

THE NECESSITY OF MOVEMENT

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This dissertation is a collection of poems preceded by a critical preface. The preface considers emotional immediacy—or the idea of enacting in readers an emotional drama that appears genuine and simultaneous with the speaker's experience—and furthermore argues against the common criticism that accessibility means simplicity, ultimately reifying the importance of accessibility in contemporary poetry. The preface is divided into an introduction and three sections, each of which explores a different technique for creating immediacy, exemplified by Robert Lowell's "Waking in the Blue," Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus," and Louise Glück's "Eros." The first section examines "Waking in the Blue," and the poem's systematic inflation and deflation of persona as a means of revealing complexity and ambiguity. The second section engages in a close reading of "Lady Lazarus," arguing that the poem's initially deliberately false erodes into sincerity, creating immediacy. The third section considers the continued importance of persona beyond confessionalism, and argues that in "Eros," it is the apparent lack of drama, and the focus on the cognitive process, that facilitates emotional immediacy.

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“The Real,”

“Frost in April”

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PART I

LANGUAGE THAT LIES LIKE TRUTH:

PLAIN SPEECH, PERSONA, AND THE ARTIFACE OF INTIMACY

Plain Style and Persona

Accessibility is an often debated issue, especially among contemporary poets, and a term which can be understood in many different ways. The ability of general readers, with no specialized knowledge, to understand a text raises questions about what it actually means to read, or understand poetry. Poetry can be understood on many different levels, and similarly, initial accessibility can be of content, or language, or pathos. I am specifically interested in emotional immediacy in poetry, in poems that are not only invested in emotion, but enact in readers an emotional drama that appears genuine and simultaneous with the speaker's experience. Immediacy is one form of accessibility, one way of appreciating and approaching a poem that requires little outside knowledge or reading.

Any drama, or performance has inherent risks, many of which are related to the unspoken distance between speaker and audience, be it physical or emotional. If this distance is too great, the emotional experience is not as immediate, or accessible. While one of the most obvious benefits of immediacy in poetry is admitting readers with little specialized knowledge, many immediate poems are quite complex in their rhetoric and use of language. Brian Henry argues that by attempting to write accessibly, poets often falsely narrow experience and meaning; they “pander to their potential audience by implying that it cannot handle complexity in poetry” (“The Trouble with Billy Collins”). In fact, accessibility, or immediacy, in no way implies simplicity. The opposite can be more true: by using seemingly simple familiar diction and sentence structure, poets can guide readers toward complex and multi-layered meanings that appear more natural--less deliberately constructed, less artificial--thus creating the illusion of genuineness, or honesty on the part of the speaker.

Since the publication of Wordsworth's 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which called for

poetry to adopt “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation,” the idea of plain spokenness has influenced writing (445). For Wordsworth, this meant a preference for unadorned language—for “plainer and more emphatic” diction—in service of the larger poetic form (447). “Real” speech is “more permanent, and...far more philosophical” than artful approximations of language, which merely “separate them...from the sympathies of men,” and are “dishonourable to the Writer's own character” (447).

This association between plain speech and character, unsurprisingly, did not end with Wordsworth, but has become closely associated with so-called confessionalism, largely through responses to Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*. Critics hailed *Life Studies*, published in 1959, for its “boldest innovations of technique” (Hoffman 118): Lowell's “new style” was the vehicle that allowed him to “balance his burdens” (Hoffman 131). The burdens Hoffman references are personal ones: plain style allowed Lowell to write about difficult subjects. Lowell himself, in an interview with the *Paris Review*, wrote that poetry too often is “a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life” (The Art of Poetry, No. 3). As a result, writers often use the story to suggest that elevated language and thought are barriers, and that plain speech cuts through the persona, creating more truthful poetic expression. However, in an interview with Stanley Kunitz, Lowell spoke about his desire “to see how much of my personal story and memories I could get into poetry. To a large extent it was a technical problem” (*Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*). This suggests that emotionally immediate language is a poetic technique for creating persona. Specifically, certain plain stylistic choices can create and simultaneously complicate persona, while maintaining the appearance of honesty.

The ability of plain speech to imply complexity through simplicity is determined by its qualities of linguistic texture. James Longenbach, in “Sex and Contemporary Style” supplies a

useful discussion of the characteristics of plain speech. In order to contrast plain and “fancy style,” Longenbach references Lowell's “psychopolitical breakthrough, emerging as a poet of openness, liberated from...elaborately artificial verse forms” (“Sex and Contemporary Style”). The story's moral is usually understood to be that “high poetic rhetoric”—or fanciness—separates a poet from “real experience”; in fact, *Life Studies* evidences Lowell's dramatic shift from “a poetry of interior decoration” to a style that is “adamant in its preference for dirty scavengers over fussy traffickers in ornament” (Longenbach).

Longenbach's concept of plain style is useful because it makes clear that definitions of plain style in general are inevitably limited by their reliance on contrast. Plain style is never defined by its own characteristics, but is rather simply a negation of those of “fancy speech.” Furthermore, what is considered to be traditional language, of course, changes with place and time, and with it changes all markers of style. Wordsworth and Lowell were both reacting against the dominant poetic modes of the time. While Longenbach does not condone the association between “plain style in poetry and a lack of intellectual breeding,” he is by no means a proponent of plain style, arguing instead that many poets of plainness write in this way because they want to express emotion without seeming “ladylike” (“Sex and Style in Contemporary Poetry”). This association raises troubling questions about the engendering of language, but it also highlights the close relationship between emotion and style. Longenbach seems to imply, through Lowell, that using plain style allows one to remove the artifice from poetry, an inherently false idea. Art is artifice: the only question is how clearly this artifice disguises itself.

To a certain extent, plain style imitates honesty through its mimicry of the cultural and linguistic specifics of setting, and the characters connected with it. Truth in poetry does not result from the removal of artifice, but from the creation and display of it. It is only by admitting the

inherent performance of artifice that makes clear its importance. According to David Yezzi, in “Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty,” “by relying on facts, on 'real' situations and relationships, for a poem’s emotional authenticity, the poet makes an artifice of honesty.

Confessional poems, in other words, lie like truth” (Yezzi). While such poems do often “lie like truth,” or create a lie that tells a truth, the way they do so is a little more complicated than simply deriving power from the conflation of speaker and writer: a poem's emotional authenticity is not created by the narrative “facts” of the poem, but by the success of language in creating situations and interactions that seem genuine to the speaker's persona. The more successful this use of language, the stronger the creation of persona.

Longenbach, in discussing the association of plain style with confessionalism, references Philip Levine's “The Simple Truth,” to define this concept as that which “must be said without elegance, meter, or rhyme” (“Sex and Style in Contemporary Poetry”). This is interesting, because Levine's poem seems to go beyond what must be said without ornamentation, and discuss more specifically the importance of the unsaid. While “some things/ you know all your life. They are so simple and true” (Levine 18-19) that they must be said directly, other “truth[s] you never uttered because the time was always wrong” become lodged “in the back of your throat...for the rest of your life, unspoken” (Levine 29-31). At the end of the Levine poem, it is ultimately the unsaid, not the spoken truth, which provides the nourishment and sustenance “you live on” (33). This distinction is important because it highlights the limitations of Longenbach's argument that plain style is unadorned truth, and that using such language removes artifice; instead, it hints at a more complex relationship between plain style and truth—one that attempts to navigate the complexities of communication, both spoken and unspoken.

Longenbach notes that “one cannot talk about 'the simple truth' without raising the specter

of a style that dare not speak its name” (“Sex and Style in Contemporary Poetry”). This “specter of a style,” of course, is confessionalism (“Sex and Style in Contemporary Poetry”).

Confessionalism, a problematic term in itself, is popularly simplified as autobiographical poetry, concerned largely with emotional intimacy, with representing unpleasant, shocking, or taboo experiences. David Yezzi, in his 1998 review of Hughes's *The Birthday Letters*, “Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty,” subtitled “on the legacy of confessionalism,” uses the terms confessional poetry and autobiography interchangeably throughout the article, concluding that “the ‘I’ of the poem is meant as a direct representation of the flesh-and-blood poet” (“Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty”). He furthermore argues that such work can be identified by the “rawness of its address and the incorporation of guilty personal detail for emotional effect” (Yezzi).

