THE MUSEUM OF COMING APART

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This dissertation comprises two parts: Part I, which discusses use of second person pronoun in contemporary American poetry; and Part II, *The Museum of Coming Apart*, which is a collection of poems.

As confessional verse became a dominant mode in American poetry in the late 1950s and early 60s, so too did the use of the first-person pronoun. Due in part to the excesses of later confessionalism, however, many contemporary poets hesitate to use first person for fear that their work might be read as autobiography. The poetry of the 1990s and early 2000s has thus been characterized by distance, dissociation, and fracture as poets attempt to remove themselves from the overtly emotional and intimate style of the confessionalists. However, other contemporary poets have sought to straddle the line between the earnestness and linearity of confessionalism and the intellectually playful yet emotionally detached poetry of the moment. One method for striking this balance is to employ the second person pronoun. Because “you” in English is ambiguous, it allows the poet to toy with the level of distance in a poem and create evolving relationships between the speaker and reader. Through the analysis of poems by C. Dale Young, Paul Guest, Richard Hugo, Nick Flynn, Carrie St. George Comer, and Moira Egan, this essay examines five common ways second person is employed in contemporary American poetry—the use of “you” in reference to a specific individual, the epistolary form, the direct address to the reader, the imperative voice, and the use of “you” as a substitute for “I”—and the ways that the second-person pronoun allows these poems to take the best of both the confessional and dissociative modes.
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32 Poems—“Here at the end of the world, one needn’t remember everything”

*cream city review*—“After Running Four Blocks in a Night Storm”

Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Prize Website: “I, Being of Sound, Leave,” “Poem for My Sister,” and “What to Do”

*Gulf Stream*—“Opening the Cellar Door”

*Puerto del Sol*—“What We Mean When We Say Love”

*Sojourn*—“Transubstantiation” (under the title “Spring Communion”)

*Wheelhouse*—“Sonnet for Wal-Mart”
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PART I

AND WHO MIGHT “YOU” BE? USE OF THE SECOND-PERSON PRONOUN IN

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY
The confessional poetry of the 1950s and ‘60s produced a radical change in much of the English-language poetry that followed, particularly American poetry. Where once the very private subjects of mental illness, sex, abuse, etc. had been taboo, in the work of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, these topics became more than just fodder for poetry—they became the stuff of which great poetry was made. Rather than shying away from taboo subjects, confessional poets used the shameful and painful moments of their personal lives as a window to the shameful and painful in all human experience, as catharsis for themselves and anyone else with similar experiences or emotions. Though sharing such intimate details in poetry seemed radical to ‘50s readers, it quickly became a dominant mode in American writing.

The confessional “I” has become an easy reach—dig through your life for the dirtiest, most emotionally resonant moments, and throw them into a poem. The imaginative work of a poet like Plath, who, for example, grandiosely compares her suffering at her (allegedly) abusive father’s hands to that of the Jews in Nazi death camps in “Daddy,” all but disappears in later confessional poetry, which relies primarily on the strong emotional nature of the situation recounted to carry the poem, whether that emotion actually comes across on the page or not. This scattershot approach to poetry writing is what many people think of when they hear the term “confessional poet,” but even Robert Lowell himself, generally considered the leader of the confessionsals (critic M.L. Rosenthal coined the term about Lowell’s 1959 collection *Life Studies*), did far more than merely regurgitate the facts of his life for readers. In a 1961 interview for *The Paris Review*, Lowell discussed how he “invented facts and changed things” such that “the whole balance of the poem was something invented” (17). He said that this invention is necessary for readers to accept the poem as true—for the reader “to believe he
was getting the real Robert Lowell” (17). He also noted that his autobiographical poems were as
difficult to write as his earlier, metered work had been, and that, in terms of language, his
“seemingly relaxed poems [we]re just about as hard as the very worked-up ones” (17, 19). He
also explained that this more relaxed language and his movement away from strict form came
about in part because he saw so many poets who could “write a very musical, difficult poem
with tremendous skill,” but that “the writing seemed divorced from culture somehow” (13). He
wanted to strike a balance between the craft of poetry and the vitality he saw in prose, which
ultimately led him to the looser, more autobiographical work of *Life Studies*, which other poets
soon took as their model.

In the flurry of rebellion against form, however, many poets sacrificed the heavy
attention to language and extravagant metaphors of early confessionalism in favor of extended
description which only has the fact that it is “true” to recommend itself, and the trend toward
pure autobiography in poetry still pervades. In a 1999 interview, poet Adrienne Rich noted,
“Today, there’s a banalizing tendency to read all literature as autobiographical, to discount the
real work of the imagination.” This assumption led Rich to employ different voices in her
poetry: “I’ve been creating characters as a novelist or playwright might. The literature of the
restricted ‘I’ becomes too limiting after awhile, too claustrophobic” (138).

In addition to choosing different characters and voices, the limitations of the “I” can
lead poets away from narrative entirely as they try to seek more distance. Tony Hoagland
comments on this trend in his essay “Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment”
from his 2006 collection *Real Sofistikashun: Essay on Poetry and Craft*. Hoagland attempts to
explain the attractiveness of the distanced, freely-associative tone that has dominated
contemporary poetry in the last decade, and the rejection of narrative, particularly first-person narrative:

It seems likely that narrative poetry in America has been tainted by its overuse in thousands of confessional poems. Not confessionalism itself, but the inadvertent sentimentality and narcissism of many such poems have imparted the odor of indulgence to narrative. Our vision of narrative possibilities has been narrowed by so many first-person autobiographical stories, then drowned in a flood of pathos-poems. [177]

The current generation of poets has reacted to this flood in a variety of ways, effecting radical changes in style and tone to avoid being seen as indulgent autobiographers. Many steer clear of “I” altogether, and others make the identity of the speaker in the poem impossible to locate—even, indeed, making a coherent tone, theme, or sense of purpose in the poem difficult to pin down. Hoagland characterizes the poetry of the early ‘90s through the present “as one of great invention and playfulness” and yet “a moment of great aesthetic self-consciousness and emotional removal. Systematic development is out; obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity are in” (173-174). This sort of distance and fracture has resulted in a great deal of experimental poetry that is so detached from narrative that each line in the poem often seems completely divorced from the next—the poem consciously prevents readers from grabbing a foothold. The price for this cognitive play is the loss of a reader’s sense of personal investment in the poem.

However, even as many in this generation rebel against the forms of the previous one and fear being read through the lens of the last generation’s excesses, other poets still seek the vitality, sincerity, and emotional resonance that led Lowell to the confessional mode in the first place. Many strive to write in a middle ground where the poet (and, therefore, the narrator) demonstrates a strong awareness of the complete effect the poem has on readers. These poets exhibit an appreciation of the many contracts a poem has with its readers—an appreciation of
the fact that, inasmuch as most readers do not want to see the poet spew his or her most private experience on the page, many readers also do not merely come to poetry for intellectual play. Reaching this middle ground between detachment and autobiography can be difficult, but even a step as simple as using a different pronoun can help. Though “I” can often lead readers to believe that the speaker in the poem must be the poet, using the second-person pronoun can shift the dynamic of the poem and draw attention away from the first person. Instead, second person draws attention to the addressee; it privileges the speaker’s intentions toward the addressee over the action of the poem. This adds an additional layer of complexity to the poem and opens up the possibility of a relationship between the speaker and reader, which potentially gives the poem greater emotional power. The process of creating this relationship relieves the implicit narcissism of “I,” and so helps second-person poems avoid the false steps of indulgent autobiography. Because it is the only pronoun of direct address in English, “you” also produces a conversational tone that causes readers to feel involved in second-person poems. Where later confessionalism creates intimacy easily—forcing it, even, at times, as if readers were contractually obliged to listen to the poet’s personal accounts like a psychiatrist—poetry that controls the second-person pronoun is able to more carefully construct its relationship to its readers. “You” can at times coerce readers into intimacy, but it is equally capable of keeping readers at bay.

The second person is attractive to a poet for several reasons, not the least of which is that it forces the poem to look outward, calling attention to the relationship between speaker and reader. In addition, “you” in English is fraught with ambiguity. Because “you” can be both
singular and plural, it raises questions about who is involved: the reader, an imagined audience, a specific individual who is not the reader? In the last case, where the “you” is clearly different from the reader, the poem can also create a sense of voyeurism, acting as a window into a relationship, whether real or imagined. Second person can also create a provocative or confrontational tone and/or force intimacy with readers, especially when the second person is implied, as with the use of the imperative. “You” may also serve as an unusual kind of foil for “I” by actually being a veiled version of the first person.

Early confessional work did not ignore the power of second person. Plath uses second person to great effect in “Daddy,” beginning by denying and dislocating the “you” in line 1—“You do not do, you do not do”—and then using it to build its accusations against the second person. This “you” is so large, so accusatory in tone, that it allows Plath to fabricate an entire web of metaphors for it—for “Daddy” to become a myth. Again, though, this kind of meticulously constructed drama too often gets washed out in favor of easy intimacy and clichéd self-analysis in much of the confessional work that comes after Lowell and Plath.

Thus, using the second-person pronoun is certainly not new in poetry, nor is it incompatible with confessional poetry. However, because later imitative confessionalism seemed to take conveying the innermost thoughts and feelings of the “I” as its primary objective, many poets of the next generation—the poets of the ‘70s and ‘80s—felt anxious about using the first-person pronoun in their work, fearing that it automatically made readers associate the poem with such sloppy autobiography. Thus, many poets turned to “you” as a response to confessionalism, taking it as a way to circumvent using “I.” In his 1980 essay “The Abuse of the Second-Person Pronoun,” poet-critic Jonathan Holden attributes the increased use
of the pronoun “you” in ‘70s poetry to this worry, saying that “this impulse […] to place the poet in a more peripheral position in the poem is, I think, the result of a continuing reaction against the excesses of the confessional mode” (40). However, he laments the use of second person because it seems, at the time, to be primarily used as what he calls the “blurred-you”: the ambiguous second person that lacks a clear referent and could easily be the reader, narrator, or some other, more general you, “like the expression ‘you know?’ so often tagged onto the end of a sentence” (39). Holden decries this “blurred-you” precisely because it is unclear—because, in attempting to skirt the immoderation of confessionalism, it also precludes the sincere and authentic sound that the first-person provides. He says that maintaining at least the appearance of earnestness is essential to readers finding a poem relevant and that “Great poetry is usually so earnest that the poet is constantly on the verge of making a fool of himself” (45).

