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THE BODY MENDS ITSELF

by

Hannah Elizabeth Dow

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Letters,  
and the Department of English  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2017

THE BODY MENDS ITSELF

by Hannah Elizabeth Dow

August 2017

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SOUTHERN**  
**MISSISSIPPI.**

ABSTRACT

THE BODY MENDS ITSELF

by Hannah Elizabeth Dow

August 2017

The following poems were completed by the author between September 2014 and April 2017.

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## INTRODUCTION

So many poems, like the ones in this manuscript, articulate the impossibilities and failures of communication, as well as the pleasures and pains of attempting it. I am enticed by the idea of using apostrophe in poetry, a figure that Mary Szybist likens to prayer: “A voice reaches out to something beyond itself that cannot answer it” (qtd. in Dueben). I employ apostrophe most intentionally in my “postcard poems,” short pieces written in the voice of a single speaker and addressed to various, unnamed recipients. The speaker of these poems is never in the same place for long, and the postcards she sends originate in locations around the world: from Mississippi, to California, New England, Europe, and the Middle East. The speaker reflects on the idiosyncrasies of place, as well as the mysteries of human life: relationships, love, loss, death. As in Jacques Derrida’s notion of the postcard, the identities of the postcard recipients in my poems are never as important as the identity of the speaker when she becomes “a voice [that] reaches out to something beyond itself that cannot answer it” (Szybist qtd. in Dueben). I envision these postcard poems as apostrophic gestures in that they do not demand a response. By nature, postcards do not require reciprocal communication. They can be one-sided, the way prayer might feel, because whether or not someone is listening, the speaker will move on before an answer comes, if it comes at all. These postcards have no return address, because the speaker is a traveler, never writing from home.

Using a material genre such as the postcard poem has allowed me to explore the relationships between place, home, identity, and belonging. Place, in my poems, is most often conceived as habitat; the environment interacts with its human and non-human inhabitants, and the inhabitants speak (apostrophize) to each other and to their

surroundings. One's habitat is abstract, inescapable, and even as it changes, it is a home that cannot be moved beyond. My poems both celebrate and distance themselves from the habitats they create.

Whenever I write about place, I hear Richard Hugo's voice urging me to write what I know without having to adhere to factual truth: "Though you've never seen it before, it must be a town you've lived in all your life. You must take emotional possession of the town and so the town must be one that, for personal reasons I can't understand, you feel is your town" (12). Most of the places I write about are places I have briefly lived or visited, and yet, I like to think that my poems mythologize these places, rather than replicate them. For example, "Laws of Living," is one of the more "truthful" depictions of place. And yet, the town in the poem (Hattiesburg, Mississippi) is not the "real" Hattiesburg, or even the Hattiesburg I have lived in for the past three years. It does contain some semblances of the real place, including markers like: "We are promised: / *Jesus and tomatoes coming soon, and*

Nearby, the houses seem  
to birth cats and churches try breathing  
assurance into the neighborhood's  
decay

Yet, the poem actually becomes a broader meditation on home and belonging. It uses the law of inertia as an imperfect metaphor to explain the restlessness we might feel when life takes us far from home: "I have found no laws / explaining the restless body / inside a vehicle standing still."

Although the poem begins in Mississippi, it ends in what I imagine to be the hometown(s) of my childhood: where I was baptized, where my father taught me to ride a bike, and where I first learned about death. And yet, this hometown is just as mythologized as the Hattiesburg, Mississippi in the poem. This hometown is not just one place. My parents moved around a lot when I was a child, and I have moved around a lot as an adult. I have lived in many different cities and in different parts of the same city. When I think of the “town [I’ve] lived in all [my] life,” I think of this amalgamation of towns; while each place may be distinct from the other, they form for me a single home. This reminds me of Elizabeth Bishop’s treatment of place and home in “Poem,” and how our understanding of home is really just the memory we have of it:

And it’s still loved,  
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot)...  
...life and the memory of it so compressed  
they’ve turned into each other. Which is which? (48-49; 53-54)

Like the small sketch in Bishop’s “Poem,” a postcard represents “life and the memory of it cramped, / dim”: an image of a single moment in time accompanied by an account of the speaker’s memories of the place (Bishop 55-56).

Many of my poems are concerned with home not just as a physical entity—a house or a hometown—but rather, as the relationships between ourselves and other people, or between ourselves and our environments. I am fascinated by the fact that we can both care for and destroy our earthly home: the planet that both cares for and destroys humanity. These tensions are inherent in my poetry; for example, in “Imitation,” the

speaker describes an external environment that has suffered from severe drought and in response, she creates an indoor scene to reflect the external world:

Inside, I removed floral: yanked  
curtains from their rods like weeds,  
unstitched every tiny blossom on blouse  
or handkerchief. I drew fresh coats  
of *Aged Barrel* across the walls, set fire  
to the potted plants and counterfeit  
flowers, watched them blaze,  
and saw how flattering it was.

In this poem, the differences between inside and outside disappear, such that home becomes inseparable from nature.

My attention to earthly belonging has been inspired by a sustained study of Dorothy Wordsworth's writing. Rather than bring the external world into the home, however, Wordsworth brings the domestic outdoors. She occasionally writes about the possibilities of seeing the domestic world enter into the landscape: "[I]t is scarce a Bower, a little parlour, one not enclosed by walls but shaped out for a resting place by the rocks & the ground rising about it. It had a sweet moss carpet—We resolved to go & plant flowers in both these places tomorrow" (91). Using words like "parlour" and "carpet," Wordsworth shows us how hospitable she finds the natural world, or at the very least, how at home she feels in nature. Moreover, she demonstrates a desire to add beauty to her world. Just like the gardens she plants around her home at Dove Cottage, she wishes to nurture—possibly even domesticate—the "little parlour" she finds outdoors.

