoke and from not finding the fan. Erika, you called and it took me a second to realize you were calling from the front yard. I went to the window. The air was cold on my face and fingers. You were standing in the snow with my yellow bathrobe, untied, over your

striped boxer shorts. I could see your chest. You held my white sneaker up the way you would a torch. You looked vital. The sun was out on the unbroken snow. The plows hadn't found our street yet. Catch, you said, and lobbed the shoe up to me. I shrieked and stuck my arms out, bobbled, and finally caught it against the side of the house. You whooped; the rest of the neighborhood was muffled. You tossed the other shoe up to me but overshot. It didn't come down. It's stuck on the roof, you said, and stared at the shoe. Then you tucked your hands in your armpits and came back inside.

The difference between a romantic and a realist, you once said, is that a realist saves the love letters she's been given, a romantic saves the ones she's given away. I still don't fully understand what you meant. It was a fine thing to say at the time; your compliments were always oblique comparisons, "So we became those idiots you sometimes see at airport terminals." I don't know why it took me so long to see your use of "we" is what's important, why I resisted your referring to us as idiots. Where you saw puppets, I saw strings. I'm trying to say you were willing to pretend certain things. I thought you loved me because I kept you on the ground. (Arrogant.) Come back, I'm not like that anymore. There were better reasons, and it was certainly love—I'm sure of that—in the same way the man who gets his arm ripped off is certain it was, indeed, his arm.

Tom disappeared at a Styx concert in Jackson. We were in the crowd. He touched my arm, mouthed *Bathroom*, and held up one finger. I did not turn my head to watch him, though now I like to pretend that I did. I pretend I saw the crowd swallow his striped shirt, like watching a ship sink, the only part that matters is seeing its last spur above

water—the final bulkhead submerged. In reality, I tried to make eye contact with the musicians, chewed my gum, bobbed my head, oblivious.

When the concert ended, I waited. The crowd left the Coliseum through the two exits at the back. The workers broke down the stage. Janitors began sweeping confetti with long gray mops, and they asked me to leave. *Show's over, ma'am. Time to go. You have to go.* I searched the Men's rooms. They looked like elementary school restrooms, same waxy, green tile. I walked all the way around the Coliseum. Then I walked around it again. And again. I stood by the row of glass Exit doors with my hands in my pockets. When the guards came to lock the doors they told me to call the Police. I filed a report. I drove home. I drove back. I slept in the car with my elbow on the console. I looked for him every way I knew how. I scanned headlines, filed reports, Googled every night. He was so lost. I called everyone we knew, then anyone I could think of.

“Hello, Country Hospital. Hello, County Jail. Hello, Highway Hotel. Have you seen my Tom? He might have registered under a different name. He is over six feet tall with brown hair. If he's dead you can tell me. He has thick forearms and a freckle under his eye. He was wearing white linen pants the last time I saw him. I didn't love his pants. He might have grown a beard. He could grow a beard quickly. He is conspicuous, are you sure you haven't seen him?”

Maybe he didn't say *bathroom*. Maybe he told me something. He might have said *volume*. He might have said *ceiling fan*. He might have said anything.

He was on the news the other night. They put his picture on the screen and the anchor read from the teleprompter, “In tonight's Crime Watch we remember Thomas Hanlon. The thirty-five year old man disappeared from the Jackson Coliseum two years

ago this evening. If you recognize him or have any information regarding his whereabouts please contact your local authorities.”

The Russian Aeroflot flight attendant is one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen in real life. Grace Kelly but tiny. I’ve been calling her Natasha in my head the whole flight though her nametag says Irina. She leans down and touches my shoulder every time I talk to her. She’s taking care of me. Her lips are very red and big for her face. I asked her about one of the safety procedures from the bulletin. She squatted down next to me in the aisle and put on the reading glasses that hang from a gold chain around her neck. She pointed a long, red fingernail at something in the bulletin. Her white-blond hair is shellacked in a bun and the part in the middle makes a perfect pink runway down her scalp. She is being so nice to me it makes me want to cry, I mean my eyes literally well up.

You may, or may not, be the cosmonaut. The more I think about it though, the more I’m convinced. I saw you first on a TV special. You were getting ready to go to the space station. It was to be your first space flight. You have been there for four months. I don’t know how it’s possible. I’ve read your biography on the internet. It says you were born in ‘71 instead of ‘74. You have a wife and two children. Your hobbies include: “underwater hunting, tennis, car repairs, tourism, yachting, volleyball, and music.” But these are only facts. I saw you and it was you—without a beard, thinner—nonetheless, you.

Natasha carries a drink to someone in the back of the plane. She smiles at me when she passes. Her reading glasses are tucked into the V of her red vest. They remind me of a night in Walgreen’s when Tom grabbed a pair off the reading glasses’ tree. He

was wearing a pink dress shirt and the glasses had purple frames. He balanced them at the tip of his nose and looked at the floor.