Holden makes two exceptions for the use of “you”: he believes it is acceptable if it is 1) employed in a specific, directed way, as in epistolary poetry, though he feels somewhat skeptical even about this usage—he finds straightforward first person to still be superior in general, or 2) employed in a hypothetical manner, where “you” essentially stands in for “suppose you were in this situation.” In a 2000 interview, Holden said he had written this essay “in response to a particular fashion popular in the seventies” but that what he “said then still holds” (par. 15). Perhaps this is in part because the intervening generation—the poets who came of age in the late 70s through early 90s, whom Hoagland calls the “Plain Stylists” (190)—tried to achieve a narrative-discursive clarity that resulted in the continued use of confessional techniques and autobiographical material, which in turn resulted in other poets’ continued
attempts to distance themselves from first-person poetries. Regardless of which generation it is intended to apply to, Holden’s argument seems to ignore many of the facets of the second-person pronoun—it does not take into account the great variety of effects that “you” can produce when used masterfully, and, perhaps more importantly, with intent. When a poet substitutes “you” as a second-rate version of “I” though first person would suit the poem best, Holden’s admonition is warranted. However, what the current generation of poets strives to achieve through its varied deployment of “you” goes far beyond the unadulterated fear of confession that Holden references.

Though their comments span forty-five years and address everything from their individual work to the work of an entire generation, Lowell, Rich, Holden, and Hoagland all point to poetry’s fundamentally reactive nature—that trends in poetry are often the result of a response against what has come before. For Lowell and Rich, reaction pushed their work in more imaginative directions. Hoagland is ambivalent about this quality—on the one hand, the reaction against narrative has created “a poetry equal, in its velocity, to the speed and disruptions of contemporary culture” (187). On the other hand, he notes that “there is a moment when the poetic pleasure of elusiveness, inadvertently, commits itself to triviality” (187). Holden views poetry’s reactive nature pessimistically in light of a specific negative outcome it generates—the overuse of the vague “blurred-you.” However, perhaps what Holden observed, instead of being seen as an unfortunate phenomenon, can be recast as a necessary step in poetry’s evolution.

Rather than merely using second person as first person’s poor relation, the current generation of poets has found a stunning array of uses for “you,” all employed with a careful
understanding of why and how “you” behaves as it does. With this in mind, there seem to be five primary functions of the second-person pronoun in contemporary poetry: 1) in reference to a specific individual, often in place of his or her name; 2) in epistolary poems; 3) as a direct address to the reader; 4) in the imperative; and 5) in place of the first person, but with a targeted effect on readers. This generation’s second-person poems are able to participate in confessionalism’s heritage of earnestness because they can deal with intimate details and cohesive narratives, but they also demonstrate their kinship to dissociative and intellectually playful contemporary poems because they never forget their fundamental character as poems—rather than attempting to pretend that the printed page does not exist, they embrace and even toy with the spaces between poet, narrator, and reader.

Many contemporary poems that contain narrative threads use “you” to refer to a specific individual. This is the case with C. Dale Young’s “Night Air,” which begins with an interaction between the speaker, who is a doctor, and his patient, a professor who asks a question in the opening lines: “If God is Art, then what do we make/ of Jasper Johns?” Though this question is not answered in the poem, it does subtly set up the play of pronouns that occurs throughout. The “we” in this question could merely refer to the speaker and the patient, or it could be much broader—people who are familiar with contemporary American art, philosophical individuals in general, even the human race at large. The pronoun shifts in the second sentence of the poem: “One never knows/ what sort of question the patient will pose,/ or how exactly one should answer” (2-4). This “one,” though more specific than the “we” of the previous sentence, still contains multiple possibilities; “one” might mean only the speaker, but
it opens up to include doctors and other medical professionals—the word “patient,” at least, precludes the vague possibility of humanity.

Because of these pronoun shifts, when “we” appears in the third stanza—“We were no different”—the reader cannot be sure who the “we” is at that point. In fact, it seems to bring in the possibility of another “we” entirely, one composed of the speaker and an additional, unnamed third person. This “we” becomes more suspicious after a second exchange between the speaker and his patient—“‘Tell me, young man, whom do you love?’/ ‘E,’ I’d say, ‘None of the Above,’”—wherein it becomes clear that the speaker is being evasive (11-12). The reader’s suspicions are confirmed with the introduction of the “you” at the end of the fifth stanza:

For days he had played that game,
and day after day I avoided your name
by instinct. I never told him how
we often wear each other’s clothes—
we aren’t what many presuppose. (14-18)

Here, the speaker’s reason for offering his patient cagey answers becomes clear: the speaker is homosexual, and, perhaps because he fears the assumptions that the patient may make, he does not wish to reveal this to his patient. The “you” in this poem offers the reader two surprises in a short space. First, the existence of the second person is confirmed and revealed to be specific because the “you” has a name. In the next line, the heretofore evasive speaker reveals the particular nature of his relationship to the second person, thus removing the ambiguity created by the earlier “we” in the third stanza.

There are several reasons why the second-person pronoun is more effective in this poem than third person would be. First, it allows the reader to be surprised by the fact that the speaker and the “you” share clothes—if the “your” in line 15 were “his” instead, the next line
would not reveal as much. In addition, it avoids some linguistic clumsiness. For example, “I
never told him how he and I often wear each other’s clothes” is considerably more awkward
and confusing than the simple “we,” but “we” would remain ambiguous if not for the use of
“you” in the previous sentence. Most importantly, though, using “you” allows Young to avoid
using the lover’s name entirely, which gives the name the talisman-like power it requires for the
closing lines and image of the poem to make sense:

I said your name to the evening star
clearly pronouncing the syllables
to see your name dissipate
in the air, evaporate.

Only the night air carries your words
up to the dead (the ancients wrote):
I watched them rise, become remote. (21-27)

As the night air takes the name away, the “you” shifts form and becomes the general “you.”

“Your words” in this context could be anyone’s words. This shift is logically possible because the
“you,” by being named to the night, is removed from the poem once again, made distant
through the loss of his name. As he names his lover, the air carries the lover’s name to the
dead, though to what end is unclear: is it for safekeeping or because he can be open and
unashamed before the dead? At the same time, however, the speaker is also calling out to this
“you” as though he were one of the dead being addressed, as though he had been made as
distant and eternal as the ever-listening dead. Thus, the use of second person allows for one
last surprise as the “you” is made simultaneously near and far, alive and dead, a play which
perhaps tries to tackle the complexity of the speaker’s relationship to the second person,
particularly in the context of a culture that may not always accept or understand that relationship.

The “you” in this poem receives even further emphasis within the context of the book itself. “Night Air” is the first poem in Young’s sophomore collection, *The Second Person*. The second person in this poem introduces the forms that the second person will often take throughout the book—“you” is the lover, the absentee, the veiled and unveiled additional presence. This title also draws attention to the otherness of the second person; it is this foreignness that can often attract a poet to “you,” especially when the speaker shares similarities with the poet and could, perhaps, seem to be the poet, as in the case of Young’s poem. Young is a doctor and a homosexual, and could therefore easily be interpreted as the speaker in the poem. However, the poem is ultimately about the power of naming, of speaking an idea aloud, and the difference between knowing, speaking, and receiving names. To focus on the degree of autobiography present in the poem is reductive and does the poem a great disservice; Young’s careful choice of pronouns helps sidestep this problem. Beyond this, Young’s use of “you” allows the narrator to withhold the name from the reader, to keep something for himself. More than a simple deflection from the first-person pronoun, the second person in this poem is a calculated manipulation—of the patient, the narrator, and, most importantly, the reader—at every turn.

Many epistolary poems share similar qualities with poems that evoke an individual “you”; frequently, the letters are addressed to an individual who shares a specific relationship to the speaker that is clarified over the course of the poem. One of the primary differences between these two forms is that the “you” is generally more defined from the outset in an
epistolary form; the sort of surprise that occurs in Young’s poem as the “you” is revealed is usually precluded by the address in the first line or title in the letter form. For example, in Richard Hugo’s “Letter to Kathy from Wisdom,” the reader immediately identifies the recipient as a particular woman that the speaker knows. The prepositional phrase “from Wisdom” seems to complicate the speaker-addressee relationship for a moment until the reader realizes that Wisdom is a place name, which is elucidated at the same moment that the nature of the relationship becomes clear: “When I heard your tears [...] over the phone from Moore, [...] I thought of this town I’m writing from,/ where we came lovers years ago to fish” (lines 1,2, 4-5). Even more than “Night Air,” “Letter to Kathy” acts as a window into a relationship between the speaker and his lover.

The epistolary form can be used in more open ways, however, as in Paul Guest’s “On the Persistence of the Letter as a Form.” From the title alone, the reader can determine that the poem is intended to be a commentary on epistolary poetry. The reader is therefore not surprised at the broad nature of the addressee(s): “Dear murderous world, dear gawking heart” (1). In this opening, the poem asserts its relationship to more traditional apostrophe, which is often directed to a divine being or a concept, like liberty or time. Furthermore, the murderous world’s inherent violence echoes the villainy of the sort of anthropomorphic gods that apostrophic poems sometimes address. The heart is a frequent recipient of maudlin letters, but Guest makes the heart strange by calling it “gawking,” implying both a level of voyeurism and impotence that more traditional apostrophe does not tackle.

The second line of “Persistence” seems at first a sort of apology: “I never wrote back to you.” But as the speaker continues, it becomes apparent that the speaker has not cared enough
to do so before—he says that “not one word// wrenched itself free of my fog-draped mind/ to
dab in ink the day’s dull catalog// of ruin” (2-5). That apathy shifts into anger, however, as the
speaker begins to give instructions, telling the world to “Take back the ten-speed bike/ which
bent like a child’s cheap toy// beneath me” (5-7). In the context of Guest’s 2003 debut, “The
Resurrection of the Body and the Ruin of the World,” from which this poem comes, the
meaning of this image becomes clear: the speaker, like Guest himself, was paralyzed in a bicycle
accident as a child, so for the world to take back the bike would be to change the speaker’s
entire physical existence. Like Young, Guest is thus able to use autobiographical detail to
enhance the poem; this knowledge adds an extra dimension to the poem, but the poem still has
meaning without it. Instead of narrowing the possibilities of the poem as it does in poorly-
executed confessional work, autobiography in these second-person poems actually serves to
open the work further.

As the poem progresses, the images in the directive become more overtly violent:

Accept as your own
the guitar that was smashed over my brother,

who writes now from jail in Savannah,
who I cannot begin to answer. Here

is the beloved pet who died at my feet,
and there, outside my window,

is where my mother buried it in a coffin
meant for a newborn. (7-14)

Here emerges a hierarchy of loss. Lowest on this scale is the loss of the body (paralysis), next
the loss of freedom (prison), and, finally, loss of life itself (dead pet). This last form of loss is
compounded by the implication, through the coffin intended for an infant, that the future of humanity itself can disappear.