Yet there is a fine line between domestication and destruction, and Wordsworth feels strongly about humanity's inclination to interfere with the environment. In one journal entry, she writes about seeing some "shrubs...cut away in some parts of [an] island," and comments on how unnatural the landscape looks with "no natural glades...merely a lawn with a few miserable young trees standing as if they were half starved...If it *could* be concealed it would be well for all who are not pained to see the pleasantest of earthly spots deformed by man" (Wordsworth 107). Wordsworth consistently shows her affinity for the natural world in moments like these, but she also does so subtly, by allowing the environment to speak for itself. She often elides her own presence, and the journals demonstrate that her authorial identity is not an identity totally separate from her world. Wordsworth resists the temptation to produce feelings for any ostensible readership; she reflects her own feelings alongside the feelings of her environment, but does not seek to "create" or impose these feelings on the environment or on her reader.

Similarly, my poems attempt a subtle advocacy for the natural world. For example, "Postcard from Yosemite" opens with the lines: "Let the black trees say there is more fire / here than water." The poem lacks personal pronouns altogether, and by giving the trees a voice, the power to "say" and to declare their suffering in the midst of a drought, I hope to follow Dorothy Wordsworth's example and write with what Sara Weiger calls "a concern to elaborate a polite relation to the environment that does not depend on the static being of discrete living creatures" (652). As a postcard poem, "Postcard from Yosemite" contains an implied speaker, a person who allows the trees to speak, even if she, like Dorothy Wordsworth, channels their thoughts through her own.

As lyric poems, most of my poems do, however, include a subjective “I” who speaks, who sees herself in relation to her world, and who forms her identity out of interactions with both human and non-human others. As an act of communication between two people, many of the postcard poems deal with themes specific to the relationships between human beings, particularly love and loss. Postcards written to a single “you” include: “Postcard from Los Angeles, California,” “Postcard from Kansas City, Kansas,” “Postcard from York, Maine,” and “Postcard from Caye Caulker, Belize.” The “you” in each of these poems varies, but in addressing another person directly, these poems directly engage with the act of correspondence. In some ways, I imagine that the speaker of these particular postcard poems enters into an epistolary moment and thinks what the speaker of Mark Jarman’s “If I Were Paul” thinks at the poem’s conclusion: “I send you this not knowing if you will receive it, or if having received it, you will read it, or if // having read it, you will know that it contains my blessing” (poets.org). This idea—sending a piece of oneself out into the world, uncertain if it will arrive or how it will be received if it does arrive—is a sentiment that the above poems share.

And yet, while apostrophe or postcards may seem to avoid dialectic, they invite or hint at the possibilities of discussion between speaker/sender and reader. “Postcard from York, Maine” addresses an explicit “you” whose mother has decided “we are not a family anymore.” In the mother’s performative utterance, language alters reality and the idea of home becomes inscrutable. Unlike “Laws of Living,” this poem describes how home can become unfamiliar, even dangerous:

Home is no protection from even  
the smallest storms—

the boarding up of windows,  
slight tearing of the sail.

In a discussion of Elizabeth Bishop's "Sestina," Helen Vendler writes that "Of all the things that should not be inscrutable, one's house comes first. The fact that one's house always *is* inscrutable, that nothing is more enigmatic than the heart of the domestic scene, offers Bishop one of her recurrent subjects" (98). "Postcard from York, Maine" takes up this idea by portraying a similarly inscrutable home. The coastal winter scene and the mother's words subvert the idea that the domestic home provides safety and comfort. Like Bishop's "Sestina," the home in "Postcard from York, Maine" is equally enigmatic; how is it possible that a mother could declare to her children that they are no longer family? The poem's final scene, quoted above, highlights the mother's words as performative utterance; they make the idea of home both inscrutable and unsafe. Home can no longer offer protection from "the smallest storms."

While I was writing this poem, the use of direct address felt especially like Jarman's assertion in "If I Were Paul": the poem felt like a blessing for my best friends, whose father passed away two years ago. However, I also felt the uncertainty about knowing how they might read the poem if they were to receive it as a postcard. Would they even read it? How would it make them feel? Would they respond? While a postcard may never receive a response or acknowledgment, these questions allow for the possibility of viewing the postcard as a performative utterance itself. If the postcard has the possibility to change reality—to alter another person's emotions—then it is never truly a one-sided exchange.



This possibility might also extend to prayer as well. Prayer, spoken in earnest, acknowledges the dialectic in its belief in the existence of the addressee. “Postcard from Los Angeles” blurs the relationship between postcard and prayer as the speaker writes to a person, a romantic “you,” whom she has idolized or deified. The poem also draws on the importance of memory as it relates to place, and summons yet another possibility of performative utterance because memory has the power to shape and alter reality. After naming all the unexpected places in the city where the speaker has found this “you,” the poem makes a somewhat unexpected turn:

I looked down  
at my palms, saw roses, winced  
at the open-close of their tender blooming.  
How down-to-earth you are.