“It makes it look like there are two levels,” he said. He stuck his leg out and tapped the tiles with his toe like he was testing water. He walked down the aisle taking exaggerated steps as if he were stepping down invisible stairs; his arms were stuck out to the sides.

“You look like a retarded librarian,” I whispered.

“I am,” he said and continued horse stepping down the aisle. The mirror overhead reflected him to the store but nobody was paying attention.

Natasha walks back down the aisle and stops next to me. “What are you writing?” she asks.

“A letter to my husband,” I said. She has a gold band on her tiny left ring finger.

“Wonderful,” she said. “Is he Russian?”

“Yes. He’s a cosmonaut. He’s in space right now, on the space station, but he’s coming home.” I hadn’t told anyone where I was going. This was the first time I’d said it out loud.

Her eyes widened and she covered her big, pretty mouth with her hands. “Oh, that is wonderful,” she said. “My husband is American but he is not going into space.” She put her hand to her forehead as if shading her eyes and knelt down, keeping her knees together. “My husband is making computers in California. He is not so remarkable. I am jealous a little of your husband in space.” She pointed towards the cabin ceiling.

“He’s up there,” I said. The man sitting next to the window on my left said something to her in Russian. She nodded to him and winked at me, then popped up and walked lightly down the aisle.

I remember the Coliseum and the lights going low as the band took the stage. Seeing Styx was his idea. It made me feel good to always be condescending to his ideas. I am a fool. The band came out, the spotlights looped around, and the fog machines smoked up the stage. We were standing in the third row. Tom was singing. There was a large woman on my left videotaping the concert with a cell phone. I was chewing red gum and inching closer to Tom. Our elbows kept touching. His forearm is the sharpest memory I have of that night besides for the janitors.

I hired private detectives from Memphis. Most were ex-cops or ex-military or ex-something. It seemed it was the line of work one fell into. They found nothing. Most days I am absolutely fine. I have friends. I visit my family, Tom’s family too. They think he is dead. His mom wants to have a funeral next spring.

“We need closure, Erika,” she said. “We need to face facts.” I repeated that phrase to myself out loud for a while after she hung up, facefacts facefacts facefacts. It’s an odd phrase. It bears repeating.

I am just fine most days, but every once in a while something makes it fresh, Tom’s gone! Then it’s like stepping on a shard of glass. One minute you’re minding your business, making some coffee, and the next your cradling your foot on the linoleum. But those are exceptions, mostly when I think of him, I think of where he might be. I am preoccupied with Rhodesian diamond mines and Sioux Falls, South Dakota. There is so

much space in the world, so many corners, and so far, I have been able to rule out only a few.

I think about these things and get stuck. I find myself holding cabinet doors open, staring past soup labels, and touching my breasts. My clothes don't go into the closet anymore and shoes are everywhere. There are dishes in the sink. I have a laundry basket full of unopened mail on the dining room table. There is a stack of phonebooks next to the tub. Why did I put them there? I go to the store at odd hours for stupid things like a belly-dancing video, alpaca yarn, jigsaw puzzles. If he knew how hard I've tried to find him it would make a difference.

"Irina," I whisper as she walks past me again, "are you hungry?"

She stops, smiles. "A little, yes. A little."

"Will you eat these peanuts?" I hold up the red foil package.

"Thank you. I have a meal in the back of the airplane. Thank you." She leans over me. She smells like a lilac.

"I didn't think so."

"Sorry?"

"You would never eat these peanuts," I toss the bag up with my right hand and catch it in my left.

"I have a meal. It's just in the back." She points down the aisle.

"What does your husband think?" I toss the bag and catch it again.

"What does my husband think about peanuts?" The roof of her mouth is dark red behind her small, square teeth.

“You’re always leaving, right? You’re a stewardess? What does he think about you always leaving?” I glance at the man beside me.

“He understands. We have a strong marriage.” She wraps her right hand around the back of her neck. Her elbow makes an angle.

“Why don’t you stay home and take care of him, Irina?”

“I’m sorry? I don’t understand.”

“You leave him all the time. Why don’t you love him?”

“We have a strong marriage, miss,” she says and drops her eyes. “We have a good love. It is rude of you.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I said that. It’s just—it’s what has happened to me.”

She looks at me for a long moment. “I am sorry,” she says and puts her hand on my forearm. “I understand. It is hard to go home sometimes.” She glanced at the cabin ceiling and took a deep breath. “Sometimes, it is hard to love.”

I nodded. Then I stopped. Something about the way she phrased it made me see the idea behind her words. I saw what I was doing. Following this idea, chasing it to Moscow, calling it Tom. And then the idea disappeared, crumbled, like a house of cards. And nothing rose up to take its place. No conciliation, no new disappointment. I saw then that I would never get it back. That this, in the end, was the real loss. And I laughed.