Yezzi's article, rather than discussing confessional poetry between Plath's time and that of *The Birthday Letters*, is more concerned with the stylistic and tonal differences between Lowell's, Plath's, Snodgrass's and Sexton's work, ultimately arguing that Lowell's and Snodgrass's work is more “true” in its sentiment (“Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty”). While the implications of this argument are troubling, specifically its split along gender lines, more problematic is its reading of Plath through Hughes. Yezzi assumes not only that the speaker of confessional works is always the poet, but that the representation of Plath in Hughes's *The Birthday Letters* is an accurate description of the real Sylvia Plath. Yezzi describes Plath and Sexton as working in the same brand of “emotional extremism” (“Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty”). Sexton's “poetic shamelessness” is evidenced through titles such as “The Abortion” and “Menstruation at Forty,” and Yezzi cites Plath's description of her work as reveling “the drama of blood, lust, and death” behind “real things; real emotions...The real

world” (“Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty”). In fact, with the exception of the word “drama,” this description sounds very similar to Lowell's desire to “see how much of [his] personal story...[he] could get into poetry.” Yezzi's criticisms of Plath's and Sexton's work suggest that he is more comfortable with the use of some “guilty personal details for emotional effect” than others.

“Guilty personal details” of course, is a gross simplification of confessional poetry. Poems often seem more interested in a deeper intimacy than simply that supplied by the confession. Intimacy is not just “making [the reader] privy to dark personal secrets”; rather, Mark Jarman and Robert McDowell of *The Reaper* define intimacy as simply “being there with the reader[,] on the same journey” (“The Elephant Man of Poetry,” 50). In this way, a reader is simply asked to experience and feel with the speaker, not feel sorry for them. Intimacy should enact, to a certain degree, that same experience in many readers: narrative is not nearly as important as the sense of immediacy, of connection, between audience and speaker. It is this definition of a seemingly simultaneous, shared experience that is most valuable when arguing for the continued importance of intimacy in poetry. It is necessary to expand the concept, which often results from the cultivated appearance of honesty, beyond that of a certain caliber of experience.

While poems that create an artifice of intimacy often reflect on unpleasant or shocking experiences, they by no means rely on the nature of that experience to derive poetic power: immediacy is not tied to content, but technique. Plain style can be used in various ways, some of which are more effective than others at creating the appearance of intimacy, and suggesting the complexities of identity and experience. Specifically, some plain stylistic techniques seem to result in a kind of ironing out of language, which has the effect of focusing and singularizing the

poem's conflict, thus effectively simplifying the speaker's persona, and the overall poem. Billy Collins's "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House," from *The Apple that Astonished Paris* (1988) is a good example of the potential simplicity of plain style.

In this poem, the speaker laments on his frustrations with the neighbor's dog, who "will not stop barking" (Collins 1). The dog is "barking the same high, rhythmic bark/ that he barks every time they leave the house" (2-3). While there is perhaps something more haunting than annoying in a lonely animal, the poem does not describe further the desperate sound, instead ending the stanza with a joke that his neighbors "must switch him on on their way out" (4). The speaker then tries to drown out the sound by "clos[ing] all the windows in the house" and "put[ting] on a Beethoven symphony full blast/ but...can still hear him muffled under the music,/ barking, barking, barking" (9). From here the poem humorously imagines the dog "sitting in the orchestra,/ his head raised confidently...sitting there in the oboe section barking,/ his eyes fixed upon the conductor," and when the record ends, obeying the conductor's commands for a solo (10-14).

The small details in this poem—the Beethoven reference, the description of the dog—are interesting, but do little to introduce complexity into the narrative. While the speaker's choice to put on Beethoven perhaps reveals something of character, the speaker is less interested in specifics: it is only "a Beethoven symphony," so it is difficult to attach further meaning to the reference. The lack of specificity, also to a certain extent, takes away from the image of the "part for barking dog" because readers cannot supply a specific part to replace with the annoying dog (12). Moreover, it prevents readers from experiencing all of these sounds himself, along with the speaker. The poem is more of an anecdote—told solely for the purposes of amusement—than a descriptive story in which the audience is invited to participate. The speaker's description of the

dog as confident and attentive is funny, and creates a strong image, but ultimately, has little meaning beyond a reiteration of the speaker's problems with a neighbor's dog, and the humor associated with this common problem. There is no intimacy here.

The poem ends with an image of the other musicians listening respectfully to the “famous barking dog solo,/ that endless coda that first established/ Beethoven as an innovative genius” (18-20). The comparison of the dog's bark to the “endless coda,” one of Beethoven's most important contributions to music, is one of the richest details of this poem. That the speaker knows this reveals more about his personality and interests; however, what little complexity the comparison itself introduces clearly registers as satirical, undermining the potential for multi-layered meaning: not only is it clear that the barking dog is no genius, it is moreover ridiculous to try to mine further meaning from this experience. The repetition of the word bark—11 times in this 20 line poem—allows readers to experience with the speaker the true annoyance of a barking dog; however, the word gains no deeper meaning or importance through this repetition: it does little technical work, other than coming across as funny. In many ways, the poem essentially undermines its own importance.

In “The Trouble with Billy Collins,” *Verse* editor Brian Henry argues that advocates of accessible poetry often want verse to focus largely on the interests of prose—plot and character—rather than sound and meaning, and that this insistence on accessible language often results in a number of problems (Part I). However, these criticisms of plain style are perhaps more representative of the limits of persona, highlighting the strong connection between the two. From the singularization of experience, and the risks of creating insincere, or unsympathetic characters with too-internalized dialogue, the risks of persona are as numerous as its potential rewards (Henry Part I). As numerous as such criticisms, there are as many examples of poems

where emotional immediacy does not result in simplicity, but rather uses that illusion of simplicity to elevate persona while highlighting the fluidity of identity. Such poems tell a compelling story while simultaneously undermining that story or perspective. Lowell's "Waking in the Blue," Plath's "Lady Lazarus," and Louise Glück's "Eros" each provide examples of different ways that plain language can suggest complexity through the performance of honesty, and intimacy.

Lowell's Inflation and Deflation of Language and Character

"Waking in the Blue," appears in the fourth and title section of *Life Studies*. The poems in this section, perhaps more than others in the book, thrive on persona, and the appearance of genuineness: they are among the most emotionally immediate. In fact, Lowell originally intended to write the experiences expressed in *Life Studies* in prose; he found that regular meter "ruin[ed] the honesty of sentiment, and became rhetorical; it said, 'I'm a poem'" (Lowell). This sense of artifice was to be avoided; Lowell believed that by breaking meter, and relying on prose-like narrative techniques, he was "simplifying [the] poems" (The Art of Poetry, No. 3). However, in the same interview, Lowell admits that there is "a lot of artistry... in the poems... If a poem is autobiographical, you want the reader to say, this is true" (The Art of Poetry, No. 3). He wanted the reader "to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell" (Lowell). This is interesting in part because it reinforces the conflation between speaker and writer that Lowell himself encourages, while at the same time implying that the poems are not autobiography. While Lowell clearly made a distinction between artifice and honesty, his deliberate conflation of speaker and writer reveals the degree to which he wanted these poems to appear genuine.

"Waking in the Blue," set in McLean Mental Institution, begins with a description of the

young night attendant, “a B.U. sophomore” lifting “the mare's-nest of his drowsy head” from a copy of *The Meaning of Meaning*, before “catwalk[ing] down our corridor” (1-4). This beginning, this effect of starting not with the hospitalized speaker, but the night attendant is important for a number of reasons. The attendant is not just an employee of McLean, walking down the hall toward the speaker, but a working public college student, unlike the speaker and other named mental patients, who all attended Harvard. McLean is a private hospital, a socio-economic division made immediately clear by the characterization of the night attendant. The book he is reading is *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (1923). This title, among other things, implies self-reflection, and an awareness of the importance of language in constructing meaning. Immediately, the poem's importance is brought beyond its setting, begging larger philosophical questions.

This beginning is important because it immediately prevents the poem from suffering the limitations of plain style, particularly as it is practiced in “confessional free verse” (Brian Henry, “The Trouble with Billy Collins”). Henry argues that among the frequent problems with this mode is the tendency to conform “to outdated narrative strategies,” by which he means storytelling techniques uninfluenced by film and modern literature (“The Trouble with Billy Collins”). Furthermore, there is a “prevalence of poets who present one-sided, often self-serving views of their life experiences, a tendency that results in a dull cacophony” (“The Trouble with Billy Collins”).

Lowell's “Waking in the Blue” avoids these potential pitfalls by employing throughout a narrative parallax: for a modern reader, steeped in film culture, the poem's opening comes across as a kind of establishing shot, a description that provides setting, but also suggests complexity

and depth. Instead of beginning with the main characters, and following their experiences, the poem starts large, with the setting itself, before locating the speaker within that setting. By looking at the attendants, and fellow patients Stanley and “Bobbie,” the poem reveals as much about the speaker describing these “thoroughbred mental cases” and caretakers (47). In fact, the poem devotes little discussion to the speaker; it is only at the end, when he looks in the “metal shaving mirror,” that any description of the speaker is given—and this is entirely physical, as if the comments of an objective observer (Lowell 44). While not a ground-breaking narrative strategy, it is one that seems to derive power from diversion, and the expectations of more traditional storytelling techniques. From the beginning of the poem, Lowell's speaker looks elsewhere, shifting the external focus away from himself, but reveals in this process his own complicated identity.