“Persistence” then moves briefly into the realm of prayer as the speaker petitions his audience to “visit numbness” on his family. The prayer-like quality of these lines—once again showing the poem’s kinship to traditional apostrophe—is emphasized by word choices like “upon,” “vigilant,” and “visit.” But this petition, this moment where the speaker lays bare his needs, proves too intimate to sustain, and he backs away again. He becomes defensive, saying “And to you I’ve now written too much” (17). Then the speaker changes the scope of this “you” by concluding with “dear cloud of thalidomide,// dear spoon trembling at the mouth,/ dear marble-eyed doll never answering back” (18-20). This moment capitalizes on the ambiguous nature of “you” and the open nature of the letter form. Though the poem lists them individually, the murderous world, gawking heart, cloud of thalidomide, trembling spoon, and marble-eyed doll seem to all be part of the same “you”—a brutal, yet ineffective, universe that has hurt and refused the speaker to the point that he has given up.

Guest’s poem represents a distinct shift from earlier post-confessional epistolary work like “Letter to Kathy from Wisdom,” published in 1977, which not only contains a singular and specific addressee but is also more distinctly private in nature—rather than ribbing the reader into an awareness of the form, “Letter to Kathy” lets the reader in on the intimate details of the speaker and addressee’s relationship, which allows the reader to stand aside and make judgments about the speaker instead of the form. “Letter to Kathy” invites its reader to see the speaker as by turns lecherous (“How odd/ we seemed to them there, a lovely young girl and a fat/ middle 40s man [...] we kissed their petty scorn to dust”), egotistical (“All my other letter/
poems I’ve sent to poets. But you, you were a poet then,/ curving lines I love against my groin,”) and compassionate (“please believe I want to plant whatever poem will grow/ inside you like a decent life,”) (lines 5-7, 9, 12-14, 16-17).

The letters differ, too, in their answerability. Kathy, though she may choose not to respond, is able to physically and linguistically, if perhaps not emotionally—the speaker refers to “the sad/days you’ve seen, the hospitals, doctors, the agonizing/ breakdowns that left you ashamed” (10-12). The many recipients of Guest’s letter, on the other hand, will never respond. Though all are certainly unable in a physical sense, they are, on a more fundamental level, unwilling, which is part of why, according to Guest’s poem, the epistolary form persists: because the universe ultimately has nothing to say to the poet, nothing that could end the argument, the poet will go on questioning it, even as the poet recognizes the futility of the effort. The form thus highlights the impotence of the poet in the world—the ways that the poet’s power is limited by and to the page.

It is perhaps a little strange, then, to realize that “Persistence” does give the poet more imaginative power than “Letter to Kathy.” Because “Letter to Kathy” purports to provide a window into Kathy and the narrator’s relationship, Hugo has to work to provide details to the reader that Kathy herself would already know; in a true letter, for example, the narrator could simply refer to the “sad days” Kathy had seen without needing to mention hospitals or her breakdowns—the phrase “sad days” would be enough to connote all of that to Kathy. However, in acknowledging his poem as a poem and a form, Guest frees himself from the restrictions of such a pre-set narrative relationship. Guest creates a narrative of sorts for his speaker, but the scale is far grander than that of “Letter to Kathy,” which is unable to escape the odor of
confessionalism it contains. Hugo’s poem ultimately cannot help but sound like autobiography funneled into a letter, and the reader eventually begins to feel slightly uncomfortable, looking back to the title page of the book and doing the math to determine Hugo’s age at the time the poem was written, looking at the biography flap to determine if and when he might have visited Wisdom, Montana. Guest’s poem, on the other hand, navigates equally the realms of the personal and universal, small and large—the speaker is just as complicit in his brother’s incarceration as he is in the violence of the world at large. The poem thus strikes a balance between sincerity and intellectual complexity through its tone, particularly because of the proximity created by the second-person pronoun, and the way it allows the speaker to admit his guilt even as he accuses his recipients.

In a poem that directly addresses the reader, the speaker asserts his or her relationship to the reader in a more overt way than in an epistolary poem. However, it is one of the less common uses of the second person pronoun, in part because it is difficult to sustain—with each reference to “you,” the nature of that you becomes more specific, and it is difficult for the reader to continue to believe the poem speaks directly to him or her as it becomes decreasingly possible for everything in the poem to refer to the reader. For this reason, a direct address to the reader is often very brief; either the poem itself is brief, or the direct address eventually gives way to another form—the “you” becomes “I” or a specific individual, or the poem moves away from using the second person pronoun altogether.

Nick Flynn’s “Hive” fits this form in both respects. In addition to being a short poem (seventeen lines), the speaker only addresses the reader directly for the first seven lines. Rather than naming the second person with the title, as epistolary poems often do, “Hive” names the
speaker. This helps mitigate the overt sexuality of the opening line: “What would you do inside me?” This line draws the reader into an immediate and highly intimate relationship with the hive and poses a question that most readers would not think to ask.

The hive goes on to catalog the reasons that the reader would be uncomfortable within its walls:

You would be utterly
lost, labyrinthine
comb, each corridor identical, a
funhouse, there, a bridge, worker

knit to worker, a span
you can’t cross. (2-7)

Where the first line sets up the relationship between speaker and reader, by the seventh line—the end of the direct address—the reader has been pushed away again, not because he or she is unable to participate in the relationship, but because the reader is fundamentally unable to understand the hive. This is partly implicit in the idea of the hive itself; where in other poetry forms that employ “you” it is the second-person pronoun that is subject to shifting definitions, in this form, the “you” is fixed and the hive is indefinite. The hive can simultaneously be the individual drone and the entire bee collective, as well as the structure that the group lives and works in.

The hive goes on to elaborate on the contents of the hive and the reasons that the reader would not wish to be within it:
On the other side
the queen, a fortune of honey.

Once we filled an entire house with it,
[.................................]
the constant

buzz kept the owners awake, then
louder, until honey began to seep

from the walls, swell
the doorframes. Our gift. (7-9, 11-15)

By the point that honey oozes from the walls, the reader can begin to comprehend the overwhelming nature of the hive and the way that the hive permeates everything it touches. Thus, the violence of the final lines, though harsh, is not entirely unexpected: “They had to burn the house down/ to rid us” (16-17). The reason for the shift away from the direct address also becomes clearer here. If the focus had remained on the reader—if, for example, instead of “the owners,” line 12 were to say “the constant buzz kept you awake,” then the last sentence would be accusatory: “You had to burn the house down to rid us.” Instead, the reader is able to detach from the last line and identify with both the hive and the homeowners. The reader can sympathize with the bees for being killed over what is ostensibly a gift, and the reader can sympathize with the owners for the loss of the house, a duality that actually helps the reader come closer to understanding the hive mentality than if the poem had remained in second person throughout.

The shift away from second person in “Hive” highlights another reason that “you” as a direct address to the reader can become problematic in a longer poem. As the poem develops and becomes more specific, so too do the judgments that the speaker makes about the reader, which can cause the reader to bristle and start to read against the poem. A good poet can use
this effect to his or her advantage; more often, though, it is contrary to the intention of the poem, which is why many poets use direct address infrequently, if at all. There are other benefits to speaking explicitly to the reader, though. By eliminating any pretense of narrative distance, poems of direct address can create an easy intimacy like a confessional poem would without having to deal with a private subject; instead, they can deal with cerebral topics—like what it means to attempt to tease out an individual’s narrative from a collective consciousness—without losing the reader by holding him or her at arm’s length via tonal detachment. Because of their confrontational nature, however, these poems often call enough attention to themselves that a poet cannot include more than a few in a collection without the work seeming repetitive.

Poems written in the imperative voice call attention to themselves in a similar manner. Any time a speaker begins to instruct a reader, the speaker naturally takes a position of authority over the reader. In many respects, imperative poems are much the same as direct addresses—often, they are (or seem at the outset) to be aimed at the reader exclusively, and they generally take a provocative tone that is difficult to maintain. However, the imperative differs in fundamental ways. First, as noted, they command the reader, which is a far more aggressive tack than simply asking questions or explaining a concept (as in “Hive”). Additionally, the pronoun “you” is employed far less frequently in these poems, because it is implied in the sentence structure; some imperative poems circumvent use of the second person pronoun altogether. Also, because of the forceful tone and the fact that each line adds details that narrow down the possible audience for the poem, many longer imperative poems will eventually reveal the “you” as a specific individual.
This is the case in Carrie St. George Comer’s “Long Goodbye.” The poem opens by commanding the reader to “See the body,” which the poem goes on to describe—the body “is small and thin” with “flecks of polish on the nails” (1, 3). As the speaker’s commands begin to require the other person to get closer to the body, the second person pronoun is introduced: “Allow your hand through the hair, [...] Press your lips to the feet” (6, 8). At this point, the body, though dead, begins to physically involve the “you”: “The glitter from the party stuck to the toes/ sticks to your lips” (9-10). This progression forces the reader closer and closer to the body, which seems at first to be the model of detachment and distance—the dead other. The speaker leaves the imperative voice at points to describe the way the “you” looks after the second person has touched the body (“Your lips glimmer like moths”) and to offer context for the body (“In the room with high ceilings”), but keeps returning to command the “you”: “See the body. Still beneath the sheet” (10, 19, 16). The second person becomes more specific at the moment the speaker enters the action of the poem: “in the room where you first touched me, see the body” (21). Up to this point, the second person in the poem could easily be the reader, with the result that the reader feels somewhat compelled by the hypnotic orders presented by the speaker. However, with the introduction of the speaker and her relationship to the “you,” the reader, rather than being removed from the poem, becomes part of the profusion of perspectives and identities, which invites questions: Who is (or was) the body? Who is the speaker? Who is this “you”? In what way am I (the reader) involved?

The poem does answer some of these questions. Two lines later, the speaker reveals the second person as a vain man: “In the room where you stroke your bare chest,/ where you comb
and comb your gold hair” (23-24). The second person’s arrogance helps to explain the speaker’s apparent anger with the “you,” especially when the speaker begins to question him:

See the body. The rageless body. Tell me what do you do with yours?  
In the room with one lamp on, what do you do, and how?  
You have seen it, you have touched it, so was it good?  
And did you feel the need to cry when it was done? (35-38)

This passage reveals more than just the speaker’s anger with this man, who seems to have been her lover. Through the speaker’s rhetoric, the reader comes to understand that the body belongs to the speaker, and she has chosen to detach from her physical self. The speaker’s tone registers as a defense of her actions; her questions act as a response to the second person’s implicit questions about why she has done this. The poem reveals this in part through the use of italics, as in “what do you do with yours?” This suggests that the speaker is offering the body as evidence of what she has done—the italicized “you” is set in opposition to an inferred “I.”