“What is so funny?” Irina asked, her eyes shining.

“Your lipstick. It makes you look old.” It was true. It was a fact of Irina, one of many. I could see I’d hurt her. I felt nothing.

“I am sorry for you, miss,” Irina said.

“I’m sure you are.” I leaned my head against the seat. I wasn’t looking at anything.

She walked down the aisle and did not speak to me for the rest of the flight. I reread my letter to Tom. I considered tearing it up. Before I’d decided one way or the other a child sitting in the row in front of me woke up and began to cry for something in Russian.

On the train from Moscow I realized I had left the letter tucked in the seatback on the plane. I wondered, briefly, if Irina would find it and whether she’d read it. The question occurred and then passed from my thoughts as the train cut through the dark, snowy woods. I couldn’t sleep. The past kept coming to me but there was nothing tender or vibrant in it anymore. All my thoughts had lost their glow and when I caught my reflection in the train window, I looked old, haggard. The man in the seat next to me was asleep and the sleeve of his coat brushed my arm over and over. I was not annoyed, I was furious. I didn’t switch seats or change compartments. I didn’t move. Pressing my forehead against the cool surface of the window, I concentrated on what I could see outside and thought of Peter and Pavel—the Russian brothers who threw the newlywed couple to the wolves in order to lighten their sled and survive in a Willa Cather novel. If they die of shame fifty years later in another country, what’s to stop me from beating my head against this window?

I follow my tickets and end at the landing strip in Star City, standing in a crowd. Here is the crowd: mostly Russian, mostly press, mostly men in long, dark coats and hats made of fur. Here is the thin, gray sky and me with a navy blue and snowflake stocking cap. My coat is brown and my hands are cold. One of the big plastic buttons on my coat

is getting loose in the thread. The helicopter which has carried the cosmonauts from the landing site in Kazakhstan has landed but no one has gotten out yet. The snow stopped last night and the plows have scoured all the pavement surrounding the airstrip. I smell gasoline. When the helicopter landed we all turned our backs to the wind, adjusted our scarves to cover our mouths and noses. We are so close. They shut the propellers off but the propellers are still spinning. The door opens and the crowd cheers, the big, muffled clap of large, gloved hands. There are whistles and shouts. Five men in blue Soyuz suits hop down from the helicopter onto the pad. They are not carrying white helmets or wearing gloves. They are just five men in blue space suits. They are just five waving and smiling men, and one of them is Tom.

X. POEMS

Coup de Grâce

Trianon, August 1811

Josephine,

*I send to know how you are, for Hortense tells me you were in bed yesterday.
I was annoyed with you about your debts. Nevertheless, never doubt
my affection for you, and don't worry any more
about the present embarrassment.*

Sometimes I follow you slowly in my sled
because I know you no longer love me.
You said it was for want of a window that Zhivago
deserted the campaign. Lara was pretense, the balalaika

a ruse. Either way he abandons Tonya. And that's
the real problem—now I have to be a fool
for this story to work. Everything that came before
becomes a lie. Not because it wasn't true.

Isn't that what you meant? Say no,
I'll shave my head and demand more
unreasonables. I know what I look like
though even the dogs have forgotten my scent.

What is love but snow? Open your windows, Comrade!
It's the air, the Lara theme, music of trapeze
artists, yellow petals, triangle shaped women.
The three strings of Russia. Isn't it grand?

My heart has two pains now: a loss and a slant.
The wolves are so thick and so
close. Mind your fingers,
you might lose one in the snap.

Act of Abdication

-After Seamus Heaney

Cairo, July 1798

*It is sad when one and the same heart is torn
by such conflicting feelings for one person.
I need to be alone. I am tired of grandeur;
all my feelings have dried up. I no longer
care about my glory. At twenty-nine
I have exhausted everything.
N.*

The black spot where the Russian's retreat fire smolders
on the roadside, the white rags that blow from barbed wire fences,
a portent of victory. You can't imagine failure.
Why the next acre? Why all the forward movement?
As if leaving were a way to love.

I will not try to understand what they mean to you—ambition,
empire, progeny, hegemony. Maybe all I know
is kitchen things—egg beater, ice tray, pot holder, coffee pot.

Maybe all I remember are mornings you came in from the snow
and held my hand until all the heat had transferred, until we couldn't
guess who'd been warmer, until it felt like we'd never been cold.

Remember your star? I don't have to pretend anymore
that it burns brighter than the others; it's a strange relief.

There is nothing to see over that mountain but you climb
as if the view itself were life, as if it weren't a kind of lie,
as if you could catch up for once with what always escaped.
Still you can't imagine how this ends, that you'll remain empty,
that what you sought was always lit by what you had already.

Able Was I Ere I Saw Elba

You will tell Josephine that my thoughts were of her before life departed.

N.

“France, l’armée, tête d’armée, Josephine.”

You die on a rock infested island.