While the description does not focus on the speaker's emotions, the poem quickly and clearly situates him within the setting. The opening description of the night attendant ends with him walking down “our” corridor. This plural first person implies the speaker's place in a certain community. While it is immediately clear this is a dormitory or hospital setting, it is not entirely clear the importance of this community until the end of the first stanza. The speaker, reacting to the agonizingly blue sky outside the window, and the movements of crows, cries: “Absence! My heart grows tense/ as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill./ (This is the house for the “mentally ill.”) (8-10). The stylistic difference between this simile, and the revelation in parentheses is stark, and corresponds to the inflation and deflation of ego and identity throughout the poem. The interjection, followed by an exclamation is a visible mark of older linguistic tendencies, and the comparison itself—“a harpoon sparring for the kill”—is rich with classic literary and historical reference. The transition between this line and the next in parentheses—

another tactic of diversion—further emphasizes the setting. Parentheses usually suggest that the information included within is extra or unnecessary information, or in some way departs from the main objective. In this case, the line in parentheses seems a distillation of the poem's main concerns, both thematically and stylistically. It comes across as a genuine reaction of the speaker to his environment, a reaction that readers experience simultaneously. While the statement, “This is the house for the “mentally ill” appears simple, plainly and urgently stated, but equally necessary, the use of quotation marks around “mentally ill” begs complex questions about the speaker's community, and his place within it.

The community in question here is specifically one of wealth and traditionally, privilege, but the current setting belies any inflated sense of self-worth. The speaker ultimately is prevented, by the nature of privilege, from truly speaking for the larger mentally ill community. However, while it is clear that the speaker's experience is not representative of mentally ill patients, perhaps even at McClean, the nature of the setting itself, and the implication that there are other, unnamed sufferers present, raises questions about the relationship of the speaker to the larger mentally ill community. Another common criticism of plain style, specifically confessionalist poetry is that it is “condescending to their readers by exploiting identity politics” (Henry, “The Trouble with Billy Collins”). Ultimately, it is this very limitation of the speaker, namely Lowell himself that successfully navigates the complicated issues of representation. Furthermore, the placement of quotations marks around “mentally ill” at the end of the first stanza immediately asks the reader to consider this label's inaccuracies, drawing attention to the fact that it is others, the attendants and other seen and unseen authority figures in the poem, who define mental illness, rather than those labeled as such. The effect is complexity, the questioning of assumptions, undercutting othering.

The speaker's descriptions of his fellow patients also are tender, revealing their individuality and humanity. "Bobbie," a former Harvard Porcellian society member, is now "redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale,/as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit/and horses at chairs" (Lowell 30-31). The playful verbs are key here, presenting even this severely ill man as harmless, jovial in his naked jousting. The inflated actions reveal the character's current powerless and pitiful state. Similarly, Stanley, "now sunk in his sixties," was "once a Harvard all-American fullback/(if such were possible!)/still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties" (12-15). Stanley is honored with his collegiate athletic title "All-American," but it also seems to speak to his personality and appearance in some way. This becomes more clear with the next line, in parentheses, "if such were possible!," immediately undercutting this description. The casual aside quality of this remark reveals the speaker's disbelief that Stanley could be a former football star, based on his current appearance. It also questions the title All-American, not as an athletic term, but as a general description of character. These four simple words deflate not only Stanley, but the whole culture of masculinity and bravado. The speaker's tender description of Stanley's body as "a ramrod/with the muscle of a seal" is echoed later, as the stanza closes with the haunting assessment of Stanley as being "more cut off from words than a seal" (24). While making clear the severity of Stanley's illness, this description also humanizes his disconnection with society.

In the speaker's descriptions of Stanley, the impossible All-American, the reader can see a similar struggle in the speaker's attempts to define himself in context of the setting. In this "house for the 'mentally ill,'" the speaker must face his own limitations, his own "bravado ossified young," and even to a certain extent questions of faith—"There are no Mayflower/screwballs in the Catholic Church.") (33-39). The effect of ending the first stanza

with the revelation of setting, contained inside the poem's first use of parentheses is to develop and complicate the speaker's persona as well. Lowell's speaker has already been introduced in context of self-reflection and the questioning of assumptions, but the next stanza break allows readers to reflect on the complexity of definitions like "mentally ill," before the next stanza begins with a plainly stated rhetorical question: "What use is my sense of humor?" (11). This moment is key in contextualizing the descriptions of fellow mental patients, as these descriptions are often somewhat humorous, but disturbing in their portrayal of severe mental illness. This line clarifies the speaker's attempts at humor as a reflection of tenderness and empathy, but also makes clear the degree to which the speaker himself finds this coping mechanism problematic. This moment of genuine-seeming self-reflection on the speaker's part makes readers feel that they are sharing the experience, taking a similar journey, and witnessing genuine reactions to that experience. The speaker's humor develops persona, initially giving reader's the impression that they are there with the reader, but the act of deliberately questioning his coping techniques creates another layer of intimacy, in the speaker's apparent willingness to admit his insecurities.

It is interesting to note that one of the most humorous moments of the poem is precisely the point when the speaker is finally forced to confront himself as physically part of the setting. After a "hearty" breakfast, he weighs "two hundred pounds/ this morning" (40-42). As he describes both Stanley and "Bobbie" as being somewhat overweight, this observation is key, as both are "half [his] weight" (48). Nonetheless, the speaker is "cock of the walk," strutting around in a "turtle-necked French sailor's jersey/ before the metal shaving mirror" (43-44). The contrast between the speaker's normal appearance and the strangeness of the metal mirror emphasizes the speaker's own disconnect with the world. Furthermore, the language here highlights the speaker's persona, for, given the situation, the tone comes across as humorously self-deprecating,

underscoring his humanity. Readers do not simply sympathetically observe, but may experience and feel the speaker's awkwardness with him, understanding this performance as going hand in hand with his persona. This systematic inflation and deflation of persona feels immediate, and in this, somewhat inclusive. It is in a moment of such reflection that he finally defines himself as part of the community: "We are all old-timers,/each of us holds a locked razor." (49-50). By ending the poem with the image of the speaker glimpsing himself in the mirror, holding the razor, its importance as a symbol becomes clear. The locked razor—reinforced against potential misuse, but still dangerous enough to be a privilege of trusted patients—represents the speaker's own incarceration, as well as the acceptance of his mental illness. This realization appears genuine because the persona and poetic style seem fused: the layering of the early rich descriptions and classic comparisons with strong colloquial language seems natural, organic to the poem. Though accessible in its immediacy, the poem is anything but simple.

The Audacity of Revelation: Sylvia Plath and the Transformation of Persona

Plath's "Lady Lazarus" also employs language that appears simple and direct in order to facilitate the further development of theme and persona; however, while "Waking in the Blue" uses a texturing of language to inflate and immediately deflate persona, Plath's poem employs a deliberately false tone of grandiosity and pride in order to arrive at a specific emotional truth. In "Lady Lazarus," deception is the speaker's only weapon against personal and cultural victimization: a weapon which eventually detonates, revealing a shared emotional experience that appears genuine, immediate.

Not surprisingly perhaps, this grandiose tone is often misunderstood, as its inherent falseness is a complex dance of diction. For Yezzi, confessionalism always risks sentimentality,

and much confessional poetry is more closely in line with Lowell's definition of false sentimentality as “blowing up a subject and giving emotions that you don't feel” (“Confessional Poetry and the Artiface of Honesty”). Generally, “Plath[']s... 'honesty' feels more like emotional strongarming,” for “such an inflation of emotion...seems a particularly dangerous form of sentimentality—not to mention solipsism” (Yezzi). Such criticisms of the blindness of perception are not uncommon of confessional poetry, but are representative not of a failure of language, but of persona. They ignore the complexity that can lie just behind the veil of plain speech. In fact, Plath's “blowing up” of the subject matter, the speaker's performative and overly inflated tone, is deliberate, an orchestrated device that doesn't ultimately undermine persona, but facilitates her rise to power.

“Lady Lazarus” begins with an ambiguous revelation: “I have done it again/ One year in every ten/ I manage it” (1-3). While this opening seems a familiar narrative technique, the style and tone of the opening stanza are key to its success, and complexity. The vague pronoun here is deliberately mysterious, a kind of challenge to the reader, while at the same time the end rhyme musically demands closure. The mysterious opening invites readers to solve it, to embark on a journey with the speaker. At the same time, it boldly promises revelation that is never delivered, rather the question about what “it” is remains, answered in different ways throughout the poem.