In this moment, the speaker’s idolatry of the “you” becomes apparent. The roses’ “tender blooming” evokes an image of the stigmata, or the sores that correspond to Jesus’s crucifixion wounds. The poem concludes with an assertion of certainty, which deliberately and simultaneously undermines itself:

What certainty  
I have in knowing where to look for you—  
you, certain as the world, as a traffic light,  
quickly changing when I blink

This move calls into question the speaker’s relationship with the “you,” particularly the tension between the mundane moments in the poem, such as “your face in the O of a

Taco Bell,” against the otherworldly roses’ tender blooming, whose appearance she attributes to the “you.”

Like “Postcard from Los Angeles, California,” many of my poems speak to the tension between earnest belief and doubt, and many do this in a way that locates God in the everyday, in other people, or in nature. Several of the poems in this manuscript are retellings of the mysteries of the rosary. In the Catholic tradition, the mysteries of the rosary are divided into four types: sorrowful, joyful, glorious, and luminous, and they are used in prayer as meditations on the events in Jesus’s life and death. I am particularly fond of Louise Glück’s definition of religion as one that “documents the relation of affliction to ecstasy,” and I find this statement especially applicable to the tensions between joy and sorrow that appear throughout the mysteries of the rosary (50).

Like the postcard, the rosary lends materiality to the act of apostrophe. A poem that embodies both of these objects simultaneously is “Postcard from Gethsemane,” which is modeled after The Agony in the Garden, a sorrowful mystery that meditates on the evening Jesus went to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane shortly before his crucifixion. Rather than a meditation on this event, however, the poem is actually a meditation on grief itself:

The trees in this garden  
wear grief like they’ve been  
holding it in for a thousand  
years, a secret writhing and alive  
inside that gnarl of trunk, limbs  
embracing only themselves.

The poem imagines the aftermath of the events described in this particular sorrowful mystery and its effects on the trees in the garden. The physical descriptions of the trees indicate that they have been quietly holding onto grief for so long that it has deformed their bodies.

Another poem that looks to the natural world to better understand another manifestation of the rosary's mysteries is "Postcard from Gulfport, Mississippi." This poem is a response to the Ascension, a glorious mystery that acknowledges the assumption of Jesus's body into heaven. Like "Postcard from Gethsemane," this poem looks to the natural world instead of religion for explanation, and replaces Jesus's body with the bodies of march flies (love bugs) that have flown into the speaker's windshield:

I find it possible to accept these  
small deaths, to picture  
wings and red thoraxes making  
their way toward sky, counting  
their descendants as they go.

Like Jesus's disciples, the speaker in this poem finds she is only able to "accept these / small deaths" once she believes the march flies could "ascend" to a better place. This poem is one that particularly "documents the relation of affliction to ecstasy," in that the march flies are "joined in the act of love" immediately before they die.

Catholicism enters my poetry in ways I find both comforting and terrifying, and my poems frequently explore the tensions between faith and doubt. For example, "Postcard from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania" explores themes of love, sex, and marriage as they relate to the idea of transubstantiation in the Catholic faith. This poem is meant to

border on the satirical, and uses its humor to illuminate an aspect of Catholic belief in the Eucharist (as the actual body and blood of Christ) that many, including myself, find strange:

[Jesus] says the wedding of two  
bodies is pretty much the same  
altering thing that happens  
when I let him inside of me.  
So I married Jesus today...

The idea of consuming the Eucharist is both elevating and incredibly disturbing, and these feelings make their way into this poem. In this way, “Postcard from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania” is especially concerned with the body’s relationship to the spirit, and many of my poems interrogate the line between sexual and religious intimacy. I look especially to Derrick Austin as the master of blurring this line:

We ran from His body in the gallery,  
afraid, aching to be sore...  
You teach me what the Old Masters can’t—  
the crimson flush running over you already  
fading into memory—yours are the hands  
that master and finish me with a final stroke (37)

In her foreword to Austin’s debut poetry collection, *Trouble the Water*, Mary Szybist writes: “...spiritual salvation is not imagined apart from physical salvation. The life of the body matters deeply...” (8). As Austin frequently imbues sexuality with religious imagery and vice versa, I seek to do the same. In both “Postcard from Gulfport,

Mississippi” and “Postcard from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,” the meeting of bodies—human and nonhuman—matters a great deal in understanding the confounding religious mysteries like ascension or transubstantiation, as well as complicates the relationship between material (bodies, rosary beads) and immaterial (belief, mystery).

Using the postcard poem as an organizing principle for this manuscript has allowed me to grapple with the various themes outlined above, yet the final characteristic that intrigues me is the way in which postcards are open and even potentially public. Unlike a private letter sealed in an envelope, a postcard could easily be read by anyone accompanying it on its journey. For this reason, the postcard seems a particularly apt vehicle or metaphor for poetry; while a poem might be intended to be read in one way by one particular person, everyone who reads the poem will respond differently. It might contain a private experience that the poet knows could be made public. Even when, as Szybist says, “it cannot fully be heard, understood, or answered,” a poem—like a postcard, like a prayer—is a gesture to connect, while the materials—postcards, rosary beads—lend embodiment to the words (qtd. in Dueben).

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## WHAT IS THE BODY

if not a nest—  
indiscernible like a plover's  
shallow hole in sand  
lined with shell,  
untouchable like a woodpecker's  
mine in a tree's soft patch.  
If not a verb, a being, the way  
a pregnant woman  
who arranges her home  
in the weeks before delivery  
is said to be *nesting*.  
How it gathers  
everything to itself—  
history, windows, warmth.  
If not a hive, the bee's boundless  
enter and egress,  
then a mountain  
thought to be a mountain:  
what the magma won't miss  
when it finally erupts.