I die in my bed on a Sunday.

I die in my throat; my words are not remarkable.

You die on a rock infested island.

I set your blood on fire, you wrote.

I died in my throat; my words were not remarkable.

It was humiliating, my death, no words

to set one’s blood on fire, I writhed,

I held my arms out. At last my children saw

how humiliating it was—my love. No words,

but I wanted to say come back.

I held my arms out, not to my children, was
grappling, as always, with the loss.

I wanted to say come back,

my last word is nothing

to do with grappling or loss.

It was my most important failure.

My last word was nothing

to sing you or bring you back.

It was my most important failure.

I choked in my bed on a Sunday.

You left with my name like a song on your back—

So long Army, farewell France, goodbye Josephine.

Divorce

*"I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly.
I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled
...and all the cities were broken down"
-Jeremiah 4:24-6*

It ends with a face in the window,
his or yours, the train's long whistle, something silver
in the eyes, foreign or friendly, jaws work
backwards, as if the last letters were capital.
Dissociative nouns dropped like fists on a table:
tongue-kiss, garret, steeple, cat.

It ends and the end becomes a cat,
a licked paw spied through a window.
You give the cat what's left, give up the table.
Pretend it's all his—the paw, the give-up, the silver
in the drawer. The cat curled like a country's capital
becomes the heart in a lonely state, its last great work.

When it ends prepare for promises or paperwork.
Anything that begins with *p*. Call the cat
Panther or pride-n-joy. Play fast and easy with capital
letters, play rock and paper with the window.
Cut snowflakes out of tablecloth, bend everything silver.
Find reasons to be scared, to be under the table.

The sound of endings is a teacup tabled.
The smell is wet sidewalk from a rain missed at work.
It tastes like a mouthful of pennies, the seatbelt's silver.
The baby rabbit screaming from the mouth of the cat.
You know very well what it looks like, how each window
gives the same view, how it's always gray in a country's capital.

There simply must be a river at the end, a state capital
building crooked in its elbow. Perhaps a gypsy at a card table,
some magical thinking by the highway. A car window
down for directions. A crossing guard at work.
A stalling under tracks. A road kill stretch with bull's-eye cats.
The road is still gray, and the city—it's ok to say silver—

though there's never been a different end, a silver
lining. Remember the gold dome on the capital?
Remember why, in the first place, the cat?

There used to be campfires and a use for the table,
a good looking man and a reason to work.
A map with a legend, a rock through the window...

End with the legend: the window turned sideways, turned column capital,
turned silver hat. End when it's certain he's not coming back, when the table
turns into a poor working door, when you give up the crown, your king for a cat.

My Napoleon

-After Christopher Smart & Wendy Cope, with a line from Frank Bidart

For you are what I'm ordering planets around.

For you are all the places a mouse can go.

For you are the marbles' scatter and the moon's end of the marshmallow.

For firstly, you do not edit your thoughts from your speech.

For secondly, you flung gravel at my window instead of using the door.

For thirdly, your sun is the last Ritz cracker.

For simply, I would rather you be nearer than farther.

For fourthly, you are vain.

For also, you are a padlock with a rusty hinge and difficult combinations.

For fifthly, sometimes you lift your shirt to scratch your belly.

For to be frank, ours is neither the love of two people looking at each other
nor that of two looking in the same direction.

For I wish to bang pots with a wooden spoon when you arrive.

For you turn the tips of my fingernails white.

For a kid is locked in an attic and the attic is gold and is a heart
and is both your heart and my heart.

For sixthly, you have a lovely and sensible wife.

For we are the same coin.

For your laundry beckons like sleeves from a Shakespeare's balcony.

For you lack symmetry.

For seventhly, it is impossible to rake leaves after talking with you.

For singly, the way you sang of snow.

For your beard grows quickly.

For I will consider swallowing your wedding ring
if your hand comes close.

For nothing is as ceramic as the coffee mugs you hand me.

For sand is just one measurement.

For you are the last Jerusalem cricket I say goodnight to in the yard.

Request

Sing me that song again—the one about stripe shirted Sammy.

Sing the method of men making myth song:
Baby, I'll write you every day.
And every other day I'll write.

Sing one that goes: Billy on the lam
with a spade in his hand.

Sing I'll dress like a starling,
I'll shake like a fiddle-leaf fig.
Tap out rhythm on this table with your wire-rimmed gold glasses.

Sing the road and chimney song. Sing dust shafts
out of the rafters. Bring the house down, oh
blow like a wolf on Sunday song.

Sing one with lyrics
and make it rusty. Sing one
where the butter pats melt and all the bread is crumbly bread.

Sing a dark ballad called "Backdoor Assassin."
Hold one note so long
I see the crescent moons
on every label in the pantry.

Sing that "train's pulling out of the station" song
with the long sneezy vowel.

Sing someone's in the kitchen. Sing the one
where I get someone in the kitchen.