In fact, this ambiguity and tone are vital, in some way mitigating the risks of beginning with personal confession: a character who is not shaped by the external factors they describe will almost always be limited to the specifics of those experiences. To some degree, this ambiguity serves to distract the reader from character critiques because the specifics of her revelation are too vague for readers to define her in context of it. Because readers cannot initially take the persona's confession seriously, they come to equate performance with the speaker's persona,

rather than being ultimately disappointed by a lack of self-awareness displayed by that confession. Her tone implies revelation, or confession, though nothing has been revealed: “done it again” and “manage” imply that the action is not one to be proud of, yet simultaneously supply a kind of bragging tone. Through the colloquial and connotative nature of the language, it becomes immediately clear that the speaker's feelings about the experience are by no means simple or self-serving.

The persona Plath creates in this poem is a very complex one, capable of speaking not only for herself but also for victims in general. This depth of persona is even more important when the vague “it” of the first stanza is clarified as being death. However, the death—and accompanying resurrection—in the poem is not simply that of the speaker, but of the larger world, and modern society's legacy of violence, as suggested by the Holocaust references. The second stanza describes the speaker as “a sort of walking miracle, my skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade” (4-5), immediately raising the stakes of the speaker's experience. For Yezzi, this metaphor, used throughout *Ariel*, is wholly inappropriate, exploiting Holocaust victims for self-serving purposes. He is “deeply suspicious of the ego that would equate [her own] grief with the atrocities of the Holocaust” (“Artifice and Honesty in Confessional Poetry”). While this is a powerful objection, and a common one, in this particular poem, I believe it is actually this very audacity of comparison on the part of the speaker that makes the transformative qualities of “Lady Lazarus” so powerful. At the point this comparison is made, the speaker's grief is never specified, or even owned, but rather simply implied. This is key because it makes it clearer that the speaker's grief is to a certain degree a reaction to undeniably horrific historic circumstances, including, but not limited to the Holocaust. She becomes a victim of history, instead of just comparing herself to one; in this, the speaker's triumphant rise to power is not just her own, but

of all victims. When the dead body is physically revealed, it is a show, a display: first, to reclaim power— “peel off the napkin/ O my enemy./ Do I terrify?” (10-12) and then as a kind of “theatrical” request (51), “the big strip tease” (29). The speaker’s abuse and subsequent death becomes a performance, and an often requested one. This transformation of the speaker from victim to celebrity predicts the speaker’s phoenix-like resurrection, suggesting the creative power of destruction.

Language and imagery are, of course, key to these transformations. Specifically, throughout the poem, colloquial speech masquerades as direct, creating multiple simultaneous readings of the speaker’s experience. After the first image of premature death— “the nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth” (13), the speaker immediately juxtaposes this with a rather colloquial description of health: “soon, soon the flesh/ the grave cave ate will be/ at home on me/ and I a smiling woman.” This repetition of “soon,” the phrases “at home” and “a smiling woman” are all commonly heard expressions, but each reveals much more. The repetition of “soon” sets an ominous tone, but the narrative here is actually one of resurrection, of regaining weight and health. Nonetheless, the strong rhyme of “grave cave ate” places emphasis on the later half of the sentence, and line breaks suggest that the speaker is actually at home in the grave cave. This somewhat haunting description is immediately juxtaposed with the humorous comparison of the speaker to a cat, with “nine times to die,” a slight modification of the common cliché that highlights unsettling truths about the cycle of life (21).

The eighth stanza then begins: “This is Number Three./ What a trash/ to annihilate each decade” (24). The capitalization of “Number Three” is melodramatic to the point of comedy, but also has the effect of highlighting the poem’s trinity of deaths. “Trash” is a good example of the poem’s complex diction choices. It light-heatedly echoes the American colloquial phrase “what a

shame,” as well as the British “what rubbish.” Trash is ubiquitous, disposable, unremarkable, like the speaker's death, but yet the effect of this death is annihilation, complete destruction. The juxtaposition of “annihilate” with “trash” undermines the speaker's desire “to last it out and not come back at all” (38). Even this attempt at real death is transcendent, allowing for transformation: the speaker “rocked shut/ as a seashell,” but by the time she is found, the process of decay has already become one of creation, and her rescuers “pick the worms off...like sticky pearls” (42). This seemingly playful approach to serious subject matter reveals much about the speaker herself: by pretending to disregard her experience, its true importance becomes clear.

The transformative value of this false inflation of tone is perhaps most evident in one of the poem's most memorable, and often quoted lines: “Dying/ is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well” (43-45). While the speaker's audacious tone and colloquial expressions make the comment come across as rather bathetic, its true importance in the process of transformation becomes clear upon a close reading. Art here, of course, represents a kind of creation, and immortality, implying that dying is an act of creation. The line break after “dying” emphasizes this process. The aside comment, “like everything else” has the interesting effect of both softening and highlighting the connection between death and life: art is in the eye of the beholder. The speaker's experience of death “feels real”; in fact, “it feels like hell” (46-47).

While a bit of a cliché, the comparison is quite apt, as hell contrasts with the promise of resurrection. When the speaker notes that “I guess you could say I've a call,” this casualness is further emphasized by the grammatical contraction as well as the word choice: ease of language highlights the tongue-in-cheek tone (48). Similarly, the speaker's reaction to her “comeback in broad day” being called “a miracle” is so humorous it “knocks [her] out” (52-56). This very colloquial expression undermines psychic resurrection; the term “a miracle,” almost a cliché of

modern expression, here references the biblical resurrection and holy trinity, which parallels the three incidents of death and spiritual rebirth in “Lady Lazarus.” Plain language, including deliberate use of clichés signals the reader that the speaker is not only aware of her inflated tone, but using it in complex and meaningful ways.

In fact, it is the audacious comparison of her survival to a miracle that ultimately allows for the poem's triumphant end. This declaration elevates her to a kind of sainthood, a position from which she can “charge/ for a word or a touch/ or a bit of blood” (63). Once in a position of power, she directly addresses “the same face, the same brute” of her oppressors (53):

So, so, Herr Doktor
so, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby
That melts to a shriek (64-70).

The use of the German phrase “Herr Doktor” thematically echoes the earlier Holocaust references, but allows for a clarification that undermines criticisms of this theme. “Herr Doktor” is interestingly redundant: “Herr” roughly translates to Mr., a masculine title of respect, and “Doktor” is not just anyone with this level of education, but specifically, a male doctor. While there is some playful humor in the juxtaposition of “Mr.” and “enemy,” the complex use of language here more importantly clarifies the metaphor of oppression—the real subject of the poem is a universal clash of gender roles, not historical tragedy. Visually, “Herr” closely resembles the feminine pronoun “her,” creating a layered meaning: her doctor is also her enemy, and later in the poem, “Herr God, Herr Lucifer,” also male figures of power (79). The speaker, unsurprisingly, puts little stock in these traditional symbols of authority.

The speaker's comparisons of her “valuable”-ness suggest different kinds of power: she is

both an opus, an important artistic creation, and a “pure gold baby,” implying that legacy can be both creative and socio-economic. However, the baby “melts to a shriek”; the physical process of melting, emphasized by the stanza break, robs “Herr Enemy” of these symbols of power, including the spoils of war—both historical and personal— “a wedding ring, a gold filling” (77-78). Similarly, the speaker “turn[s] and burn[s],” before disappearing; this is both a familiar colloquialism, and another instance of physical change. The speaker then warns both heaven and hell—“Herr God, Herr Lucifer”—to “Beware/ Beware” (79-81). This warning prepares for the phoenix-like ending of the poem: “Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air” (82-84). The direct rhyme sonically closes the poem with this triumphant image. It corresponds with the inflated tone of revelation as well as connecting with important thematic elements throughout. As musically simple, almost childishly sing-songy as is this final stanza, it is the culmination of Plath's careful texturing of language and meaning throughout “Lady Lazarus”. The transformation is complete: the tone no longer registers as audacious or false, but representative of the complexity of speaker and experience. Furthermore, readers have accompanied the speaker on all stages of this journey, and are aware of this cycle, making the end a far more intimate triumph.

Epiphany in Progress: Glück and the Complexity of Self-Discovery

Though plain style in poetry is often discussed in the context of confessionalism, its presence and power is by no means limited to the handful of poets usually considered part of this mode. Though Lowell and Plath are representative in their creation of persona through language, it is important to consider how more contemporary poets concerned with persona create a similar texturing of meaning. Lowell and Plath both inflate persona in order to create intimacy, and

facilitate immediacy, while Louise Glück's "Eros" uses poetic intensity and direct statement not to mimic grandiose revelation, but to imitate the cognitive process. The poem's immediacy comes from its seeming lack of drama, the speaker's thoughtful tone. This philosophical process seems spontaneous and genuine, allowing the reader to intimately experience the speaker's realization and emotional relinquishment of her failed marriage at the same time as the speaker.