The reader steps aside again for a moment as the poem goes on to describe the body as it exits the room, bound for burial, “wrapped in gossamer” (41). The speaker offers few instructions again until the closure, which avoids the specific second person and, in effect, re-involves the reader:

Wave farewell to the body. Sing to the body as it rolls down the hill,  
into the grove and toward the river. Throw marigolds and sing.  
Throw doveblossoms and sing. Throw a white rose and sing.  
Sing low, sing high, sing never come back here again. (50-53)

These final commands could be addressed to any of the players in the poem: the speaker, the second person, and/or the reader. This allows the body to become a larger metaphor for weakness, for whatever binds a person to a place or memory. Thus, all of these players are invited to let go of what weakens or fetters them. Without the detachment and strangeness
that the “you” provides, though, this poem would seem entirely interior, and the speaker would seem mad, perhaps even a little schizophrenic. Though the tone of the poem still implies this to a certain degree, the reader trusts the narrator more because of her authoritative tone, rather than stepping back to analyze the first person—the reader remains too close to the action to dismiss the speaker entirely.

Where in “Long Goodbye,” what seems at first to be a third person—the body—eventually reveals itself as a now-distant part of the first, so too can the second-person pronoun serve as a dodge for the first. That is, “you” sometimes substitutes for “I.” Often, this sort of substitution occurs when the first person in the poem does something unpleasant or immoral or discusses something that the reader might find uncomfortable or objectionable, as in an overtly sexual poem. Certainly, this kind of dodge could fall under the fear of confession that Jonathan Holden mentions. However, using “you” in such cases serves not only to give the first person some distance, but it also makes the reader complicit in the speaker’s actions. Often, the speaker in a poem of this type will actually use “I” at some points and “you” at others, which highlights the fact that it is used with careful intent. This is the case in Moira Egan’s two-sonnet sequence “Millay Goes Down,” wherein the speaker employs “I” throughout the first sonnet and shifts into “you” in the second. The content is sexually explicit through the entire poem—it is in fact far more explicit in the first section—so the switch into second person is not simply to avoid this topic or to avoid the appearance of autobiography. However, the speaker in the first section describes acts that occurred when she was young and sexually naïve; she says, “I learned a truth/ perhaps more grown than I was then” (7-8). Because the speaker
does not behave as the aggressor in the first sonnet, she is able to use first person and admit her actions.

However, the speaker in the second sonnet is clearly the aggressive party. It is difficult to determine in the context of the poem whether the speaker in the second sonnet is the same as that of the first; it could be that the two sonnets are simply linked by subject matter and a common first line, Edna St. Vincent Millay’s famous “What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why?” The speaker’s tone is somewhat different in the second section than the first, but this could be attributed to the difference in maturity level. What is obvious, however, is that the speaker in the second sonnet is an older woman attempting to seduce a younger man. She at first attempts to justify it to herself, saying “why not/ seduce this boy whose face, in candlelight,/ looks slightly older, almost appropriate” (16-18). In the next line, as the speaker shifts out of her interior and into exterior actions, the second person pronoun comes into play: “Your fingertips might almost brush his hand/ as both of you dip bread into the oil” (19-20). This move into “you” makes the reader an accomplice, pawning the action off on the second person as the speaker’s actions move out of the realm of what could be considered innocent—she manipulates the boy by making it obvious she “understand[s]/ he’d rather hang out with a younger girl” and offering him a wine that is new to him, mourvédre (21-23).

Making the reader complicit in the speaker’s actions by using “you” to refer to herself has a unique payoff, however. As the poem closes, the speaker is able to step back and let the boy become the aggressor. Because the reader is implicitly participating as he or she is being addressed, the reader also feels the pleasure of the final lines: “and then his hand is on/ your shoulder and he kisses you, his mouth/ quite like a warm, mourvédre fountain of youth” (29).
This warmth and youth would seem far more remote to the reader if the speaker used first
person, saying “then his hand is on my shoulder and he kisses me”—in this version, the speaker
calls attention to herself, inviting the reader’s criticism rather than inviting him or her into the
situation.

Using the second-person pronoun does not eliminate the need for first person. Of the
six examples I have just presented, only one, “Hive,” does not employ “I” at some point. Rather
than allowing the poet to avoid “I,” what “you” more often does is alleviate the implicit
narcissism of “I” and offers that first person an outsider to play off of. “You” presents more
opportunities to shift perspectives and to surprise readers. It also creates another narrative for
the poem, whether the poem actually contains a narrative of its own or not—the story of the
relationship between speaker and reader. Even if the poem reveals the second person to be
someone other than the reader, there still exists the moment where the reader is addressed as
“you,” wherein the reader must determine his or her level of involvement. As Tony Hoagland
notes, “The speedy conceptuality that characterizes much contemporary poetry prefers the
dance of multiple perspectives to sustained participation” (178). The second person pronoun
simultaneously allows for shifts in perspective—“you” can contain many possibilities within the
same poem—and encourages the sustained investment of the reader. A reader’s sense of the
meaning of “you” often changes over the course of a poem, as the poem seems to address
and/or engage the reader, and then as the poem continues to reveal the second person and its
intentions toward the second person. As the meaning of “you” evolves in a poem, the narrative
of the speaker and reader evolves, as well. Nevertheless, as a second-person poem manipulates
the sense and value of its “you,” it plays a rhetorical game that bears a close resemblance to
the cognitive sport that takes place in many contemporary poems. The second-person pronoun therefore enables a poet to straddle the line between the more dissociative, free-form poetry of the moment and older, more continuous forms, like the confessional narrative.

Through their evolving engagement of the second person, the poems here show “you” to be far more imaginatively productive than an easy, reactionary pronoun substitution. Though Jonathan Holden argues that “you” is a rhetorical device which is only truly meaningful in performance and therefore inappropriate to poetry, these poems demonstrate that highlighting the relationship between the speaker and “you” can offer reader far more opportunities to enter a poem than simple first person can. Just as a performance is meaningless without an audience, literature is meaningless without a reader. A literature that takes ignoring readers as one of its primary objectives is doomed to failure.

That is not to say that the detached and intellectually energetic poetry of this poetic generation ignores its readers. In fact, these poems often have a calculable effect on readers, but it is generally one of mystery and puzzlement, an attempt to cognitively register the varied ideas and perspectives that are at play in the work. Contemporary poets who wish to maintain a reader’s emotional investment in a poem may run the risk of their work sounding confessional and outdated. Using the second-person pronoun is one stylistic option for negotiating between the two extremes—clever but emotionally hollow and sincere but self-indulgent—without losing readers in the process.


PART II

THE MUSEUM OF COMING APART
Section I.

A New Disease with a Beautiful Name
Here at the end of the world, one needn’t remember everything.

Only mallards in the park at dawn,  
drowning one another for crusts;  
the way the baby’s head came home  
with a dent the size of a doctor’s thumb;

and the afternoon you grew so lost  
you just made a house  
of branches where you stood.  
Remember the hallway song

    of your mother’s red shoes,  
    the adagio of wedding cake.  
When an apology could still be made  
    with chocolate, with crayons.

Think of a woman’s kneecaps,  
of grape leaves, and mandolins.  
Wrap yourself around  
    a cricket’s desperate voice.

That’s all. It ends with the iron taste  
of someone else’s mouth, a whiff  
of illness you can’t escape.  
But the lava and dirt, the center of things

    will linger, and you’ll discover  
    there’s a difference between the world  
    and your world. You’re a heap  
        of thought and fingerprints and God—

you’re what burns off at the edges.
Mrs. Mencken, 1930

*Love is the delusion that one woman differs from another.*

*Whenever a husband and wife begin to discuss their marriage they are giving evidence at a coroner’s inquest.*

—H.L. (Henry Louis) Mencken

In Montgomery that summer, I found a mourning dove hung by its trident foot, caught in the red yarn of a nest

as it tried to take flight—for the first time, the last.

It shuddered alive at my touch, an angry coo blooming from its throat. I could not free it

without crushing one wing, and still Alabama

would not approve my right to vote. 1919. You remember. Even after that Tennessee man reread his mother’s letter—*be a good boy...and vote for suffrage*—and passed

our measure, I kept the browning leaflets. Look for them in the top drawer of my chest when this all goes south

again. *Suffrage,* we called it, as if each ballot formed

a wound, as if making all people victims also made them equal. *How could you? Such a misogynist,* you say now.

My word is shorter: *Henry.* Ask about my marriage

and I will tell you about the blood blooming in my lungs. That here, *consumption* means

we are all consumed. And my name—*Sara*

sometimes means *Look at the salt stains left on this pillow,* or, *Read this column; find the errors.* When we finish,

and the commas have found their peace, *Sara is wife,*
even just woman. We are all the same and none alike, hung by our own needs to flail and cough, to splinter.

Offer me nine years and a female senator.

Offer me your one vaccine. Offer me a new disease with a beautiful name: typhus, cholera, silent anemia. Failing all else, offer me five more years of Sara and Henry. Throw coins to the sources of my stories; bind me to the false life of the swiftly dying. Let there be nothing left but woman and man, our sweats and hatreds caught in bitter symmetry—blossom and loss, blossom and loss.
Osteogenesis Imperfecta

Feel the arm, its marvelous shards,
its pins and rods, the technology
of breaking. See the jaw

you could shatter with a kiss.
Touch the muscles afraid to act,
the toenails that form

the body’s hardest armor.
Know how grave it is to grow.
Know, too, what the warm

honeycomb of bones will not permit:
the cat huddled against the stomach,
urging its furred ribs in the hollow

between the thighs; the children
with their Red Rover, making a game
of rupture; or another body,

pushing in with its soft bottle
of blood. In its swollen places,
in its boils and cysts, the white

knife that shapes the nose, the body
makes hard what once could bend.
Still, you are surprised when it fills

the flesh with brittle halls. Do not
scold the lattice spine. Devote
yourself to the science of setting,

of corrections, because no one can say
where blame falls, a marker so faint
that even the cells don’t know.

See the skin that covered twenty-seven
fractures before the lungs met breath. Fold
your arms around the shoulders, crush them
if you must. There is no body,
no brain beneath the cellophane skull.
There is only this wet museum

of coming apart, this monument to letting go.
To Juana, on the Floor of Bachmann Lake

They say bodies make up half the depth.
You, five foot tall, could only reduce
the shore a fraction. Though I heard numbers—

seventeen, with a two-thirds child—
I taught you words. You remain ten for me,
struggling to see how whole letters stay quiet

in *doubt*, and *wreck*, and *ghost*.
I still cannot tell you. Such small things:
You read aloud to me in empty classrooms.

You told a joke in Spanish, and I understood
everything but the punchline.
Back then, I had another name. You had a voice.

Perhaps on the algaed bed you have found cousins,
teachers, friends—an entire city held in thrall
beneath the broken bottle of the water’s surface.