XI. ESSAY

Cowboy Up

We're driving to north Texas for Sarah Robb's wedding, my dad told me the summer I returned to Illinois after finishing my Masters degree. Frank Robb, father of the bride, was my dad's roommate in college. They have kept in touch for over thirty years, a fact that impresses me since it only took me three years to lose track of all my undergraduate friends. My mother was invited but she chose to help move my sister out to D.C. instead. She would never admit it but she was grateful for an excuse to skip the wedding. She loves the Robbs but it's sometimes hard for her to be around other people. I always thought this had something to do with control, but the older I get the more I understand insecurity and how much easier it can be to let people slip out of your life than work to keep them in it. The familiar, at some point, will trump adventure. Risk loses its value when you learn to love what you have.

Dad and I borrowed my grandpa's conversion van and crossed the Mississippi in Memphis heading southwest across Arkansas. We were the only wedding guests who did not arrive in a pick-up besides for the folks who came in RV's to camp in the yard. We had a hotel room in Sulphur Springs but Frank convinced us to stay in his and Judy's camper instead. We didn't realize we'd be sharing it with some of Sarah's friends, but it didn't make much difference, it was just a place to sleep. Only close friends and family came the first day. The others would arrive at the 3R Ranch (one "R" for each Robb—Frank, Judy, Sarah) the following afternoon.

Judy is one of those rare, lightning-rod people. She attracts things: animals, children, dogs, cowboys, Midwesterners. She's loud, kind, competent, a natural story-

teller. She grew up in Houston and used to be a show rider until an accident (she was thrown and stepped on by her horse) left her unable to ride or conceive. Sarah, adopted as a baby, was their only child and was about to marry a cowboy named Trey King. Trey was a professional bull rider (had been ranked as a top 15 SuperBull riders for over three years) though an injury kept him from competing that year. He was the main hand on the Robb's farm since Frank had gone out of retirement to work two out of every four weeks on Shell's largest gulf oil rig as a rotating parts engineer.

3R Ranch was in the northeast corner of the state, between Paris and Sulphur Springs. It was my first trip to Texas and I was surprised to find these farms didn't grow crops, not like the Midwest. They were fenced, grassy plains with big sky and livestock. On the Robb's ranch there were mules (used to keep coyotes away and pull the covered wagon on the cross-state trail ride Frank and Judy did every year), regulars cows, miniature cows (Sarah used the mini's to practice roping), a bull in the back pasture where guests were warned not to go, several horses, and a lot of dogs. Trey kept the pit bulls tied up across the field throughout the weekend, but the Great Dane and Jack Russell (Judy's dogs) had the run of the place. Several guests brought dogs as well. I was impressed that they all seemed to get along. Our dogs run away as soon as you take them off the leash and fight anything in their path.

The house was two hundred yards from the barn where the wedding and reception would be held. The barn was long and aluminum with big openings on both ends. On one side were the horse stalls and on the other was Sarah and Trey's newly renovated apartment, complete with nursery. (I don't know if the pregnancy came before the engagement or after, not that it mattered since, Judy assured me, Sarah really loved Trey

and the wedding would have happened eventually. Although, Judy laughed, they almost had to buy a new wedding dress the day Trey called Sarah spoiled and she got pissed and crammed the gown into a trash can swearing she'd never marry such a stupid, stubborn asshole.

The horses were pastured away from the barn and new hay covered whatever smells might have lingered after Trey hosed and scrubbed each stall. A concrete path wide enough to drive two pickups through side by side divided the barn. Here there were several round tables set up for the reception. The decorations wouldn't go up until the next day so there wasn't much to do that afternoon besides eat barbeque, drink margaritas (there was a rented margarita machine set up next to the restroom), and get to know the other guests.

There were three types of guest. One was the older generation of Texans, mostly middle-aged couples. The men wore cowboy hats and bolo ties, drank beer, hollered at things. One of the wives, Dora, had big gold earrings shaped like Texas, big blonde hair, and a rhinestone blouse. Buddy, her husband, was a good old boy who ignored her for the most part and flirted with every girl under thirty in that wink-wink way older men use to say inappropriate things without seeming perverted. Then there was the non-Texas crowd. Most seemed as disoriented and fascinated by the situation as I. We were the ones wearing flip-flops and baseball caps—the ones Judy had to keep from wandering into the bull's pasture. The group we were all most interested in though was the younger Texans.

Trey's childhood was rough. His father died and his mother was a drug-addict. At thirteen he ran away from home. While hitchhiking he met a pair of brothers whose parents owned a huge ranch just south of Texarkana. Lane and Loren were tall, thin, dark

haired cowboys. Lane, the older brother, was the best bull rider in the region which included that part of Texas and southern Oklahoma. He had brown, watery eyes and a flat nose from being whipped down so many times (that's when the bull throws his head back and the rider is jerked face first into the back of the bull's skull—like getting smashed in the face with a shovel).