## POSTCARD FROM THE SPANISH STEPS

The artist breathes a divine  
varnish, transfigures a body  
to burn like sun on new snow.  
So like grass to the rain I make him  
my god, beg him to fall down  
beside me, show me what colors  
his hands invent. Everything

disappoints from a lesser  
vantage—tempera on wood,  
more viscous than it sounds,  
that the painting insists on its own  
smallness, and the artist's pale body,  
slight veins like shadows on his hands.



## HALCYON: AN ORIGIN STORY

After making precise measurements,  
a woman travels to the middle of the ocean

to disassemble her ship. She tears the sail  
from its mast, strikes from the bottom

as though cutting down a tree, lets it fall.  
The hull, she uproots piece by piece by piece,

tosses the fragments overboard. They leap  
like fish finding water, bob, bob & float.

Nothing left to stand on, she knots the sail  
around her shoulders and, with the pieces,

draws together her nest.

## POSTCARD FROM THE DEAD SEA

This is what she wanted—  
to be left alone  
on the Sea's  
placid face,  
clutching its fabled  
stones to her chest  
as if they could grant  
her passage to the next  
life, as if the fertilizing  
salt from the Sea's  
own womb could make her  
more than mother.

This is what she wanted—  
to prove that a person  
can drown, become immersed  
while still floating, or else  
baptized into something more  
than water. From the shore  
I watch her face sink  
from the sun, head  
pressed to water  
by invisible hands.

## ANYONE WOULD DROWN

No one saw her emerge from the ocean in midnight darkness, but they awoke to the imprint of her body in sand. Slight curve of the hip said, *woman*—said, *bird*. Aside from the imprint, no one could prove they had seen her—not when sailors began leaving notes behind that said, *I have followed the sound of my love to the sea*. Not when a tidal wave lapped the shore of its trees and its houses, depositing fish skeletons in retreat. Day after day, another swimmer disappeared under a strong current, never to resurface, and still no one could say they had seen her.

Yet she was blamed for all these things. Years later, no one saw a ship collide with the vacant shore. No one saw the sailors, the trees and the houses, the swimmers, disembark. Because they did not see them disembark they did not believe these were their very own fathers, trees, houses, children. They could only believe that a woman had stolen them away with the sound of her voice disguised as wind, as rain, as current, did not understand that a woman and a halcyon could make their home in the same womb.

POSTCARD FROM GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI

One difference between snow  
and march flies? Snow falls,  
the flies' slow drift both  
tumbles and ascends. As I drive,  
my windshield gathers only  
the gluey prints of their slight  
bodies, joined in the act of love.  
I find it possible to accept these  
small deaths, to picture  
wings and red thoraxes making  
their way toward sky, counting  
their descendants as they go.

## GENEALOGY

this tree vines itself to another  
like an umbilical cord  
like the midwife or its father  
forgot to cut it from its mother  
and it grew up attached to her waist  
without secrets without  
rebellion without privacy  
what if we were all still joined  
by our umbilical cords

## LAWS OF LIVING

I seal my windows to keep  
the pests away. Nearby, the houses seem  
to birth cats and the churches try breathing  
assurance into the neighborhood's  
decay. High above the displaced  
palm trees, birds navigate a city  
of their own. I look at them and feel  
the occasional delight I did as a child  
while flying in airplanes, my mother  
beside me, each of us reading  
a book with gossamer pages, laws  
of inertia allowing us to travel  
at great speeds without moving  
our bodies, without pages turning themselves.  
The laws of living bring us to places  
we did not plan to go. Places where flowers  
bloom without permission, where  
everything closes on Sunday or else  
for good. Here, mothers have died  
for their sons, sons for their mothers,  
and even the pavement loves  
what cannot love it back. We are promised:  
*Jesus and tomatoes coming soon.*  
I watch birds baptize themselves in their bath,  
recall that my father baptized me.  
He also taught me to ride a bike.  
Our first time out on the road he asked  
what I should listen for. *Birds*, I said,  
and while he did not correct me—

such is his way—I have never

since forgotten the immanence  
death has in our lives. Mother, Father,

I am trying to make my way to you,  
but I have found no laws

explaining the restless body  
inside a vehicle standing still.

## WHY I WILL NEVER GARDEN

When I was just a wishbone  
child I buried lost teeth  
between mother's marigolds  
and parsley. Because a part  
of me had died I willed  
the earth to grow me  
a sister—bone from my bone.

When a sister never came,  
I dug holes across the yard  
until the dog refused to walk  
outside. I let mother seal  
my scrapes with resin,  
sat inside and peeled  
gluey ghost-prints

from my fingertips. Now,  
I scorn the feeling of dirt  
beneath my nails, their filthy  
arcs reminding me of spades,  
of senseless violence  
toward the earth, as well as  
what's beneath the earth—

root systems that might tangle  
around a sister's ghost-  
throat. I will never garden.  
Never kneel close  
to the ground & hear  
the voice that rain makes  
as it meets a sun-bathed ground.



## KUMARI

When the universe left my womb, royal priests  
looked to my sister—her set of full teeth,  
her oil-black hair, her skin unblemished, unbled.  
Limbs like a banyan tree's—open, not inviting.