A new world, where falling is impossible
and fish become your dogs. Where language
is all movement and no sound, and you will name

your daughter something I could never say.
Where memory has no address. Safe from all danger
but the errant fishhook, safe in the capital of victims.
Bathsheba’s Algebra

Solve for $x$:

Where $y$ is the difference between the lilies for the trash
and the wine on the table. Where $n$ equals doors answered,
raised to the power of summons
I should have broken
and strings now unplayed. Where I have poured water
over every cinder
but left ashes in my bread.

Multiply this equation
by the number of times
he found me bathing
on a rooftop and the cups
of blood in a baby’s body.
Explain why for every element
You give, You must subtract
two others—why
our days are fixed,
our lives discrete,
and every sum Your fist.
Hiding beneath that silent laurel lies
a girl who speaks to the grass, who makes it
grow with her words. Mired there in roots and sap,
her lungs unleash a bitter leaf, the story
of what the body fears.

Her hands like limbs arise; they bare their green,
draw me to crawl, to climb, to eat her leaves.
I must consume her and erect a treehouse
in my own throat, watch her branches like ferns
emerge from my own chest.

So come, and push this bark across my lips;
I’ll make a better woman when I’m wood.
Before you can become the moon, you first must have a face, though it need not be your own. You must drink a great deal of milk—from cows, mothers, human kindness—and consume stars like peppered suckers. You should want to dance, but not know why. You must love the night, its owls, revolver shots, blackberry wine, those flushed and cheating mouths. It helps if you like to watch. To linger.

Follow your childhood street to where it ends in the toadstools and keep going. Find the trail of ginger breadcrumbs that leads you to the girls and boys, glistening, dead or asleep, and share their black solace. Pull your frayed sheets over your eyes more often than you should, shunning daylight—save for the last dawn, which you must wrap, whole, in cheesecloth. Let a morning glory trumpet your farewell.

Then you'll ascend, and take that ancient post. You'll watch insomnia's victims on their threadbare sofas, mourning the buried cats in dark backyards. You'll glimpse the pain of men you loathed, see children peer at you until their pink eyes turn to dust. But keep always in mind that yours is borrowed shine, and all of what is good in you remains a con, a dumb reflection.
What you don’t know about the Garden of Eden

is that there never was an apple tree. Figs
and persimmons, sure, and dates large
as a monkey’s fist. Apples are a translator’s
late addition, so bland they needed a divine lie.

And the book leaves out so much. If asked, Eve
would recall the ugly trees, goji vines, and a host
of virtue plants: the Bush of Spousal Devotion,
with its bloated brown fruit, and the gamey berries

that fell from the Honesty Hedge. Who could stomach
even a little Patience, its milky purple hearts?
Most puzzling to Eve were the trees intended
for future generations—trees that discouraged
children from hoarding Easter candy
or peeing in neighbors’ kidney-shaped pools,
or the one that could keep a boy with a learner’s
permit from riding the clutch. Those fruits

tasted like pulpy water to her, their juices
squandered down her chin. But the Garden knew
we’d never put those trees to use, knew that sin
would be the father of all our inventions. Else why place

the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the bright
center; why have it offer the coolest shade
for snakes and smoothest hollows for squirrels,
their bellies round as little moons? On the hill

next to the blood oranges, behind the papayas,
and above the acai that Adam ate by the handful,
Knowledge didn’t disappoint. It broke open red and sticky
like a pomegranate, each bite a hard, sweet germ.
Sonnet for Wal-Mart

It’s you we blame for gutted bakeries
and darkened seamstress shops, for wanting to buy
flip-flops and grapes at three a.m., to get
our hearts’ needs met for less than five dollars
at a go. We deride the smiling way you roll
across a cashier’s sick sons, want you when
the toilet paper runs thin. We are not
so different—not above shoving the people
we need if it can raise our stocks, and who
among us hasn’t once confused fucking over
with making love? None of us will become more
than a glut of stuff on someone’s shelves. When we die,
and meet the dark, we’ll say, Yes, we’ve seen this place
before. We need flashlights, burn cream. Aisle nine.
What to Do

In case of fire:
  Open the ’95 Cabernet.
Eat the dark
  chocolate cherries and put
on your wedding
  dress for the second time.
Remember
  that photos only tether
your memories;
  forget to think
that what fits must be

lovely. Ask yourself
which child will wail
  and drop and which will creep
away on its own. Know
  that the tabby sees its spot
beneath the stairs
  as a different kind of escape,
and you cannot come
  along. You must leave
through the big door.
  Understand that all doors

are big doors, and that to exit
  and to leave are not the same:
every exit ends
  a scene, but to leave
you must mean it.
  Take the terrier and hand
her to a fireman.
  Give him a novel, the one
with the longest title—
  he can read by the light
of the burning house.
I, Being of Sound, Leave

to the space heater, one dog, who barks her love to the landlord, who will not sleep

to the car’s back seat, a boy, who leans his head out just to hear the sound of distance

to the barstool, bleeding its foam, one cousin, equal parts clamor and man

to the guest bedroom, one sister (your choice), and to the Army, one father, no more

to the sheer white curtains, all the daughters I don’t have

to a master key, my husband, his bag of stones and loss—plus a cellist with hands of water

to my headstone, a picnic, a man and woman who will not share their wine

to the earth, a thousand tumors, everything that loves itself enough to grow

and to the music outside my window, a word like passerby, my eardrums, my complaints, my mockingbird heart.
so quietly: slowed muscles,
steadied bones, the last air
escaping like a child’s wilting ball.

It sets you, the living, loose
into the luxury of grief;
you lie and claim these cries
are not for you alone.
You do not get to witness
death the drama, the syrup-
blood end you crave. You hear
no ferocious gasps,
see no mouth abruptly pursed
like a vulgar flower.
It all just pauses. Stops.
And a body, then, is more

surely a body than it has been
all its life—more a box
of garbage than a vacuum

for memory. A body
will stay where it’s told:
the playground, the easy

chair. It wants nothing—
so unlike you, trapped
in that ridiculous coating of skin.
First came the gunshot.

And then the sparrows,
    making a sound like corundum
    against the black glass of night.

Roused from sleeping
    in their dreamless cottage
    of leaves, they spread themselves,

ashes blown from the limbs.
    But we sat awake and dreamt
    so hard we believed in gates

and latches, in curtains
    and God. *What will save us*
    we squalled, in time with the birds,

though the response lay
    already, facing us. No one
    wanted to touch the cracked

and spilling body, the flesh
    by which we understood we lived,
    that we were saved every moment

we blinked and bled. We knew,
    too, another name for this,
    broken and hollow: *nothing.*
Three Lies

1. And here the path leads to the orchard
only I can see. No one can enter, just as no one
can locate the muffled center of a bruise.

2. Long days can be cobbled out of cups, syringes,
ignition turns. She cuts whole crooked mornings
from phone calls. I prefer gravel and hotcakes.
There is no word for disease that does not mean disease.

3. But I may always eat the fruit of deer and calves,
the tough apples of their shoulders. I once saw
her clutch too-ripe mangoes like lungs
in her hands. Her gaping arms and open mouth
create the diabetes inside our marriage.

4. Each vein collapses like a cold alley, like a sugar trail
to a broken phone. I tell her, There are the animals
we would like to be, and there are the animals we are.
Perhaps she alone is both. Our children
won’t find our bodies, though they’ll lie
in an orchard far less invisible than our lives.
Bobby,

That year unfolded like a bridal fan, a crease opening each week—the credit bill, the thermostat, the Turkish roommate. My drawers filled with paper, bottles poked from the wine rack, and the skinny jeans, for once, fit. Rapping on my door a Sunday alarm,

I woke to your face thrust into my hand: Missing. As if no gap existed between gone from my periphery and gone from the earth. I’d seen you last four years before, in a locust-coated parking lot. Before you’d thought of the service. Grasshoppers crunching beneath our feet, me married, you dating women—a year of plagues and shams.

How strange to wake a half-decade later and find I’d lost what I thought I’d just misplaced. Your picture-grin grew wider each news hour,

and our friend found himself in custody over a bloody sock. Your Dodge ditched two miles from my apartment made your mother plead harder, and the men you served with had to be asked, had to tell. Weeks later, police dredged your body from a business park pond eighty yards wide and five blocks away. The fountain lit every night to offer you a brighter hell. In a year, your bunkmate would have pulled you from Iraqi sand, anyway. Death in America is not unique—
just wetter, colder. In the meantime, the gap between inquiry and answer, I passed your pond to buy groceries, glided by en route to files and phones—to keep the world unfolding as it should. While you, a dead gay soldier, grew fat beneath a fountain, a wedding cake of water.
Section II.

The Animals We’re Given
Poem for My Sister

Hannah, do not ask why we buy wine in jugs. Don’t ask where the dogs go when we reach the bottom of each bottle, don't ask how they have more than once eaten tacos, chocolate, cigarette butts, and I won’t ask why you left the work of your hands, quit signing, why you sell me drop necklaces and soft stone rings. I won’t tell you how I hate that you stopped listening, loathe to think that what goes on our ears is more important than the sounds you shape for people’s eyes. Hannah, we have spilled our love on the tablecloth, and I, for one, will not clean it this time. Still, you may call when our mother will not feed your son, or feeds him too much, or when you again cannot live with a man you see only in the careless grace of computer light. When no one who believes in a center can find it. Hannah, I will tell you what it means to sleep with my phone in hand, to sit at my plate and talk to the mums and roses he sent, to act as though distance is imaginary, like the white blank at the edges of a map. To know what is close is only different because you can touch it. I want you to know how my roommate broke a bottle in her own hand, how I couldn’t find the shards under the serrated ridges of skin, how I wrapped her fingers in a black towel and held it in my lap. I want you to know about the wine and blood drying on our porch. But Hannah, what I cannot say—what I do not know—is how we keep loving a world that spills from our hands like so many beads of glass.
You call to tell me what you cannot have
at your party, what the doctor will condemn:

frosted cake, white wine, black crepe paper.
Later, we stand in your kitchen, washing

the approved-of strawberries, and you tell me about a man
who would have taken us both, when I was three. Fervor—

would that have drawn you out of bed
more in all those years? Would you have raised me

from my sheets, instead of I, with a coffee cup, pulling
you? My younger sisters rush in, the ones who provide

the grandchildren, and you forget him again. The lives we leave
unled rest in drawers, curling at the edges, and they crumble

in the light. The unborn children loll in jars
at the back of the cupboard. Tonight, I will wash

out the leafy stems of your stories, collect the dirt,
and you will act as though you do not see. The grains

of what you don’t know about me would weigh
that sink through the floor, but you hand

me a strawberry and ask: Is it clean? I can’t tell
the difference between seeds and soil.
Orphans

In our kitchens, we nodded soberly as our mothers clucked *poor girl and awful truckers*, but at school we were free to admit our envy. Theresa of the dead parents, Theresa of the bottomless absence notes and casseroles, of open hall passes and snickerdoodles. Who dared deny her soggy eyes, didn’t hope to pilfer a scrap of her unkempt sorrow?