For many, however, any poem that is so explicitly about the break-up of a relationship may seem the definitive example of "domestic anecdotes that culminate in trite epiphanies" (Henry, *The Trouble with Billy Collins*). The poem risks being so self-serving that the experience has little value to anyone besides the speaker. In his review of *Seven Ages*, "Louise Glück's Monumental Narcissism," Brian Henry argues that in this, her ninth book of "autobiographical poetry," Glück's brand of "hyper-narcissism...is even less attractive than the more naïve brand of obsessive self-reflection...Her self-scrutiny has become ridiculous in its perseverance and cavalier in its assumptions" (Henry, "Glück's Monumental Narcissism"). This review seems more critical of Glück's continued work with post-confessional material than of the poems themselves. It is almost a personal attack. Perhaps more problematically, it also conflates Glück with her speakers—multiple narrators with multiple experiences, ignoring the inherent contradictions between those speakers. While the poetic situation may seem inherently risky, plain language and persona are only as weak as the techniques used to employ them: domestic anecdotes and epiphanies do not have to be trite, but when they come across this way, this is not a symptom of plain style, but more a limitation arising from the creation of persona. The challenge for a poet is to use language to facilitate, but also complicate the development of persona.

Glück's "Eros" begins with action by the speaker, but even this action has the quality of

reflection, of observation. The use of the past tense implies to a certain degree self-reflection: “I had drawn my chair to the hotel window, to watch the rain./ I was in a kind of dream or trance—” (2). It is this sense of the speaker's own distance from herself that ultimately allows for the complex epiphany at the end of the poem. There is no ornamentation in these words, no unnecessary description of the situation; they come across as effortless, natural, but at the same time facilitate the speaker's feelings of disconnection through meter and texture of language. In a few lines— “to watch the rain,” “a kind of dream or trance”—repeated iambs are colloquial while simultaneously calling attention to the use of craft and technique. This audible shift in meter highlights the degree to which the speaker is observing herself without any apparent emotion, lending a somewhat unreal quality to realistic description. One of the few adjectives, “hotel,” suggests a narrative reason for this feeling of disconnection already established. The rain elicits from many readers a specific pathetic response, further cementing this sense of reflection in solitude. Once again, all the action has occurred in the past, creating a sense of paralysis and indecision. In this setting, the speaker's description of herself as “in love, and yet/ I wanted nothing” both reiterates this lack of movement, and juxtaposes love, implying desire, with “want[ing] nothing” (3-4).

In an inverse of traditional narrative principles, the speaker's quiet contentedness, her lack of desire actually propels the poem, and the speaker, toward conclusion. This lack of desire makes it “unnecessary to touch you, to see you again” (5). While the first statement is ambiguous in its meaning, the second part of the sentence clarifies the relationship between the speaker and the “you,” suggesting that a lack of intimacy—physical or otherwise—is partially to blame. In the next line “I wanted only this:/ the room, the chair, the sound of the rain falling/hour after hour,” the line break after “this,” emphasizes such a reading (6). This sense of time passing,

“hour after hour” speeds up the rate of reflection, for the past tense emphasizes the fleeting nature of this moment. This kind of suspension of time is all the speaker needs or desires: she “needed nothing more,” is “utterly sated” (9). The first statement provides a limited definition of “sated,” but more importantly, the contrast of the simple “nothing more” with the less common “utterly sated” emphasizes the lack of need. The speaker then returned to vacantly watching “the rain falling in heavy sheets over the darkened city—” (11). While this description seems only a more detailed reiteration of the opening image, the image of these “heavy sheets” of rain is symbolic of the poem's overall interest in the process of disguise and revelation. “The darkened city” has the effect of isolating the speaker further, while locating her in a larger community, however, unfamiliar. The darkness and solitude in many ways allows for the speaker's self-reflection, which appears a natural result of experience.

The more important effect of returning to the image of the speaker silently watching rain fall is to contrast the speaker's response with that of the “you.” The dash following “darkened city” pauses in a stanza break before continuing “you were not concerned; I could let you/ live as you needed to live” (13). The characterization of the “you” as unconcerned reflects his lack of involvement in the speaker's life, but furthermore implies that the speaker *is*, a revelation that adds complexity to the speaker's apparent lack of need or desire. The line break suggests that the speaker is trying to convince herself to let the “you” remain this way, further emphasizing the dichotomy of action and inaction in the poem. The juxtaposition, which makes clear the speaker's and the you's mutual culpability, ultimately allows the speaker to relinquish the “you.”

The passage of time, expressed subtly but consistently throughout the poem allows the speaker's self-reflection and resulting realizations seem more natural. The rain falls for hours. The reader gets the sense that in the time that passes between when the speaker pulls her chair to

the window and when the poem returns to that image, night has fallen, hours have passed, and the speaker has realized she must let the “you” go. After this statement, it is implied that the speaker turns back to the window, watching and reflecting, for she is aware that “at dawn the rain abated” (14). The day goes on, and the speaker does “the things/ one does in daylight. I acquitted myself” (14-15). This enjambment suggests that while daylight is the time to “acquit” oneself, or to relinquish guilt, night casts a kind of trance, causing the speaker to continue to move “like a sleepwalker” (16). This action, one of the first in the poem is “enough” perhaps because it “no longer involved you”: it effectively breaks the speaker's trance (17). As a “few days” pass in the “strange city,” the speaker's solitude is finally broken by “a conversation, the touch of a hand,” directly contrasting the speaker's lack of need to touch the “you” (18-19). The poem occurs over the course of a few days, but the hours of staring vacantly at the rain create a dilation of time: the result is that the poem's series of epiphanies seems more natural, and more meaningful, as each one follows a descriptive passage allowing time for reflection.

It is only after this period of reflection and realization, and after the “conversation, [and] the touch of a hand,” that the speaker takes off her wedding ring, finally removing the symbol of the failed marriage that has effectively been resolved in the course of the poem (20). The human connection made is most important, contrasting the speaker's solitude and inaction throughout the poem. This act of removing her wedding ring prompts the closing line, the speaker's final epiphany: “that was what I wanted: to be naked” (21). Read in context with the previous line, this nakedness is both physical and psychological. The missing ring leaves a pale indentation, a symbol of its absence, just as the conversation and touch that prompted its removal perhaps suggest long desired physical intimacy. More importantly, the speaker finally appears naked in her honesty, both with herself and the reader. She has simultaneously “acquitted” herself and

accepted her own culpably. While the poem does arrive at an epiphany, it is a complex one that eludes any single reading, coming across not as self-serving, but representative in its complexity of not just this relationship, but the more universal conflict between intimacy and independence.

Embracing Complexity

Poetry is communication, driven by the human instinct to express thought or experience, to interact with the larger world. It is the interaction between what is said and what is unsaid, between personal and social identity. Writing is a process of navigation: we write because we think and feel. This interaction between the personal and the larger world is slippery, as complicated as society itself. Poetry, through a number of different techniques, attempts to juxtapose what must be said with what cannot be said. In Glück's words, there is a certain power "to the unsaid, to eloquent, deliberate silence" ("Disruption, Hesitation, Silence"). While what remains unsaid can be a sensitive subject or social taboo, it is more often the pull of complexity, of the unknown and the half-truth. After all, "all earthly experience is partial. Not simply because it is subjective, but because that which we do not know, of the universe, of mortality, is so much more vast than what we do know." (Glück). The desperate need for honesty and understanding is controlled and shaped by the irreparable distance of being, the impossibility of shared consciousness.

Language is the medium of expression, and in attempting to bridge this gap between experiences, poets often argue for accessibility, toward using language that is more familiar and more colloquial, and perhaps more direct in its syntactical pattern. Emotional immediacy, one form of accessibility, is inherently related with the connection between plain style and persona, perhaps most notably in the context of confessional and post-confessional poetry. Style and

persona are so closely linked, in fact, that they are conflated. More importantly, many of the common criticisms of plain style are not actually limitations of language, but of the persona's use of that language. Rather than being limited by the politics of identity in "Waking in Blue," Lowell uses a texturing of description and colloquial language to create a persona who speaks for a privileged community within a marginalized one, raising questions about the nature of community, identity, and mental health. "Lady Lazarus" employs a deliberately falsely inflated tone that ultimately allows for the transformation of the speaker herself. In Glück's poem, reader and speaker experience together a process of reflection, distilled through a series of epiphanies that are anything but trite, as they navigate the complexities of human desire.

I am drawn toward poetry in which the reader and the speaker together navigate experience. Often, this intimacy suggests that the speaker and the poet are one and the same, but this is actually a side-effect of using colloquial speech to create persona. Furthermore, poems that imply a "you" to contrast the "I," or otherwise introduce alternative voices or perspectives seem particularly powerful. For this reason, I have often used poetry as a way to process experience and emotion, borrowing plentifully from my own life as well as others', creating a persona that furthers the emotional truth I wish to explore. Always wary of the limits of narrative and confession, I struggle to write personal-sounding poems that contain complexity, while still being immediate. Poetry must embrace both "the language of men" and their complexities. Contradiction is inherent in identity: we all contain multitudes.