On her black night, in a voice as clear  
as a duck's, she asks: *Did they let you dance?*  
*Were the goats on fire? Did they wash your hair*  
*with perfume? When they bring me your belongings*

*how will I know they are yours?* I tell her all  
I remember is waking into fragrance, into flower  
petals torn, into asking for water. The unfamiliar bed,  
the unmarked sheets, my thighs soft and heavy, like deer.

POSTCARD FROM YORK, MAINE

Still, every day like coming to  
the ocean in the dark—hearing it,  
but only seeing its sudden enormity  
upon waking. Your mother's words:  
*we are not a family anymore.*

A gull lands on the seawall. He doesn't feel  
the year is new, hasn't checked his body  
for changes. He is content to be alone,  
or else is learning to live with it.

Home is no protection from even  
the smallest storms—  
the boarding up of windows,  
slight tearing of the sail.

## IN THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

### *Center*

Our bodies are transparent  
spheres, amniotic from our birth.  
We've learned to crave  
the nakedness of a mussel shell,  
the stomach round  
with extravagant fruit.

### *Left*

Feeling taut and unused to my new  
skin, the odd bend of my knees, I avoid  
your wide gaze. Your eyes are heavy—

sleep or desire? Do you notice how  
the rabbits edge around our feet? The single  
curve of my breast to hip? And is it you

I am avoiding, or the dragon tree behind  
you, the blood I know it holds, and the large-  
eyed owl, alert to the uncoiling snake?

### *Right*

A shadow passes over  
my body and I feel  
the almost-ghost

of your touch. But nothing  
can save me from knowing  
you might be drowning

or tied to a torture  
instrument where the snake  
plays sibilant music. I listen

for your voice, avoid  
any surface that promises  
to return my own gaze.

*Outside*

More than half of the body  
is water, and meanwhile  
all this drought. I would like

to open myself, pour out  
from the center and flood,  
watch the roots clutch

at the soil like hands  
that have just awakened  
to their lover's touch.

POSTCARD FROM CAYE CAULKER, BELIZE

I saw you from the airplane:  
small light. I held my book  
to you and read. On the page,

I found the letters of your name  
and spelled you until the words  
burst open like seed pods and

scattered you around my feet.  
How fragile you are in my hands.  
How well I know you to know

what black spores you hold  
and what happens when  
you're split and buried, left alone.

## INFINITELY YOURS

Let's crash a wake. I'll be your plus-one.  
You'll wear your tie and I'll wear my dress.  
We'll poach leftovers from the funeral crowd—  
muffins, macaroni salad, finger  
sandwiches—we'll take  
flowers from the tombs and tie

them through our hair. Loosen your tie,  
let's be going now, on to the next one—  
a penthouse somewhere, we'll take  
the elevator to the highest floor, undress  
the sky with our eyes, dance beneath the finger  
of the moon, away from the crowds.

Next, we'll find a wedding, crowd  
around an altar and watch two strangers tie  
the knot, put rings on their fingers,  
promise: *you're the only one*.  
And when she, in her white dress  
and he, whose eyes see only her, take

off in their shiny car, we'll take  
balloons from chairs, drinks from a crowded  
bar—flutes of champagne dressed  
up in bubbles—something to tie  
us over for infinity: plus one, plus one,  
plus one. Lace my fingers

through your expectant fingers,  
let's watch the prom king take  
his queen around the dance floor, one  
more song before the crowds  
disperse and they're alone. Now tie  
me to your sail and we'll address

our next adventure: a dressage  
competition, where your trained fingers  
will hold me like a rider whose hands are tied  
to reins, walk me around the arena, take  
me in pirouette before the crowd.  
Bow. Applause. And just one

more thing—let them take

our picture before the world crowds  
in, before we're one plus many ones.

## THE WORLD IS THROWING ME A SURPRISE PARTY

The trees are in on it, too.  
They wave until I notice  
how well they've bloomed  
into party outfits, how they've  
changed in public. They're not shy.  
Neither are the morning birds  
who practice *happy birthday*  
when they think I'm still asleep.  
The mailman passes by my house,  
saving up my cards—he'll throw them  
like confetti when I open the door.  
My friends do not return my calls.  
They act like they don't know me,  
afraid they'll ruin the surprise.  
And my husband is gone  
on business for a month, time  
enough to find me perfect gifts—  
red Italian wines, a Japanese harp,  
perfume scraped from a rose's hip.  
The moon, if he could. But it  
has a prior engagement—  
it's been practicing its brightness,  
stretching its broad  
face a little more each night  
and tomorrow, I will sway  
beneath the fullness.



POSTCARD FROM PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

I am at another wedding  
not my own, feeling like  
I'm as important enough to be  
here as the carpet's fringe—  
a nice addition, if pointless

and occasionally in the way.  
I'm in a new dress, but Jesus  
is the only one who knows it,  
and not just because he saw me  
cut off the tags and slide it over

my head this morning, but  
because he stares at me  
while everyone else looks to  
the altar, where the action  
happens, though I wouldn't call it

that—for all their hype and eternal  
implications, ceremonies feel so  
uneventful. *Do you mind  
sharing your limelight?* I ask  
Jesus, because no one but me

notices him or the way  
his muscles thrust  
in chiseled pain. The priest  
says something about bodies—  
how two become one,

and I imagine bride &  
groom joined at the hip,  
like the plastic couple  
perched this very moment  
on their three-tier vanilla cake,

and the pain of being  
irreversible, altered this way.  
Jesus says this wedding  
was his idea. He likes bringing  
people together, likes parties,

and says the wedding of two

bodies is pretty much the same  
altering thing that happens  
when I let him inside of me.  
So I married Jesus today,

and I should have known this  
when I first walked down  
that aisle—he hasn't taken his eyes  
off me yet, and it's not even my day.  
Do I think he'll make a good

husband? Not if I'm the jealous  
type. I don't think I'll like  
the way he loves everyone equally  
or watches every woman in the world  
undress before slipping into bed.