Even after the German grandmother took custody, we wouldn’t have refused her some trade, some trafficking in lives:

Grandparents turned in early and caught on late. Grandparents believed in butter and white flour, and it was easy enough to skirt their restrictions—to pocket drugstore lip gloss and smooth it on in the junior high’s flecked mirrors.

In time Theresa would grow fat on pandering, while we with the curfews and study halls grew out of our wired mouths and into college majors and renter’s insurance: into the calculus of adult desire. At twenty she would inherit a beige brick mausoleum in the suburbs and retire with her cats and her boxed wine, with her GED.

But we could not see this at twelve—couldn’t see her parents as anything more than the halftone dots of their photos
in the paper and were blind to the thin cuts beneath her gym shorts, the blood beading like doll necklaces. We didn’t know then which of our crushes and classmates would become the sweet boys who defied their parents at fourteen, at sixteen.

to spend the night in a stolen car with her already copious body, each trying to claw open the taut sack of his own unfettered dreams.
Frances Newton is asked by prison staff for her final requests, 2005

If I tell you that the aphid I culled
from my father’s roses that morning
is the last thing I ever killed, would you believe
me? Pinched between my thumb and forefinger,
one green antennae trapped beneath the nail.
Dig in Harris County’s evidence locker
and you will find my victim, the dainty
outline of its feeler congealed
with my children’s blood. I tendered
my hands for scraping, offered up the gun
I never fired and the skirt they burned
to find the nitrites—gave the law
what you needed to lie, to aim your needle
at my heart. The word nitrite so strange I chanted
it in my cell until it, too, became a weapon,
a thing that could creep out in the dark
to split a child, to steal the buzz from his chest.
Kneeling in my daddy’s garden with black
ants and inchworms, with the fertilizer
full of -ites and -ates, had always seemed a kind
of prayer, and I can’t say I never asked for riches.

But if I killed my baby girl for $50,000
and my husband for the same, why did I spare
the mouse quivering behind my father’s thorn bush
just to murder my only son for free? Grief
has its own debt; we pay it in years. It floods
these halls each night—we wake wet with it,
saturated like ticks, like earth. I have no last meal
to request because I am filled already to the lip,
satisfied knowing the dead remember
what evidence forgets. So now there’s nothing
left for you but to pin me to that table, label my body,
use it to teach: *This is a woman who cupped*

*her daughter’s spent head in her dirty hands. This*
*is what she owes. This is the vein we break, the blood*
*that spiders out. This is the sodium thiopental,*

*the pancuronium, and the potassium chloride.*
*This is the truth they tell.*
Before

I
So I have “pre-cancer,”
which is like saying I’m cleared for disease—
*You are certified for cervical cancer commencement*—
and it’s not like I’ll die, or anything good,
but my gynecologist still gets to purse her mouth and ask
How many men? women? times per day alone?
How often during ovulation? in the library? from behind?
How often am I
on the bed, in the shower, under the covers
yet away from the body?

II
I’ve stopped dreaming out loud.
Instead, I lay dying as the children
I may now never have tumble
out of my other body calling
their names—*Olivia, Jude,*
*Griffin, Grace*—as they fall,
telling stories of hairs I’ll never
brush, hands I’ll never smack away
from ravenous oven-jaws;
they whisper things only the pre-dead know.

III
A girl in sixth period tells me I look tired.
My arms and legs have stopped holding
their regular coordination meetings,
and my head finds its way to my desk more often.
She has clean eyes, isn’t perpetrating that ancient felony
of flattery upon her pre-broken teacher.
*Don’t worry, Miss Davis, I’ll make sure they do their work.*
My mother tells me she’s concerned I’ll be her chambermaid in heaven.

This after I’ve broken my off-again, on-again relationship with Jesus, who was a nice enough guy but wanted me to spend so much time with his family. Always with the bread and wine.

*I know I’ll see you in the kingdom, she says, you believed once.*

All this is true: the belief, the passing of belief. Like a toxin your body can cleanse itself of.

What baffles me about her idea is not my lowly place in the afterworld—this I’ve ensured with the pettiness of microbrews and horror flicks, of red dresses and poetry.

Instead, I want to know why, after all the unpleasant hours spent contemplating our bowels on earth, we would still need them in the idyllic sky. Not only this, but there will be chamber pots to empty, great and faultless shits to dump into heaven’s luminous Thames. As if God couldn’t master a septic system.

My mother pauses for drama, and I understand how her notion reveals the furtive hope we both harbor that our conduct counts—that God, like our first grade teachers, keeps a chart of the grape juice we share, the pledges we make each morning.

Though we’ll admit we don’t want to be forgotten, we’re less ready to admit that we’re afraid to forget, afraid rightness will be somehow flawed if we can’t remember the shortcomings by which all perfection must be judged.

And it doesn’t really matter that I squander my life if we’ll all be pissing away eternity, as well. So I smile and tell her, *At least I’ll be there.* What I mean is:

Perhaps memory is a disease of the body. Now, we make a gold that pours from us like water, and we’ll end gripping the stars that reward our acts, hemorrhaging light from our hands.
Exodus

And it is in this, the fourth month of pregnancy, the month I want to cease counting my food, want to say, Yea, bring unto me the cheddar cubes and nougat bars, the sesame chicken and blueberry doughnuts,

that I know you are here, can hear your heart funneled into the doctor’s rooms—it is now I know my body is a radio filled with an old jazz. O static in my peripheries! O lemon of my lust! You have lost

from me my language (language of bar tabs, language of singular pronouns) and opened instead the kingdom of savings bonds and diaper bags—the kingdom of fear. Though your days will fill with my refusals,

I offer unto you eighty percent of my sleeping hours, the last strawberry, and change for drugstore chocolate, always. I bequeath to you the eight hundred and two books I would have read, and, as the seasons cycle like hamster wheels, I give to you my acting hopes and California reveries—I give you bikini wearing and billboard wishes. And lo, in return you will offer me credit for your touchdown record

and thank me in your graduation toast. You will spare me from all places called facilities and bury me in a coffin of burnished mahogany. Soon, you will rend me like a grief, and I will continue

to drop quarters in my mouth, expecting always a gumball or glass ring to tumble out—I want not a great new noise in the world, but an idol swathed in plastic, a false reward from every open chute.
The list of what I did not expect must begin
with dry hands, my fingertips growing white
and foreign under their surfeit of skin. I lather
in cracks as they open, mix petroleum with blood.
I am not half soft enough to approach you:

my fingertips stick to your sleepers; each diaper
is tougher to let go. When you cry at two,
four, five, do you know I question how
to touch you, that I look at your small body
and wonder which is the right angle of love?

My hands are cut glass and nails. But soon you will stay
the night in your cradle, and I will not spend my days
spilling water through my palms. Until then,
I have to dream of falling back in a slow, pre-human
sleep, my arms flung wide with stigmata, with joy.
My Life as an American Shorthair

RENEE: If you were an animal, you’d probably be some kind of cat.
ME: What about the baby?
RENEE: He’s too young to call yet.

I watch you ramble through the hall, reaching a small hand
to each toy as if to mark it, while I slide into the weight
of my own paws: I am open, cavernous,
a beast made of mouth
and stuttered song. These broad teeth I use to carry you,
the tongue to clean you, a sharp kind of custody.

If I am a cat,
then your father is a sloth. But past this, the metaphor
breaks down: which creature are you? Perhaps you instead begin
life as a slitten
or a koth and will later grow horns, sprout
feathers, scratch out a naked music all your own. When you look
back at these caged years,
will you remember us
as we are—me well-intentioned but distractible, your father steady,
absorbed, our bodies tough
and warm as you push against us
in the dark? It is hard on you, this becoming,
and often the animals you’re given
are not the ones you need.
Consider the facts—the brown recluse infestation, the six-month-old and his mania to touch what can move of its own accord—

and you realize that the mice are necessary casualties. Sticky traps scattered in what seems at first a higgledy-piggledy sort of torture,

a jumbled manner of dying mean and dying slow. Malice is always more subjective than you think, and the monsters themselves

so stalwart: ten months without food, three legs plucked off will not kill them. Even limbless, relieved of their abdomens, they can bite

for eight minutes. If you were just teeth, you could do almost nothing to another man for eight minutes. Once one has wounded you,

it does not matter how he died—more death will flower behind him, the toxin a Venus flytrap in your back, your thigh, opening to take and consume

what is healthy and within reach. And though miring recluses in glue is the soundest defense, they don’t seek

to attack. They are outsiders, little hobos of necrosis in your basement. They eat cast-off insects, drink the washer’s condensation from cinderblock

walls. Still, you gloss over them with guests, do not repeat the story of the night you woke to find one lolling on your arm, away from her cardboard flap to steal a moment of warmth. Inches from the hand draped across the baby. Flung into the toilet bowl and flushed
from memory, the spider is your schizophrenic
uncle, the gap-toothed girl you were made to lay
off your fourth day on the job. You do not notice
one until you step into the shoe
where he lives, feel the stiff roots
of tissue burst beneath your skin.

Though you say you fear only
for the children, you know it’s tougher
to murder one with poison than with water.
Four Lies

1. Now we are in the life of seams, where we stitch the cat to the yard, the yard to the brick, the baby to a word. You will not mend her name.

2. When my father died, his clean shirts hung on the line like prayers in winter. Behind the shed, the brook ran alone and dreamt of snow. Tired, slowing, everyone.

3. But I did have brothers. Everywhere—the street, the mailbox, the milk jug—filled with their hunger. Too many died to keep track of the living. We marked only the still, and we wrote the world in pencil.

4. Sometimes, in our sheets, you and I hear murmurs from fences as they grow, sprouting barbed wire and grackles. When we can be patient, we sleep. When they are patient, we age. Only the children stitch fences. It is not the swelling but the water that will undo us.

5. This spring, we’ll etch a stone for the baby. The gates will steel themselves against the sparrows, the wires humming with sleep. In silence, the cat will nest in piles of shut letters, and I’ll stir iced tea, the sugar a snowstorm at the bottom of my jar. You’ll admit, then, that it has always been impossible to make a dead thing stand.
The Suicide Child

*I want your phone to never ring and your door to never open,*
*and then you come and ask what’s wrong with me.*
—Constance C. Harold, *Eggs and Bones*

We wage our bed on honesty, and lose
Grasp of what we know; though truth makes a union,
Love’s its own device. You and I are not new.

We vow tonight, once more, we’ll start, be two
Who’ll make it past the numbers, keep as one.
We weight our bed with tragedy, and lose

Our son every day anew. He was you,
He was me; he was everyone and none.
Love’s its own device; you and I are not new.