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PART II

THE NECESSITY OF MOVEMENT

I.

Home

St. Denis Immaculate Conception Cemetery

Once through the fence, I ran like I was still afraid of the dark,
the mausoleums' shadow, the moon's face mocked in marble.
We trespassed the wrought iron crosses walling in the dead

not just because we were tired of the living
speaking for us but because we were sixteen;
I thought I was depressed. The boy with me,

Brandon, spoke like an untuned guitar. The night
was heavy, velvet. He insisted he felt most alive
in the cemetery, and besides, Oak leaves and Spanish Moss

were soft on bare skin. I well knew these old graves:
Easter egg hunts, field trips to make stone rubbings,
so I thought he might be perfect until he started talking

about how death was immortal, and all it took was a blade to reach God.
He smiled and his hair fell across his cheek like a knife.
I led him to a bench near the Lavender bush

choked with vines where they buried Avery Evan's
pink bicycle. Everyone looked for her body
for weeks. They even drained the lake.

When I told him the story, he ran his hand slowly up my back,
pulled my hair, and kissed me for the first and only time.
This is all that remains: the way the earth

beneath his headstone now swells with the rub of rocks
like arthritic bones. They buried him
in the oldest part of the cemetery, where graves

are split with settling land, and the hollow
trunk of a dead cyprus has gathered all but the edge
of a hand-carved marker into its roots.

The Blind

As an old man, Milton spoke of needing to be milked,
swollen as he was with metered words, a sense of task.
Mary must have felt more like handmaiden than daughter,
every morning transcribing until her fingers' movement
was nothing but a series of signals at arm's length;
nonsense, at first, like chickens' squalling, the languages
he bade her read aloud: Greek, Latin, even Arabic.

Each symbol was a stutter for him to correct, so he told her
of the ways she mangled syllables, divine song.
He taught her only to worship, never pray, like a hostage
modeling her captor's inflection. Understanding
was intuitive, at best, but when people asked,
she said her father taught her everything.
Through him, the great father spoke; she listened.

I should pity Mary, the spinster, her caretaker's routine.
I too am using her in the same way: a set of directives
strung out like candles in a hall, and no one else
to light the lamps. Still, I envy such simplicity,
her provided purpose—no need to serve the muse,
to write the way he speaks: blind in the sitting room's
dark, dependent on patience, a promise of solace.

Mary, it is time to be honest. If history has kept silent,
speak. I've strained my eyes, reading late into the night,
writing in near-blackness, and I know nothing
except questions perhaps better left unasked.
Every wise father is his daughter's oracle,
I've heard, and you will speak no evil, so what
do I say to my creator, or his mute God?

Father, I do not have your congregation,
but I am struggling to match your wisdom, as if even now
you oversaw my prayers each night, sneaking out
as I count my sins to sleep. I can no more command
a household than a sentence; the kitchen is always dirty,
the meter sputtering. I can no more explain
my Godless world than return Milton his power to see.

See You at the Pole

It was dark, the town silent in sleep as Harmony drove us to school. Every streetlight that stabbed through the old Civic's cab revealed her profile, the crook and bump of nose. She was telling me about burden, the weight of being so many pieces, broken before God, silenced by government. We'd go to the school flagpole and pray for our teachers, our leaders, our friends. I was like doubting Thomas, she said, needing only to know the wounds' depth, needing only to see our flag like a star, radiating light, and I'd know the truth.

I knew the way gospel could become a heartbeat, the thickness of church walls: I wanted to be enveloped within, wanted God to talk so loud I couldn't hear my own thoughts. I was sure He talked to Harmony this way: she was all smiles and bruises. We were best friends forever, so she told me she'd learned to fall down stairs without hitting her head, how, when Mrs. Powell asked if maybe she'd like to talk to someone, she said God was on her speed dial; she had another family in heaven, waiting.

Her voice hummed like the motor, the wheels against the road, while I stared straight into the headlights' path, memorizing dark edges. I thought it was easy to jettison everything: like a distant radio station, all I had to do was tune in, listen, and the world would fall into static. I thought He could make me like Harmony—stronger than then step's spine, so sincere in faith. She told me once, when she was saved it was like dying, memories of darkness too thick for shadow, then floodlight. I said it sounded painful, and like the eyes' shock-throb, blinding.

From the road, a parking lot of silhouettes, some shuffling toward silver, under the pink veins of morning, and then we were among them. Dawn filled in the spaces between us, each synapse bridged by dust motes long before we clasped each other's hands and prayed for prayer in schools, world peace. I prayed God would take me as the sun broke the treeline: I wanted Him to be my only, for all of us to fall away.

Harmony grabbed my hand tighter, bird bones flexing, to signal the flag's raising. With every inch and click the glare was less forgiving, and I squinted until floaters danced around me. It was like losing consciousness, slowly. Limp atop the pole, the flag, and through its folds, the sun, finding every cross-stitch, every fiber. I kept waiting for a breeze to give it life, but the morning was still; I went still, stared down, as if in prayer. Only blood beating in Harmony's fingertips, a hint of blue under thin skin.

The Real

The first time I woke up screaming,
my uncle was fumbling for the lights.
I said what are you doing here; my aunt said never wake
a sleepwalker, so I told my parents, myself,

it was only a nightmare. Twenty years later
my sister asked what really happened, what was family
lore, what was fact. I told her it didn't matter anymore,
I was too old to be a victim.

The next time I knew what was coming
like a car wreck. I was dreamy drunk in a strange city
and he was the only person I knew. When he grabbed me
I thought *so this is what it is to be beautiful*,

because love meant not saying no, don't
touch me, and strength was about weapons,
about what is real. I knew nothing
about surviving, only the burden of logic, of needing

to explain, and being unable. All I could hear
were my own words echoing like water in a well,
and all I knew was the night solid with shadows
that slit through my fingers like glass.

Bully

Let's blame it on emotional distance:
we were thirteen, and vicious
as starved dogs, ringing tight circles, barking

bitch, weirdo, freak, anything for tears never shed,
anything to beat an insult, to say *hey, stupid*,
you're as shallow as your gene pool. I said

I hated the school, the town, everyone
in it, and they believed me; I believed myself,
and learned to be alone with words. I'd read

about *la resistance*; I thought I was being strong.
I thought *sticks and stones may break*
my bones, so when he swung,

I picked up a chunk of brick—some shard
of the world. He bled. I never tried
to apologize, even before

my mother shook her head: *I don't know*
what to say—you're just not normal, Emily;
some days I can't believe you're my daughter.

Field Trip

We took the school bus as far as the road would let us,
the wheels' motion throwing us into each other's sharp elbows,
or metal so hot we jerked from the burn. Three to a seat,

and potholes marked where floodwaters had almost washed
the route away, but as long as we were still moving,
we loved the jolting, like an amusement park ride.

When the teachers told us the road stopped here,
that we would have to walk into the hanging forest
of moss and rot, I still felt rolling movement. I wanted to run.

Under the cover of cyprus, the heat was boiling. My sweat
was thick as the air, and every breath felt like drowning.
A large-scale effort, this swamp sweep:

we continued two by two into the darkness,
armed with pointed sticks to pick up trash along the water's
edge. Someone kept casting a net too large for fish.

We were supposed to clean, to make this place pretty,
but I kept thinking it was a lost cause—everything
would return in the end to Styrofoam cups and faded beer cans.

Suddenly the net-caster shouted for someone to look
at what he'd found: an old Frigidaire, rusted the red-brown
color of swamp water, and shut tight with a padlock.

It dragged the bottom as they hauled it in, and the mud plowed
from the depths smelled worse than death.
Afternoon darkened like a screened-in porch at dusk,

swarmed with flies burrowing between the freezer's hinges.
The cloud pulsed and fractured, danced around us.
Our silence magnified their buzzing. I knew

what no one was saying. They told us it was time to leave.
We walked back with the swamp's stink heavy in our nostrils,
each step weighted with the give of the earth, mud's slow release.

Dona Eis Requiem

I.

For days I have wanted with the dust bowl's need
for rain to hear the voice of the dead, so when the door
to my living room opens with a slow shower
of vowels, I know I am dreaming.

Yet I come running toward familiar syllables, the rural lilt
of my mother's youngest sister, cotton under the tongue.
Suddenly I am a child again, skidding in the foyer, hugging a woman
whose reflection in the storm door could be my mother's.

She is too tall, too delicate. I can count her ribs
with my arms. Valerie, I shriek, but she says no,
and mother turns to greet me, her laugh
lines contorted, speaking with the delta's stolen damp.

II.

The house swarms with faces, featureless, ageless,
laughing; a stereo booms against the din of tenors.
I do not know how I know it is her
and not my mother, solid as thought. I stop just out of reach.

Like heat waves, a mirage of water puddling
on the road ahead, she shimmers, then speaks.
I'm sorry about my body,
I just haven't been the same since the flood.