## ADVICE FROM A MARRIAGE COUNSELOR

To love someone at their worst means to accept that a body crouched over a toilet, vomiting, is more appealing than one summoning dust and the greenness of age. Your partner, when dead, will still ignore your demands that he cut his fingernails or mow the lawn or flush the toilet, and once you have died, you will no longer hear the flushing of toilets, so you might as well get used to it. When you are dead, it no longer matters who you wake up next to or whether you are laughing or if he can make a good lemon meringue pie. And you must not forget that after a mere twenty years, children begin to raise themselves. Because when it comes to marriage, what matters most is whose name appears adjacent to yours on a tombstone and whether you will agree on an epitaph, because what is written in stone is written in stone.

## A JAIL

A man and a woman were out shopping for a jail.

I would like a dormitory-style jail, said the man. I want to sleep on bunk beds and when the feeling arises, pretend I am on a sinking ship.

I would prefer a panopticon-style jail, said the woman. I want to feel I am always the center of attention.

I think there is a way to accommodate both your wishes, said the realtor. Look here, this jail was once underwater. And looters visit so frequently, you will not forget you are being watched.

A once-submerged jail would make the sinking ship game more riveting, said the man.

And I do love being watched, said the woman. Even while I am getting undressed...

Will you take it? said the realtor, who began to lock them inside before they could respond.

PLEASE DON'T FEED THE SPIRIT ANIMALS

I saw a pair of mechanical polar bears  
getting it on at the Vienna Prater. It was  
unexpected—his bucking her from behind

while I slid by unobserved in a no-rail  
cart. Knees to my chin, bar low and tight  
across my lap, I dropped the fake

camera I'd been instructed to use.  
They were polar bears in everything  
but spirit, I decided—or else all spirit,

no polar bear. I couldn't know. Who  
signed them up for this? Were these  
exhibitionists in another life, banished

to a special circle of pseudo-Arctic hell?  
Or was this a celibate's reward? Sex in heaven,  
perpetual love-making, no threat of offspring.

A giant crab looked on from across the way.  
And how was he supposed to feel,  
lit up only by his own florescence?

POSTCARD FROM LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

You were always fond of anything  
that could melt, and so I found you

at the bottom of my cocktail glass  
where you were hiding beneath a smile

of orange, a globe of ice. On the bus  
I witnessed you Cubist: a man modeling

your scars—another, your small tuft  
of above-the-collar chest hair.

I looked outside the window and saw  
your face in the O of a Taco Bell,

your bike locked up outside  
the hair salon—the bike that left

grease stains on my palms. I looked down  
at my palms, saw roses, winced

at the open-close of their tender blooming.  
How down-to-earth you are. What certainty

I have in knowing where to look for you—  
you, certain as the world, as a traffic light,

quickly changing when I blink.

## VARIATIONS ON *GOODBYE*

Sometimes, my goodbye assumes  
it will see you again—in a café, staining  
a teacup with your lips, or home,  
frying eggs in your underwear.

My goodbye, like an old man serving  
beer, like snot in a tissue, like a flag  
at half-mast, tells it like it is. It says: *watch me  
crest this wave, man*. Flirtatious, it twirls

hair around its long, slender fingers,  
pops gum between its glossy  
teeth. Sometimes, it expects not  
to see you again. It is the average

finger in the air. A finger prepared  
to press a button. Once it was a kiss  
ripening on your hand. Now it is  
the stone fruit's pit, just before

the toss. Or the hand on a ship's  
wheel, petticoats swelling with  
the wind, while the shark makes  
its long descent, realizes latitudes.

## THE HARP KNOWS HOW TO BE STRIPPED BARE

*After Duchamp*

And the fish knows how to be stripped bare.  
And the bed. Each feels in the strumming  
of its ribs the call for a missing part. A loss  
less obvious than death. Like pocket change.  
Like drought. Like learning how to not grow  
old, as in uncapping the fountain of youth  
and casting vapors on the world. So the harp  
never buzzes, the fish never grays, the bed never  
folds into itself. So the harp lives forever  
on a stage. The fish, a chopping block. The bed,  
on display in an empty room. And when the sun presses  
its thick body against a nearby window—drown  
the lights, pull the shades. Let them sing sad music, make  
their love to the silence. Allow, at least, this modesty.



## ORIGIN OF SALT

A man and a woman build a house of stones.  
They do not build a roof because it never rains.  
After two days, they say, what shall we drink?  
The water, says the woman.  
But the lake is so beautiful, says the man, we should not disturb it.  
We will die without it. She makes a cup with her hands and drinks.  
He makes a cup with his hands and drinks.  
After several years, the lake has retreated many inches.  
The man, the woman, and their child must walk out very far to cup their hands and drink.  
What can we do? says the woman. We will run out of water.  
We can make our cups smaller.  
He makes a cup with his child's hands, saying, see? Now we will live many more years.  
After many more years, the child's hands are as large as his father's.  
What can we do now?  
We must conserve, says the woman. We must separate our tears from their salt.