His grave is strewn with sentiment, hard-hewn
Cross to a god you and I have never known.
We lay his bed with stone lilies, we lose

His face a little more each day; the few
Photographs we took seem darkened by sun.
Love’s its own device—you and I are not new.

Food’s small comfort; yet how simple, too, the ruse
That he unites us by the grace of his gun.
We wage our bed on honesty, and lose
Love—its own demise. You and I are not new.
Section III.

A Fine Mesh of Shock and Hum
I.
Your hand against the small of my back
like an accident, your mouth behind
my ear. Vacant glasses on the table.
And now, right now (feel it?), we start
to lie, like a sprint away from the real.
In two years, you will tell me what happens
tonight, what I can’t know about your body
just by looking. Until then, our pressed faces
will seem to be the first domino of love,
the first in a series of things we knock down
just so we can stop knocking things down.
My skin breaks beneath your fingers; we scatter
across the bed in a litter of limbs—all useless,
like prayers. You and I are strangers
in a strange night. We fall asleep together
and dream ourselves apart.

II.
He lets his fingers slide down my spine,
and I remember the pain—soft,
like gold—of waiting for you to take
my hand in yours, for you to admit
to the darkness that you wanted me. Now,
his hands are long words to a literate room.
I need to believe the songs we sing asleep
will survive our bodies,
will rise like vapors from our coffins.
Because if our throats aren’t infinite,
if our voices are really just dice
we cast into the bedroom, then why

should I keep my legs against my own chair?
Why should I let his mouth go to waste, let him

spend himself on dreams? I could lie to him, too,
you know. My tongue would stay the same.

III.
This, then, is how murder happens: you raise
a veil, we divide a cake. We die sweetly, slowly,

with petals and string quartets. We offer
up our kisses like rites, like chores; our lips

are hymns to gods we can’t believe in
and our lives like tokens, children’s games

we never learned to play. We lay the truth
out in slices on the counters and eat

to forget the time we went without.
The truth is a trinket, a bead, a bribe.

More to the point—this is how it begins:
your body at the sink, mine at the desk.

When we move, we pace, looking for our lost
faces, brushing past our others in the hallways.

We litter the living room with them—
these ghosts we make, but cannot own.
Perhaps it ended in the moment the test
came out not blue or pink, not plus or minus,
but black, as if our bodies had opened a yawning
hole, a thing we could see only because we knew
what lined it, because we have words for what is missing.
Or maybe we should go back further, stopping to glance
at the phone in fragments on the floor, its fine mesh
of shock and hum that I could never mend. Further still:
a receipt for my own gift, the scent you chose that lay
on my skin like an empty song, as if in signing
for something I did not want, I had also made
a carbon of your regard. If I push on, I will find
the small March frog who sat with us
in throaty silence on our second date
and for whom I learned a Spanish name,
ranilla, the next day. I will find that satient
and ameniable are not in the dictionary,
though I am eighteen and seventeen
and think I know what these and all words
mean. I will find a host of creatures and tongues
I had not met before you. I am not afraid to pull
up the grass of our yard and uncover asphalt
beneath—to discover that we were not without roots,
but without ground. I am afraid instead that each step
will lead to another before, that I will go
to the bruises from a skating party
and a white chocolate melting in my palm,
to my lost molars, my last nightlight,
and my first mama, and stop only
because I am worn out, because I keep
coming back to my parents, their legs
tangled beneath a blanket, their lips opening
and closing in a cool room, the black door ajar.
Five Lies

1. *Until our walls bloom into sky*, I tell her when she asks how long I’ll stay. I do not say that I have seen such walls, such sky.

2. She glides against me with her mouth’s other sister, the one who forgot to attend the wedding. Each song begins on our lips. These together tell kissing’s briefest possible history.

3. She prays out loud like a chess move, as if the dark and bright of our routines can be reversed. In the flap of our sheets, a bishop takes a pawn, and I castle before her dirge can find its diagonal.

4. I do rest on Sundays. No mail steals my breakfast, but a crossword can take the day. The bed wears out so quickly: lying, the body’s fondest purpose. Sleep has a language that only the sofa has learned, and both are alone because of this.

5. In summer, our backyard bursts alive with ticks, mosquitoes—fertile brutes, all. Their mating pains them as ours does. Citronella gloats above the porch’s silence, above our hands held in bite-pocked show, but she speaks in tongues at dusk. The candles are not the only small gods we worship.

6. It is Sunday; she and the sofa have whispered for days. *The walls have taken root*, I tell her, and make a line for the bedroom as the hallway opens into a cathedral. I hear the protest
as it begins, makes its way to the open ring
of her mouth. In the end she will play her knights
but hold her queen, as if she were a hymn
I wrote before I knew what music was.
Kissing Me,

you would be a new and graceful language,

your mouth trying to breach the distance
like a story told to my mouth

about Mexico, the Valley, a girl in seventh grade.

About all the ways we leave. Your open collar
a wound against my throat,

your tongue all the words I cannot learn,

desire a song only our hands can sing
and that only our lungs will remember.

Never having kissed me,

you will become a scar, *mi cicatriz*,
that I scratch to feel again.

My mouth empty but clean, my arms

pale against my own sheets,
my heart buttoned in its own body, my lips

like strangers after all the wide sighs.

And I will swallow the thought of your breath
so close, like a memory of surging blood.

Like a memory of dying.
is that we have been unborn.
We have dropped the stones
of our thoughts from our dirty palms.
We have made a mockery of blooming.

We run roughshod over all that tries to stand
thin and alone, looking with equal pity
on the untidy grass and the woman

buying one deck chair. We call
across grocery aisles and congested
buses, still expecting our voices to find

one another. We are worms out of earth,
butterflies dusting one another
of their scales, yet we make
insects die against our lights.

We want the things we are
and the things we think we are
to be the same, but we cannot tell.

What we say when we mean love
is that even before we didn’t exist
our hearts were pieced from our burning hands.
Bliss

Prologue.

If I went alone to Griffin Street, to the ginger door in the stone building, I might still be there, reading the book about God that I so wanted to come true. He—the dragon, the hunter, the lover—might still be there, too, axe at his feet, pushing his fist through the bedroom door. There would be no socks on the carpet, no crumbed plate in the sink, and I’d lie awake under the fluorescent window.

I.

In the Griffin house, I played cards with wolves while he went out. He left, each time, a spinning needle and a ruby apple, neither of which I touched. I knew what it was to fall asleep, what it meant to drink wine with the wolves. When he returned,

the floors were always as he asked—clean as bedsheets, clean as blood. I lost ninety dollars, a month of food, and he told me I could eat only what was left in the cupboard. He, though, could eat it all: the iced roof, the warm chairs, the children.

II.

My parents visited once and said, *How lovely, the crumbling walls,* while the dragon sulked in a closet. They had cautioned me—*He doesn’t love your God*—but God was lost in the sock drawer, and now I was just a story to scare my sisters with. They never came
again. Then his parents dropped by, and I put on the dragon’s jacket and tried to prick myself with the needle. He stayed my hands so I could serve the coffee. I spilled a little, I sang a requiem. We ate the breadcrumbs and forgot the lives they’d lead us to.

III.

I began to want to leave, because the porridge was too hot and a small blond girl still slept in my bed. I grewarker and paler and my red coat didn’t fit. So I gave myself the big bed, and the soft animals got in with me. I meditated on the needle tip, the apple meat, the window panes like coffin slats. His bed seemed far away when I woke. I could see him kicking a furry creature that I couldn’t save. I tried to pull him back, but we had long since cut the rope. He was gone—the prince, the reptile, the angry god. Love was a doorknob that broke in my hand.

Epilogue.

You should know, my parents said, that porridge will always cool. They wouldn’t come to fetch me, not with the needle still in my hand. So I stood alone on the heavy ground and ate the apple, but it was just an apple because all the poison was gone from Griffin Street, and the sleeping could be done by yourself. If I went alone to Griffin Street, maybe I would find I was never there at all.
The Coffee Shop

A circuit had broken into baby hairs.
The manager patched it poorly, and all that winter
the lights flashed when the front door opened.

They hired you one evening that December;
I have always marked your arrival with darkness.

I forgot this for a time as our days filled
with light, as we used the wooden letters meant
for labeling orders to spell dirty words in the bus trays,
as we considered each customer X, how ignorant he must be
of his own mystery. And so it was many nights later

that I closed, unmindling, the store. I came home
to the empty, floodlit foyer; I heard the fabric
of my red chair breathe. This, too, marked an arrival:

the twin bed, the silent percolator. My coffee,
like me, doesn’t think; it just falls through.

After a time, you returned alone to the shop, and I slid
my resignation beneath the door. You could always say
more coolly those swirling words like *macchiato*.

I often forget now which street sign points the way
to my apartment, which mailbox has my name.

I think of the day block X went missing, taking with him L
through R. “What happened to the letters?” you asked,
though you needed only two of them for the note:

“no.” But even this tiny alphabet of unlove
has gone, and with it, the words we could have made.
Where are they now: the circuits, lattes, and dark entries?

We knew such enormous words—
like *palimpsest*. Like *penumbra*. 
Evolution

The complaint takes a familiar shape, like an asterisk—many points, but none unique, and at the center the accusation You don’t love me the way you used to. The unspoken volley small and round (a ball, a bit of punctuation) Neither do you. The house is filled, though, with constellations, little proofs of light: socks neatly partnered in a basket, photos slotted in albums. Changes occur, yes. The clothes that once littered the floor have been replaced by berries speckling a cake, by dark holes dug for bulbs in the garden. What we do for one another is all part of the deeper astronomy of the heart, pieces of a galaxy in which there is sometimes room for our lives. Look in the refrigerator, the bathtub. Look behind the shoeboxes, under the china hutch, and in the pockets of our winter coats. If you want to believe, the evidence is there.
Near-Blindness

1

When I was nine, my first glasses switched on
the night sky, and I at last made out the craters
and lakes people referred to as the Man in the Moon.
Until then, I had thought him part of the sphere

of random adult associations—like the way
grown-ups assumed I must love horses
because I was a girl.
This Moon Man floodlit a landscape

of wonders: grouse tracks in snow, fireflies
rising like miasma in the woods.
Best of all, I discovered that the narrators
in my books weren’t lying: from a bedroom

window, you really could see stars
and pinprick planets, bodies of light.

2

The ships approached for days. At first just blemishes
on the muscled sea, they grew slowly into wooden
mountains the natives seemed not to perceive.
No flaming arrows, no gifts of perplexing produce. Women banded children to their chests
and stripped turtles of their meat, overlooking
the threat less immediate than hunger, than darkness.