Loren rode broncos and was recovering from recent surgery on a neck injury. (It's not about *if*, it's about when and how bad when you're talking rodeo.) His neck was long and fragile looking; his head wobbled a bit when he stood still. I liked him immediately. All of Sarah's bridesmaids were (or had been) married except for her best friend and Maid of Honor, Amanda. Like Trey, Amanda had a rough childhood. Her mother died when she was young leaving her and her younger brother to be raised by an aunt, I think, though I never got the full story. The Robbs made it clear that she was family.

Amanda and Stacy (another of Sarah's friends, not a bridesmaid) showed up late on the first night in Stacy's blue diesel pickup. Stacy was thin with sharp features and a short skirt. She was a ballsy girl, had a raspy voice, and used colorful expressions. I thought she and Amanda were sisters at first because they were both tall and blonde. Amanda, however, looked much more substantial. She was thick. Her hair was thick, her hands were thick. Her gnarled big toe was thick. She looked like a model—not a fashion model—but one who makes you want to buy cowboy boots when you see her tossing a hay bale. The type of girl World War II soldiers would have carried pictures of and written letters home to.

I'd been drinking margaritas and wandering back and forth between the barn and the house all afternoon. It had been an odd day and I was having a good time fitting in

and out. It all seemed very funny to me. When those girls arrived though, I became self-conscious. Suddenly my flip-flops were stupid. I didn't stop having a good time. I wasn't resentful or strange. I just became sensitive to the fact that now if I was being judged it would be on a comparison basis—and it seemed clear to me which side of that scale I'd be on.

The wedding took place the following afternoon. Bridesmaids and groomsmen wore button up shirts, jeans, buckles, boots, and ten-gallon hats. The gate of the horse arena was tulle-swaged and sun-flowered into a makeshift wedding altar. It was the first and will likely be the only wedding I'd been to where guests drank throughout the ceremony.

Frank carried a shotgun in one hand and escorted Judy with the other. We cheered and toasted the wedding party as they walked down the gravel aisle in their boots. During the ceremony, one of the dogs ran to the front and lifted his leg.

“Not on the dress!” Judy yelled. Someone flung some gravel and the dog ran off to chase it. Thinking it was a game, the dog started to bark over the minister. An older man in a cowboy hat standing nearby tossed a stick over and over to keep the dog quiet until the end of the vows.

Afterwards, we dragged our folding chairs to the tables inside the barn. Trey changed out of his formal cowboy regalia into a Hawaiian print shirt. It must have been the seventh time he changed clothes that day which reminded me of when I was a kid and would change clothes whenever my parents or sisters had company over, all that nervous energy. We gathered in the barn around the groom's armadillo cake—an exact replica of the one from *Steel Magnolias*—then hit the barbeque and baked beans buffet. Miles From

Nowhere, the Houston band that the bulk of the seven thousand dollar wedding budget had gone towards hiring, set up on the hay bale trailer just outside the barn's main entrance.

Several of my dad's old fraternity brothers came for the wedding. I chatted with their wives for awhile but by the end of dinner I'd had enough margaritas to mingle. At the rear of the barn a couple of high school cowboys were practicing roping on a metal footstool contraption that had horns attached to one end and a rope tail on the other. I'd always wondered how a lasso kept its hoop—the ropes I've handled are much floppier. After watching them for a while I asked one of the boys if I could try. He showed me how to rotate my wrist so that the release would be level and I roped that steer stool on my try.

“Yee-haw,” I said flatly.

“You're a natural,” one of the boys said, and I wanted another go. I sort of felt like a natural. I stood next to the wall for a while but they didn't offer the rope again, and I went back to my table.

A blond cowboy was in my chair. I took the empty seat to his right. He had come with the Texarkana brothers, though I gathered he was more co-worker than friend. He had sharp blue eyes and broken teeth. I asked him something about rodeo then tried to steer the conversation to the brothers. He seemed intent, however, on sharing with me some information about himself. For instance, he called my attention to his toughness, citing the example of a recent fight he'd been in where he let a bigger guy beat the shit out of him so he could “learn” the guy's weaknesses for “next time.” Another of his goals was to become a bull rider.

“Even better than Lane and Trey,” he said. I was skeptical since he lacked the modesty and shyness which seemed to indicate a talent for the sport, plus his bull riding strategy was identical to his fighting one.

He was a talkative cowboy and I smiled and nodded as he spoke but my mind was elsewhere. It struck me that when people find themselves in a new and insular situation (a weekend wedding for example) they find someone to be attracted to. It’s a way “in” in the sense that you create a personal stake in a situation to which you might otherwise remain unconnected. For me it’s rarely a serious, but I often find myself staring at someone tall and thin with dark hair who seems sensitive or has nice manners. Loren, the younger brother, was the one I was watching.