## IMITATION

All at once, the plants began  
to die. Trees surrendered leaves  
in late summer, coneflowers  
curled black & in on themselves,  
and the rose hips never ripened.  
The grass brittle and browned,  
hedges hummed when the wind  
rattled their skeleton limbs.

Inside, I removed floral: yanked  
curtains from their rods like weeds,  
unstitched every tiny blossom on blouse  
or handkerchief. I drew fresh coats  
of *Aged Barrel* across the walls, set fire  
to the potted plants and counterfeit  
flowers, watched them blaze,  
and saw how flattering it was.

## DESERTED

A rainstorm would be convenient  
now, but you were never one  
for that, always preferred enigma  
and surprise. The more I asked,  
the more you took away. First,  
the color green, so I said

take the green, but leave  
the flower, its husk is too  
fragile, even for your hands.

You left me with a fistful of stems,  
saying

see the care with which I hold  
this flower. You call it purple,  
but its infinity is my family.

You promised to return it in abundance.  
You took the stream next, and its fish,  
too, ladled all into your mouth  
as if you'd never eat or drink again.

So I said

take the stream and take  
the fish, but leave the gold, the  
only hope left for this century.

But you left me with my toes in the shallow  
bed I began to call my grave.

And you said

you cannot live on gold alone,  
it will disappear from this century  
as quickly as I will from the next.

You remained,  
saw the ocean and knew  
that it was good. I understood  
your devastating greed,  
said

if you take the ocean you will die  
of thirst. If you take the ocean,  
you will wrench the moon from its perch.

And you said

foolish child, if I unhang  
the moon I will undo everything  
I have done these last three days.

And so you drowned me in a darkness  
punctured not even by white stars.

## POSTCARD FROM YOSEMITE

Let the black trees say there is more fire  
here than water. Sequoias, like snakes, need

the kind of shedding only a good burn  
can provide. This is the way water transpires,

becomes flame—from the ground up  
to the tops of trees, spreading the way

the sun deposits light, or climbs down  
rocks as if for the first time leaving

some long-dormant volcano, learns, like  
any idea, to tumble over itself, ablaze.

## POSTCARD FROM THE SALTON SEA

If the rain came now, it would flood the cobblestone patterns of dirt where the lake  
should be.

And the ground would not know what to do, unable to bury all this water inside itself.

If the rain came now, dead fish would blanket its surface as the lake rebuilt itself.

And the fish would be washed clean of the dust they have worn like a shroud for months.

If the rain came now, it would entomb the canoe that rests in the middle of the lake.

And the bodies in the canoe would appear to the earthmovers of the next drought.

POEM WITH INEXACT APOCALPYSE

How far we'll go  
for eggshell powder  
swirled into a water glass:  
some of us build strength  
like houses—from the bones  
up. We will know the time  
has come when dogs cease  
to lick our wounds, leave us  
for forests' clay, marlstone  
of unsoiled graves.

## NOTES ON THE DROUGHT

### I.

Gills on the brink  
of collapse, you learned  
breath with your hands—  
dug sand from your chest  
with the hard gift of shell,  
carved space for the parching  
air. Your lungs bloomed  
at first gasp, before  
the withering of your face,  
the disappearance of scales.

### II.

When the sun jaundiced  
the white curtains, your skin  
cracked into geometric  
shapes, subtle hair faded  
to brown. And as your feet  
uprooted from the foot  
of the bed—you felt the sudden  
need to be covered, to wrap  
your body in the thin  
shroud of flowers  
wilting behind your ears.

### III.

You begged the sky  
for rain, but it sent the fires  
instead, like gods with plaster  
skin and wicking eyes,  
thundering through a storm  
of flames. All the thirst  
that it created, sent to drown  
you in your own blistering.

### IV.

Rather than bones, the ocean  
deposits salt in your vanishing.

POSTCARD FROM GETHSEMANE

We want grief to be quiet,  
something we can hold  
all the way up and down  
the mountain without letting  
on. The trees in this garden  
wear grief like they've been  
holding it in for a thousand  
years, a secret writhing and alive  
inside that gnarl of trunk, limbs  
embracing only themselves.



## OUR LADY OF ARTS & CRAFTS

The handkerchief in her pocket, initials  
almost yours. She embroidered them  
herself, first attempt at the seed stitch,  
so *K* looks more like *H*. If she had known  
you'd go so soon she would have buried  
you in the backyard alongside tomato plants  
with a tag to track your progress, to ensure  
that you would thrive. Drowned you  
in resin like an insect or a flower, fastened  
you around her neck on a chain whose clasp  
requires extra hands, another body, to undo.

## THE CROWNING

Look in my garden,  
don't you see yourself

haunting the ladyslippers,

the grass that brushes  
your feet? This is the way

to imagine you: ceramic

and standing as if  
some angel has just left

a crown of sunlight

on your head. Sometimes  
I come here to thread the vowel

of our names together: Hail,

woman of candles, daughter  
of fables. Hail blade-shaped leaves.

Hail clay beneath a vacant

grave. Here is the shroud  
I prepared for you, let it shield us.

O

*After Dorothy Wordsworth*

some things stay

rain, orchids, moonlight

same. All morning, my mind

a rising humming bird. Rain like blinking  
wind. And I cannot forget the way mild  
night keeps the weather

from this illness,  
walks us to our graves.