III.

Three AM's darkness, and the phone rings again,
again, and each time, before I can speak: 911,
we've received another call. Is there an emergency?

A glitch in the line, they say, a lost signal
ricocheting into nothing. Contact my service provider.
Contact my family in Louisiana

about missing Val's memorial. No one knows what to say
in the obituary. So when again the phone breaks the night's
dreams, I can only choke out: I'm alright, I'm alright.

Disclosure

I thought I could know all with my eyes and ears,
wanted to be made strong by secrets, so many words.
I heard everything: the phone receiver's doubled buzz,
front door's slam, the windows' rattle. I learned silence
while the house settled into a shadowy anger
that crept like a storm across the surface of a lake.

I lied to my sister, all long bones in a Laura Ashley dress.
I pretended you were a ghost, because that was the way
I thought she'd understand absence, as half being. I said
that when the house creaked, when the curtains billowed
without a breeze, that was you watching, coming to tuck us in.
She slept fitfully, while I stayed up and listened

to cicadas succumb to the black hole of night.
The hours before dawn came in gray streaks, more like clouds
than first light, and every shifting floorboard, I thought
sounded like you pacing, pausing in the hall—
listening to me breathe, willing me to be strong.
In the morning, the house was quiet, stale like a sickroom,

the sun stabbing around the blinds into recesses of calm.
Hardwoods, high ceilings, crown molding echoed.
I saw you standing in every shadow, heard your voice
murmuring through the air ducts, calling my name. Until I stopped
trying to believe in ghosts, stopped blaming you for things misplaced,
the ceiling fan's wobble, the way lights flickered during a storm,

I thought everyone left some discernible trace:
old photographs, scrawled signatures, the mound of a grave.
I thought secrets had weight enough to split the foundation,
pry brick walls apart, as if, overtime, silence had slowly buckled
the joists, and left the doorjambs tilted, the whole house
conspiring, leaning in on itself, every fissure widening.

II.

Tourist

Atmore, Alabama

A destination wedding where the dead
seem more visible than the living: candles flickering
on shelves empty since the mill's conveyor belts'
stilled. Yellowed newspaper photos, ghosts,
line tack-paper walls. Tulle, cobwebbs,
and the bride, quiet and pale in a moth-eaten veil.

Down the road, someone will die tonight,
I read in the paper. As we leave the ceremony,
my mother insists we at least drive by, as if to watch
the last meal, the last rites. Vultures circle
over chain-link fencing, a horizon of looped barbed wire
behind which men are draped like shadows.

Looking for lunch in the vacant downtown,
we do not speak as clouds wall up against us.
It is all cement, cinder block, sky.
We are only our reflections
in shattered storefront windows:
legs amputated, open mouths cut from faces.

Distancing

After the claustrophobia of Rome, the crowded budget hotel room,
camping outside Venice was like coming home to Louisiana

in late March, the way the rain swept through every afternoon at four,
so much open space. I wanted only to listen to the wash of water against shore,

to drink in the pour of foreign syllables and words, but the cafe's DJ had fans,
and the newest international hits. I hadn't heard more than a few snatches

of Tourist English spoken in days, so while, like the ghost of a talk radio station,
Japanese, Italian, something Scandinavian filtered in, I hoped the vibration

of music could cut through the static of language, was all the unity, assurance
I needed. Then everyone jumped to their feet, except me. Being surrounded, the words

I recognized, but didn't know, it was like junior prom, so I tried to sing
along, felt my tongue bite into the chorus, stuttering, confused over meaning,

over vowels that sounded like home. Across the inlet, Venice twinkled like New Orleans
from the north shore: an expanse of dark water, lights fragmenting, just out of reach.

Jet Lag

The red-eye took off at sunset,
a burning glass against the grey
streaks of clouds. I awoke
over unfamiliar water, too proud
of the accomplishment of leaving
to even send you a postcard
until the Tower of London's
iron spiked and guarded gates
felt like my departing words.

I misstepped.
Falling down is like jet lag:
the stonefaced skyscrapers
of spires and steeples
pierced blue skies like needles
in flesh. The cityscape became
the ground, hard beneath me.
I would injure myself
just to get back to you.

Getting up, I blindly followed
a guide who demonstrated
the model guillotine to a crowd
of Americans. They sounded
like you: all long vowels,
loud voices among static
making it difficult to think—
almost comforting, like falling
asleep alone in front of the TV.

Pompeii

I was alone on the train car
after Naples, the mountains
closing in on the half open windows,
and the undercarriage jerking,
creaking around every curve.

The brakes singing to a stop
sounded like a requiem.
It was Easter Sunday,
and I'd come to get lost among the ruins,
to try and forget you.

In Rome, the Pope spoke
to the masses—there, snatches of words
over the gift shop's radio:
ashes, dust. A plaster death cast
screamed from its curio cabinet,
frozen limbs convulsing, clawing for air.

This is what is left
after the firestorm,
after so much revelation.
We were both tourists,
gawking, defensive, horrified.

Time to Keep Silent, Time to Speak

This season, the sky's
stretch is an empty threat:
a false calm, a vacuum,
a body embalmed
and laid out for viewing.

On the road to Tuscalousa,
the kudzu has ripped away
from its skeleton of trees.
A tornado's path marks our route
from memorial, to wake, to burial.

I try to remember something other
than thunder, wind whipped waves
on the lake. Grandfather once said
nature is the only true test of man,
and piloted us into the storm.

After the ceremony,
we launch his model schooner,
sealant still wet, onto antique glass,
into motionless air. It hangs close
to the seawall, then slowly sinks.

The afternoon holds its breath.
We are all pretending to be good
Southern Christians who do not speak
of loss: staring ahead,
marble-blind, drowning in the blue.

Edna, Arkansas

After the service, I wanted to drive through the night,
to be, when the sun broke the horizon,
hours from here, but you said another funeral,
that's just what everyone wants, so it was daybreak
before we learned an eighteen-wheeler
had jackknifed, closing the freeway tunnel,
and if it weren't for the old mountain road—you said
everyone called it the pig trail—we'd be stuck
with our guilt until the wreck was cleared.

We were circling down the mountain,
watching the morning sun split
the windshield into shadow and light,
when the trees turned to stripped skeletons,
all leafless limbs and broken boughs circling
a village of flattened houses, boards and brick.
You looked everywhere but into my eyes, pointed
to a single shack with a blue tarp roof, then said
I think I finally know what it is to be lucky.

Maybe we are all victims of the wind,
fearful of green skies, clouds at sunset, noises
like a freight train, and later, silence—maybe
every year with you is a cyclone stuck in the valley,
and I am among the displaced, returning home
in RV's and trailers, returning to a cluster of slab foundations
miles from the nearest gas station. Change
the population sign, cross out the second of two numbers
with red spray paint: leave me to the wreckage.

Looking for the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial, Dresden, Germany

I.

Whiteout becomes black at the train's hard sigh.
Early April and above the terminal,
snow has been falling thick for hours.
Here it is never quite silent, like an ultrasound,
and the cinder blocks quake;
I think this city may only be safe underground.

I imagine Vonnegut crouching for hours
with only the rhythmless bombing
to match the pace of a hundred men's breath.
Here, an endless staircase funnels the storm's
fury, each step wet with the melting winter,
and I want to crawl back inside the womb-

like darkness, fester in its depths. It went this way:
the air raid wailed for what felt like days,
a muted din like ringing in the ears, vibrating
the earth. At first it was enough not to be working,
merely living like prisoners of war.
Then laughter grew forced, the bombs louder.

They could think only of luxury—four course meals,
clean laundry, indoor plumbing—as the space shrank
with the odors of urine, vomit, fear.
When there was finally silence, no one knew what to do.
Above the bunker: the relentless sun, the eyes' shock,
the leveled city, smoke. They waited inside for commands,

then were told to clear-cut the destruction,
while the city gleamed with what the firestorm left behind:
gold coins, jeweled shards, a china teapot. It was all
they could do not to stuff their shirts with everything
valuable and invaluable. Instead, took what they could get:
a palmed diamond, proof of survival.

II.

Daddy, I thought it would be easy: take some pictures,
then leave my dog-eared copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five*
marked with your dissertation notes—homage
to so many whiskey bottles discarded on Faulkner's grave,
back when we lived in Oxford. I played among headstones
sometimes, you said. The earth remembers, even if I don't.

So I no longer know what I'm looking for,
nor how to find it. Two days I've searched
this wasteland, clearing the wet snow
from bombed-out doorways, looking for a plaque
I probably wouldn't be able to read if I found it.
I keep telling myself this is all in your name,

as if taking a rickety train into the rural dark
of a strange country means I am, at this moment, good
enough for you. But any claim is fleeting:
rubble still lines the vacant streets; we all might be unstuck
in time. There is no use trying to hold together;
we are all just drifters.