“Loren’s a great bronc rider,” the blond told me. “Except he’s hurt right now so he can’t do nothing. He got bucked—went into that wall head first, arms at the sides—just like y’threwed a dart.”

After dinner people started dancing near the barn entrance. I joined Sarah and her friends at their table. They were gossiping about Trey’s sister and a woman I’d met earlier named Bridgette. Trey’s sister, like his mom, had some awful drug addiction. To my knowledge, I’d never met a heroin addict and was surprised to find one here. To be honest I doubted that it was actually heroin she was using. My suspicion had no basis, but for some reason I couldn’t believe these people, these rural Texans, would be more familiar and more exposed to hard core drug users than I. After all, I’d lived in New Orleans for four years. It seemed a cosmopolitan thing to know. I guess I wanted to think of them differently, wanted to hold on to an image of them as rustic and simple. Heroin

complicated them for me and I resisted the idea. Dumb as it sounds, Trey's being a bull rider *and* having an addict for a sister, didn't seem fair.

Bridgette was a different story. Earlier when we were first introduced I remarked that her name was French—random associations are one of my over-eager, often asinine, icebreakers. She just laughed and in a thick drawl said, “Yeah, that’s why they call me Bridg-et-tay.”

She was in her early forties, petite, with dark curly hair and a faint mustache. Judy walked up while I was talking to her to say congratulations.

“What for?” I asked.

“I just had a baby,” Bridg-et-tay said, “my second girl.” She then recounted the story of the new arrival and this is the point on which the bridesmaids later took issue.

“Well,” she said, “I was sitting on the toilet and I thought I was taking a shit, but then I looked down—and there she was!”

I'd never heard a real toilet baby story before. Bridg-et-tay was laughing and Judy was laughing so I laughed right along, but I didn't blink for awhile. Bridgette was married to Bubba-Jack, a big man with a big face who drank all the Scotch and kept cornering people to pitch investment ideas while his wife drank herself under a table and tried to pull a few of the younger men down with her. One of the bridesmaids—a large, jovial, take-no-prisoners blonde—was married to one of these gentlemen. She wasn't worried about him cheating, but she was pissed at Bridgette. Apparently this wasn't the first time she'd tried it. The consensus at the bridesmaid's table was that Bridgette was a skank.

“How stretched out does your pussy have to be,” the wife enquired, “to not realize you’re giving birth? I’ve had *three* babies and I promise you I noticed every one of them.”

When Sarah left the table to dance with her father most of the other women found someone to dance with as well. Loren was dancing with Christy, a bridesmaid with black roots and a recent divorce. I didn’t see any other table I could easily join, besides my dad’s, so I got another beer and stood next to the margarita machine. I felt kind of stupid. I had been fitting in a moment ago and didn’t want to lose the momentum, so I asked the blond cowboy to dance. He was a terrible dancer.

“You’re a wonderful dancer,” I told him. I have to say things and I hate to offend people. When it is impossible to do both, I lie.

“Thanks. You dance good too,” he said. When the song was over he asked me if I wanted to “go see something” over behind the barn. I knew there was nothing behind the barn beside RVs and pickups. I realized he’d gotten the wrong impression (not entirely his fault since I’d taken little care to give off the right one—whatever that means). I didn’t want to hurt his feelings though.

“Oh, no thanks. My dad’s over there. Maybe later.” Behind him I could see Lane watching. He made eye contact with me, pointed to the blond, and shook his head, no. I winked to show I was in on it, knew what I was doing. His concern made me feel very much a part of things.

It was late and the crowd had thinned. I was avoiding my amorous cowboy and helping clean up. I saw Loren step into the restroom and I went over to the margarita machine. When it comes to romantic advances my strategy is that of the speed bump. He

smiled at me when he came out and although we hadn't spoken yet, I jumped in and asked him about Texarkana.

It was important to Loren for people to know that although he lived in Arkansas, he was *from* Texas. His parents' ranch was just east of the state line, near where the Sulphur and Red River intersect. I didn't know what he was talking about but agreed that Texas was definitely better than not-Texas. He asked me about Illinois and told me that Lane had once dated a girl from Rantoul—a small farming town just north of Champaign—and they'd driven up to visit her.

“I live right by there,” I said. In reality it is four hours north of my town but I wanted to give him something concrete to picture.

He told me a story about how he'd run over an alligator on the Interstate not long ago.

“Did you make boots out of it?” I asked. He laughed, though it wasn't funny. He said I had pretty eyes, and when his brother hollered, left me standing at the margarita machine.

Several other moments stick out from that night. Most memorable was when Lane followed Brig-et-tay into an RV and came out moments later wearing only her pink, satin thong. He jumped up on the hood of a pickup that had a longhorn bumper (of course) and started shouting and waving his hat around. Trey, sitting near me at the time, looked at him for a moment then leaned back and remarked, stoically, “Well how's that rub ya?”