POSTCARD FROM GRASMERE, ENGLAND

I press my forehead to the floor  
and ask forgiveness for poor  
listening. A dove rests in the crown  
of birch limbs on my head. I've grown  
holier these moments I've spent  
with my legs folded and bent  
like a grasshopper's, singing  
as he sings, chafing  
all parts together. A duck cleaves  
the lake's smooth surface and leaves  
me wishing I could do anything  
so precisely.

## OPTIONS FOR PENANCE

Fill your living room with flowers. Keep the cat from poisonous ones.

Write the Our Father in chalk. Write it one hundred times. When you finish, erase everything and write it all again.

Lie naked in the snow. Be washed clean.

When your hand bleeds, do nothing to stop it. The body mends itself.

Put on your wedding dress. Climb out the upstairs window, stand on the roof. People will mistake you for the Virgin Mary, build shrines in your honor, light candles across your yard.

Put salt on your wounds instead of your food.

Lock yourself in the room with flowers. Kneel before them until they die, until their scent disappears from your hair. Whichever comes first.

VARIATIONS ON *I'M SORRY*

The apology I give you is shaped  
like an egg. When it cracks, I let it  
drain from hands to arms, follow

my veins like the rivers they are.  
My apology is a river. Fast-moving,  
Knows where it's going and when

it will arrive. And it arrives. My apology  
knows how to make an entrance.  
It dazzles in its fur coat and sapphires.

Everyone turns their head to look  
at my apology as it goes, lips slightly  
parted. See me mouth the words

to my apology—ripe, sweet, firm.  
Don't be alarmed by the powder  
it leaves on my tongue, the bees flying

in and out of my mouth. We all  
need something sweet, something  
gold and worth blossoming for.

## POSTCARD FROM KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

Little known fact: this is the capital  
of dead baby birds. No one knows  
how or why, from where they fall,  
just step cautiously around the gray-  
pink of them and their large, sealed eyes,  
without considering how a bird falling  
resembles a miscarriage—*spontaneous  
loss*, or that the name Phoebe means  
*bright*, but also, *small passerine bird*,  
but also, *sister, daughter, girl*, or how  
anything that dies before seeing is  
born into darkness, swaddled in cries.

POSTCARD FROM KANSAS CITY, KANSAS

This city is this city on both sides  
of the state line, the way grass is green,  
etcetera—yet for all the arguments  
they cause, this border has always  
felt invisible to me. Even birth,  
a sort of border, a crossing into,  
carries its own dim edges: we only know  
the moment we lost you, that you passed  
into life without living, no grand Persephone  
moment, no eyes adjusting to the sun.



## ECHOLOCATION

Last night I dreamt of wings. I dreamt that you  
did not use words but rather echoed sounds  
I could not hear, in a pulse I could not feel. Beloved:

if I had found a way to make you see  
that I was not your prey, you could have searched  
for me the way you forage nectar and  
forestalled the sequent deafening you felt.

POSTCARD FROM MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

At the scene  
a custodian pushes  
blood into jars  
with a broom.

Briefcase quiet  
folded pajamas  
shaving cream set  
to leave in the morning.

Woman on a balcony  
mourning. Wants God.  
Answers. To plunge toward  
another derelict building.

A ghost in this one  
or blurred man  
walking. Agnostic  
photographer says

*man*, blames an eye that blinks  
too slowly, as if resurrected  
photographs were not  
some embryonic ghosts.

POSTCARD FROM THE KUNSTHISTORICHES, VIENNA

In early depictions, Jesus carries his cross  
like it's made of feathers, without breaking  
a sweat. Not until the late Middle Ages,  
I learn, did artists think to emphasize  
his burden: a heavy line in the sand, fine  
red attention to strokes along his crown,  
bound wrists, neck yanked like a dog's—

all to make me feel something like devotion.  
Yet I cannot imagine myself in his place  
or swoon like a Boschian virgin. I do not  
see a face that resembles my own in the hostile  
crowd. I only feel that I've swallowed something  
small and alive—a bird whose wings  
keep gravity from drawing me to my knees.

## ELEGY FOR A PHOEBE

What to make of the bedroom—  
its obsolescence the kind  
that sheds its leaves come autumn,

loses what warmth it should  
be gaining? Perhaps it's like the way  
I say your name each morning,

a ritual I wish into prayer, wish  
into the rattle's easy *samsara*—  
yet feel the handle's indifference

move from hand to hand like winter's  
repetition, impossible to hold.

A DREAM OF BURIAL MEANS TO ACKNOWLEDGE SOMETHING IN YOUR  
LIFE IS ENDING

When the heart clenches  
like a willful child, the body falls  
to the pavement it has long  
loved. We are not deer,

stumbling into light, but we  
chase, and we chase, and we chase.  
They say we'll remember how  
to live once we forget we are dying,

so we press heel to dirt,  
the open wound, and we turn  
and we promise we will see you  
at the end. What keeps us here,

knowing we too could collapse  
into the earth's diurnal mouth?  
The end is always promised,  
so we descend and yet blossom.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH DRAGONFLY

*After Mary Szybist*

She looks at me with so many eyes  
invisible to mine.  
Twice-winged and aching

to break into  
a new skin, much  
like you are undressing now—  
shedding the shirt, wilted  
with sweat, that smells of summer  
pavement rain.

\*

We have migrated across oceans  
in tandem, our heavy bodies

conspicuous in flight.

\*

I am doubled now.  
Beside myself  
when you take me

by the back of the head,  
bend me into a shape  
we find suitable.

See how much our body is  
like a circle.

Does this pose make us look eternal?