And so conquistadors made claims in their letters
of a unique Central American blindness, imagining
their small flotillas so complex as to be unseeable.
This is a small part of imperialism’s
apocrypha, wherein it’s tough to tell the difference
between what is invisible and what is merely ignored.
My lenses, those glass bullies, became tougher each year. As a girl, I could still see what was close: a staircase of Es and Fs tumbling down a lined page, a garden snake curled in my palm.

If an object came too near, it feathered and blurred like the far-off world. But at eighteen, I lost also the middle distance, and now only with a foreign dome in my eye can I make out the country of my own life.

The conquistadors climbed ashore four-limbed, a mixture of armor and fur so fierce that one stiff spear was not enough. Around hurried fires, warriors cursed without having so much as a word to call the beasts, to make real what they saw. The women who glimpsed the horse-men held their dark tongues, made public gestures of fear and disgust. But in their sleeping hours, the older girls held hands to their stomachs and dreamt of unhinging the gaudy breast plate, peeling away the plumage to find where monster ended and man began.

After I’d removed my eyes for the night, the man who would become my husband slid into the sheets behind me, and I could tell by touch alone that he wore plaid pajamas, quaint and formal, a flannel suit intended to impress on our first night together. I, too, slept dressed as something other
than myself: I’d washed only to apply
fresh foundation, guarding how I’d appear
at dawn. Later I’d learn he smelled
the tinted chemicals and knew what

I’d tried to hide. Vision is like that; it assumes
it’s the only sense by which we see.

6

Francisco de Montejo arrived in Chichen Itza to find
a city made of geometry, a science beyond
his imagining. All that separates intricacy
from chaos is knowing what to look for. Montejo
saw height, advantage; when he unfocused
his eyes, the city feathered into the capital
of the new Yucatán. He knew nothing

then of the Mayans, their resilience, the ways
his men and their women would blur
into one another. And if he had succeeded,
no one would know now to watch each equinox
as the serpent-bird Kukulkan creeps down the side
of El Castillo cloaked in light, or that a clap
could pry out the bird god’s music coiled in the stone.

7

I cannot even see the incision, cannot
watch the kidney butterfly back out of the body
it’s meant to save. Or, worse, I can only run
my fingers over the bright bubbles of the cockpit

dials, the soft greens and blues as harmless
as fireflies despite the passengers crying
behind me in the cabin. In these dreams,
I have no contacts or glasses to perform such feats

of vision, which go far beyond anything I might be asked
to do in life. But then the moment comes when I recognize
the dream for what it is, and I face my choice:
Do I switch on the relative miracle of my sight,
or let the passengers die and a fresh dream begin?
The numbers repeat throughout the city:
  seven, thirteen, fifty-two. Chichen Itza,
the new world wonder, where astronomy
  meets the gods. Walking the ruins on our honeymoon,
my husband and I heard strange cadences,
  the widening notes of a language
we thought dead, in the peddlers’ calls

  of Mayan children who should have been in school.
Any one could have told us their word
  for horse: tziiimin, no more exotic now than wood
or the moon. In the heat, my pregnant stomach
  roiled, but my husband’s skin lit up, his dark
armor at last put to use. Scaling the observatory,
  he found a stone scrawled with blue marker:

Jason was here. This is the complete history
  of the convergence of his people and mine.

As my son wakes in the morning and smiles
  broadly at his sleeping father, I’m comforted
  to know that he sees what I cannot:
the heavy mestizo brow, the thick forest of beard.

  Early in the night, while the baby still slept
  thick-lidded in his crib, my husband
put his wide mouth gently to my collarbone.
  I reached for my glasses, but stopped short

  and made love without them—as in dreams,
  moving through the moment
  when I could choose to see, but don’t.
Where Are You, Mr. Cogito?

I tell you I prefer the broken song
that falls from a child’s mouth;
the hunger, my own, that lives
outside and comes in to ruffle
my hair as I sleep.

We share so many words: *pebble,*
*ash, breath.* Yet you have greater words
I want: *compassion, consent, souvenir.*

Give me all the words
of explanation—the whys
and wherefores and heres.
Maybe then I will know.
Maybe then I can tell
how the dry heart
becomes a ghost.

I still cannot say what love means,
what it is to be faithful. For now,
I say: There grows a small red
hurricane in my bed with him. And:
I have let go the notes, the pens,
the hands I should not keep.

For now, I can say:
My imagination is a small god
produced by my imagination;
my god will say a great deal more,
and always mean so much less.
The Lost Lover Gospels

Again and again I go away from you and send back only words.
—J. Michael Yates

When your words arrived, I did not know
what to do with them—their curves
like bodies, like streets. A circle distinct
from an angle,
still more different than a line.
This hushed geometry belongs to you. Even so,
I took to the roads, your words my only map.
At each turn, the street
filled with words—
some ground to gravel, some losing shape
in the tar, all humming beneath me. I found
your notes everywhere:
pinned to dog
carcasses, written line-by-line on sycamore
leaves, clutched in the fog’s elderly hands.
They led to cold places—North,
they call it.

So I met with the words
one by one for aid, a little exegesis
of themselves. Some asked for privacy,
for quiet, and I’ve let their meanings
weaken, their lit shapes
flicker. It’s tough
without please and sickness; still others
I’ve forgotten entirely. But help and through
came forward, lifted stones
to reveal roots
beneath, and we traced you to the origin
of your last letter, the C of your sleeping
place still yawning
in the snow. I saw
then you would always be in future tense,
the epistles between us hard and impenetrable
as chalk or grave. I knelt to stroke
the icy grass,
felt it repeat ill over and over in my hand,
and laid myself into the space where your body
had been, curved
    like the moon or a sickle.
As if there had ever been a difference.
Suzanne Verdal

And she shows you where to look
among the garbage and the flowers.
—Leonard Cohen, “Suzanne”

1965

Because I’d said there were no Jews in Montreal,
my husband brought my hand to Leonard’s
in a jazz hall, notes opening around us
like night jasmine. He pulled napkins
from his pockets, each covered with words
deep as curtsies. When the marriage broke,
I stole our daughter down to the waterfront,
and Leonard came, his eyes raw as pine
wood in the light of a candle I loved enough
to name. What does one fire mean to another?
What else could I have done but dance
for him after my daughter threw cat food
on the floor like petals to the river?
We were never lovers, but he read me
such poems—poems with their shirts off,
areolas bright as dying suns.

1976

We were short on money and long on fathers.
Three, one of God’s numbers, the children
saints in their bed linen shirts. I choreographed
in curtains, people flowing one into another,
this leg marking anger, this arm the empty stars.
Who remembers the second step when the ballet
is over? Leonard caught me backstage
at his concert, erased what he owed. You gave
me a beautiful song, girl. There are no royalties.
to be paid for the pilfered details of a life, 
the sequins and rags: I adored water. 
I loved tea and Jesus and oranges 
because they were made of water.

1984

It goes like this—the second, the third, the minor 
loves and the major hurts. But those were full years, 
years whose drawers anyone could open and steal 
from and still there would be enough silver 
to set the table. Leonard came again to Canada, 
saw me lead a roundel through a small forest 
of fountains. I curtsied for him, twice, three 
times, and still he walked away. There are people 
to whom all words belong, and others who are given 
only some, but I was too full to wonder why 
the blossoms I cut didn’t become cherries.

2007

Sleep is a place I look for with a broken back. 
I can’t dance in Los Angeles, but light sifts through the slats 
of the wooden room my son and I built on a truck bed, 
an attic to a house of tires and pavement, salt water 
and air. So few fires, fewer petals, and vagrancy the price 
every muse must eventually pay. I feed the seven cats 
because I can live on sand. At night, I lie on the floor hard 
as stolen bread, quiet as an empty cross.
How wide the gulf between o and i:
*He loves with his wife and daughter in New Haven,* his bio read.
An accident of the hands, funny
in the way wrecks often are.

But don’t discount the hands,
the way they know the girl will return
one day from college with her arms spilling
like her mother’s once did. How he’ll see
her almond sweater and the snow

as it stops in the window, and he’ll wish
he’d had sons. He’ll be vigilant
from here on, aware of the sanctity of letters.
He’ll realize as never before that his wife’s
and daughter’s names both begin with C—

that they are both about sight,
about water. The difference between *live*
and *love* will expand to *dive* and *dove,*
and he won’t know present
from past, past from flying.

For now, he sometimes opens
his wife’s shirt in the kitchen,
and wants but does not want
to find someone looking—his daughter,
the mowing neighbor, anyone—

as if to confirm, so that he may say
in the end: *Once, there were two bodies*
in the same place, and one of them was mine.
After Running Four Blocks in a Night Storm

*Beowulf*
+ *Grendel*
♥ 4-ever

—Bathroom wall in Hard Rock Café Atlanta

We arrive sodden, like abused cacti. Our hostess, a girl made for the musty loveliness of interiors, a girl with a name

like Ashleigh, like Jessica, rhythmic and bland,
allows us to drip while we wait. Inside, I plant myself in a stall,
try to sop the water infiltrating my skin, try to make myself dull

enough for the gift shop, that clever monster, god of tourists
and children. We’re both. But the restroom is no place to recover

from a baptism, and the scent of dying rain will bloom
from our jeans for two full days. The whole city is still
like that. But the stall chimes with the flushing music of toilets,

the splendor of taking away, waterfalls beneath the city’s sidewalk
skin. On the walls, dry people have scribbled stories of friendship,

of place and time, of being. And amidst the tales of Madisons
and McKaylas, the girls who adore so fiercely that they’ll carve it
in the dirtiest of spaces, I find a song older than all of us: the girl

too smart to spend her real self on bathroom walls, the girl who wants
to remind us that all feuds are made of love, that they all end

in “forever.” I leave behind me a trail of waste, a series of items
I soak to get dry, things that will fill the ground long after my body
goes missing. When we leave, a man displaced by a hurricane, a man

wearing boxes and bags and a harmonica on a cord, sings us back
to our lobby. He will wait for what change we can offer—his quarrel

is not with us, as my quarrel is not with the sky. I am Grendel,
come to clutter the night, to add to the detritus of useless names
in the dirtiest of times. And the man in bags is caught,

making his tinny music in a city that moves only when it rains.
Autumn, again, short and livid,
storms through like an assassin;
we, its lackeys, gather evidence
and burn, gather and burn.

At night, our speech rises, fog
against the porch light. Our loves,
yes, are of the earth, but our thoughts
rush and leave in so much breath.

There’s no snow for making angels,
but there is space in the ash heap
left by the leaves. I set down my bottle
and flail in the cinders. You stand above,

clean, sipping to understand.
Ash in my hair, ash in my mouth,
and no one to blaze for. You are water
that arrived before the fire began.

You walk inside, accompanied
by reeling wind. A last leaf,
full of fins, gambols through the air
like a goldfish swimming to the ground.