I was there too when Loren met Amanda. It was I, in fact, who introduced them. She and I were standing next to a golf cart; Frank was passed out on the passenger side.

Loren walked up to me and I asked if he'd met Amanda. They shook hands and the conversation quickly turned to Texas things.

In my mind I immediately saw them trading phone numbers, running into each other often now that Sarah and Trey were together. They'd get married at the Robb's ranch too—where it all began—their toddlers would ride horses, work rifles, wear Wrangler jeans, and they'd all take turns explaining how west Arkansas is practically the same thing as Texas. It didn't bother me too much that Amanda had replaced me in my own daydream. It's not too hard to accept that a person you have no chance with is actually a person you have no chance with. I may be romantic and sentimental, but I'm not naïve or jealous in that way.

Amanda decided to turn in and offered me a ride from the barn back to the house. I wasn't ready for bed but the idea of walking back to the house from the barn in the dark, drunk, didn't seem like a good one. The cab of her truck was dirty, not dirty like a Midwesterner's car—no straw wrappers or junk mail—but dirty as in caked with dirt. That truck was more than just transportation, the thought occurred to me, it did things; it was part of her livelihood. She drove slowly and asked me about the blond cowboy.

“He really liked you, huh?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said, “he was—nice.” I didn't want to come off as bitchy so I was conscious not to criticize him to her. I didn't think they were friends, but I was clearly not going to be judging by Texas standards.

“How old are you?” She asked.

“Twenty-four.”

“I thought you were younger.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two,” she said.

She parked in front of the camper and I waited for her to take her boots off outside the door. I wasn't surprised she was younger and it didn't bother me that she was tougher and more attractive. I wasn't jealous of her dark jeans, her pickup, her cowboys. What got me was her toe. I'd caught a glimpse of it the day before and now I was able to take a longer look. I didn't ask her what happened, but it had clearly been smashed or torn by something big. The nail was gone and the skin had grown over, mangled and purple. It made you wince and wonder how it happened.

I once sliced my index and middle fingers open with a butcher knife trying to cut a coconut in half. I've broken bones, fallen down stairs, smashed fingers in car doors. My injuries are always the result of clumsiness, inattentiveness, or stupidity. I'm a daughter and a student. I have curfews and homework and extra-curricular activities. I don't know if cows bite, have never ridden a horse, can't drive a stick. Whatever our obvious differences though, the thing I knew for certain was that whatever had happened to that girl's toe would never happen to mine.

Dad and I got up early the next morning to drive back to Illinois. We got to sleep on the bed in the camper and Amanda, her brother, and Stacy had the fold out couch and sleeping bags. The population of the camper had doubled over the night. Amanda's brother and Christy, the divorced bridesmaid, were passed out on the floor. A girl I hadn't met was curled up in the dining area. Amanda and Loren were sleeping next to each other on the pull out sofa bed.

I hadn't expected anything going into Texas which is one of the reasons it made such an impression. I felt like I'd experienced an entire culture reduced to the dimensions of a party; it was a different kind of fun than I'd had before. More than that, it was like discovering a better, more authentic way of life. I knew I was romanticizing a version of what life on a Texas (or west Arkansas) ranch was, knew I was not the first nor would be the last to do so, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I had missed out on something important.

After the trip, I watched bull riding every evening on ESPN Classic. I learned what it meant for a cowboy to ride into his hand, the difference between a rank bull and a hat bender, and why it's dangerous when a rider gets into the well. I even considered wearing in public the cowboy hat my mom (randomly) bought me a few Christmases ago. I knew it was silly—that internalizing rodeo vocab and donning a hat from the western store at the mall was not going to add anything to the experience—but that weekend had made an impression and I wanted to hold on to it.

At the time, I almost convinced myself that if Texas had happened a year or two earlier, I could have been one of them—could have sacked it all and found some desperado to settle, learned to ride, cooked bacon, shoveled stuff. I despise inauthenticity as much as the next person, try to avoid trends, and don't presume to be more capable of enjoying a band, book, or lifestyle than anyone else. I thought, then, that self-awareness and determination might have been enough to make a change and be legitimate. I thought what held me back were my ingrained habits of self-preservation.

The truth is, I *have* held onto the memory of that wedding and the impression it left, and Texas became for me a symbol of all I was missing out on. All the Lorens I

never wrangled, all the Amandas I'll never live up to. Ridiculous, of course—this melodramatic idea of being born on the wrong side of the Mississippi, of never quite fitting in. Ridiculous because it keeps happening. You have a great experience somewhere and suddenly your life doesn't make sense. We have this commitment to reality, to taking things as they are (give me the truth, please!), but secretly we're all trying figure out the formula, to answer that question our brains are too rational to admit though our stupid, frantic hearts keep waving the flag: Why can't everything be great all the time? Why can't we go back? We were part of things a moment ago.

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