Daddy, I remember when you said let the world be
an anchor; drink the water. I thought you meant it
the way exhaustion is always a stitch in the side.
I thought home was a pit stop, like Rome: all I had
to do was mindlessly follow the crowd of tourists
to Treve fountain, throw in a coin to mark my return.

I am rooted to this desolation like ivy
threading its way through a foundation's fissures.
This is a wilderness all its own: we make do,
carving initials into rocks and cornerstones,
cleaving the earth honest. There is no pretending
the world is more than a palimpsest of ruins.

Barbary Speaks from the Ruins

When papa never came back, silence blockaded the house.
We moved like ghosts through peacetime,
mama mourning in her moth-eaten wedding veil.
She took what was offered—their soups, casseroles, concerns—
wordlessly, and sent us out to play Soldiers and Maquis
with the cousins. All afternoon we would hide in low-tide caves
with sooty ceilings and wait for the boys to find us.
In the twilight, we were no longer porcelain
girls but the resistance, emerging from the cradle
of the earth only when there was more water than air.

At first we snuck in the servant's entrance, up the back stair,
giggling in fear she'd find we'd soiled two more dresses,
until we found she'd soiled the bed.
There were men in suits and women
who told us to call them auntie. There were days
I dared not speak. They were talking
about what was to be done, if we had any kin
across the channel, if someone could send for us.
That was how I learned we were orphans.
When they told us to pack, I said I had nothing to declare.

When the south wind whispered through the lace curtains,
rattling the row of some other family's portraits
above our beds, I knew for the first time where to go:
I walked until the road stopped, split at the Thames,
and across into the bombed heart of St. Francis.
Through the ivy, a rook motioned: closer, closer now,
sanctuary in the wild, wherever you can find it.
Through the sea green curtain, into a low concrete cave
like a grand parlor, the plaster walls buckled and leaning
in upon each other, the marble floor spiderwebbed, uneven.
In this world my wilderness, I am home.

The Necessity of Movement

I. Woman Hollering Creek

With the car's shadow lost in our blind spot,
the morning loud, it seemed possible to drive
until the air was no longer fluid-heavy.
Until our house, haunted with guilt, was forgotten
and empty as an old highway through the desert.

Come darkness, a small campground, winds
caught the canyon like a whisper, the creek murmuring
below the drop-off, like a child, I said, lost, crying.
You said it was a mother, a ghost, L'lorona,
searching for the children she drowned.

Every night she walks, echoes the creek's widening
urgency; she has lent the current her voice.
Walk into the water, it begs me. Let go, whispers
the rustling mesquite. Into the far river's whirlpools,
the storm swell, forever calling, forever following.

II. Medea in Exile

In the stillness of the sun's slide
onto land from the Mediterranean's
distant horizon, it is only then I can see
their faces, four unfocused green eyes

like the shallows skirting the beach's
submission. There was only so long
a father's dark locks could soften
the infidels' features: a mother knows

we're only rock pools waiting
to be reclaimed by the sea.
It is all I do here: stare down the tide,
will my children to walk from the water.

They have come this far with me,
all rippling laughter, beckoning eyes.
So when dawn brings our former kingdom's
justice, a plague of ships like locusts

coming ashore, I will return
to the country of gulls, seek refuge
in citizenship with the waves.
My children, I will come to you.

III. Home Abroad

I remember the earth's edges curl and fold away, the ground
coming to meet me like a lover determined to leave.
It is so seductive, the roll of the prairie; in Germany,
someone asked me if American identity was open space,
an intimate knowledge of earth's curvature.

I said I would miss trains, sleeping through three countries,
waking up to grinding brakes and shuffling seatmates,
being ringed in by the Pyrenees—
something about the isolation of mountains,
like a single lighted window on the open plain.

I should have said: drive forever and find no house
more fixed than a trailer sewn to the land with spiders' thread,
find no confidence in the city's fences and piled bricks.
We are merely ship captains, steering by the stars. Know
the push of waves and wind, the inevitable turn of the tide.

IV. To Strive, To Seek, but Never to Find

Odysseus, an old man at rest among the gossip
of women, the shrieks of children
with toy swords and shields,
is sick with the earth's turning,
missing the stillness of waves.

Fear land's first sighting, earth's dark lip
jutting further into blue. No safe passages:
every anchor drop, a new threat,
another death. After the sword's resheathing,
a silence cacophonous with accusation.

I need you to know I am not sorry
for the leagues and secrets between us.
My ears are conch shells, the ocean
within me crashing and sighing.
Listen: I will always leave.

III.
Displaced

In the Atchafalaya Basin

After the ceremony, everyone scattered. It was late;
I'd been driving for hours—no headlights in the rear view,
not even an abandoned vehicle—just disabled call booths.

The bridge like a balance beam. Already your wedding
a collection of muted fragments: hanging moss, the evening's
heat, black bridesmaid's dress, your child bride.

I thought of the air: thick, crouching, and beneath me
a long drop to dark water. So many shadowy treetops
low to the guardrail, half over the edge, limbs outstretched.

Like Being Killed

The same empty blue, too still for anger. I tell myself: someday clouds will cluster, this drought will break. It's been two months since last rainfall, two months living beneath a mocking sky—and almost a week since you died.

We're slow like the procession of mourners we are, staring up at nothing, mumbling like thunder, doing all the nothing we can. Somewhere east the earth is burning; twilight smells like brush fire. I think: so this is hell.

It's a reunion, so we say how are the kids, the dogs, the wife, school, work, the search for real jobs. Everyone looks like they forgot to rip the scratchy tag out of their interview suit. I think: at least we know we're doomed.

Let's shake our heads and pretend we believe in mistakes—that you didn't mean to die with a needle in your vein—while the sun sets magenta, while the wind is choked with smoke. Let us scatter like scavengers, like so many lonely bones.

No Root Among Us

I am trying to tell you about the beauty of this barrenness
as the fields amble by: dusty waves and rusty
irrigation equipment awaiting the return of nutrients
to the top soil. I want to tell you
I am both the cotton's sharp bur, and the pricked finger.
Salvage, hardscrabble. This year brings drought.

We are sharecroppers of the silence between us,
without property or family name. The earth
does not volunteer its saga: piney woods logged,
the hillsides clear cut and rebuilt into highway medians.
I don't know what else to say
except everything begins and ends with a clod of red dirt.

We do not look at the work crew: orange jumpsuits
silhouetted against a green road sign advising no services,
no exits for over forty miles. I am afraid to know
what is recognizable after decades: a vague face, a laugh,
a rusted truck from River Valley Ford, now a football stadium.
I showed you where I came from, but I am still a stranger.

What Remains Behind

A friend of a friend needed a roommate: he was half the rent,
but only a half-moon in the computer's glow, as I learned
through the plywood gaps that separated our rooms.

My bedroom was an afterthought, only accessible through a closet,
a make-shift passageway even I had to bend to enter.
On an inside wall, the outline of a door long since sealed.

We never spoke, as here no one was ever alone,
the paint always peeling back to reveal another layer of color,
the same rainbow of flecks sticking to different skins.

The landlord said it was a converted flower shop, the kitchen
carved from a wall of freezers, the hall closet an old vault.
I'd had enough of history, the way it crowded the house:

display windows curtained in monogrammed sheets— SV's
yellowed lace, the door and front porch graffitied with lyrics
to unfamiliar songs. *It's here in the smallest bones...*

It was a museum, I thought, easier to lead a tour than reorder
so many artifacts collecting in corners; the house had long ago
donated its every recess to time's slow accumulation.

Even the backyard's storm shelter, its mound of weeds,
when I pried back the heavy door, held gallons of black water,
a ripple of something thriving in the depths.

Heart's Ease

I never left, she says. I was an EMT, then, and a good crew goes down with the ship, even if the captain evacuates. Within a week, there was no need for the ambulances: we were alone with X-codes and debris. The swamp's darkness crept into a city of leaning street signs and floated shotgun shacks. The map of my childhood, without landmarks or light, she says. Sometimes even now, walking past still boarded houses, swelled floodplains, I forget where I am. I keep thinking this is just the storm's eye.

This is one of the last great swamp forests, the old Cajun guide says. The sun didn't always blink through the cypress canopy. Now seeds are drowned by the salt's steady flow, swept through channels. The black silted water gets browner by the day, and the crawfish go looking for thicker mud. At first we bet on the bottomlands for a good haul, he said, and then we sold the boats, except this one, for tours. Beyond the levees and dredged canals, the floodwaters whisper insistently: we only want what used to be ours.

When the earth again rose from the hurricane's surge, the trees were given a year to flush the salt from their roots. After the verdict, the whole city mourned them—the shore seemed only a low sandbar in the surf, a line of broken shells. We could not bear to see the stumps ripped from the land, to be rootless once again, so we carved the driftwood trunks into statues: smooth, sinewy fingers now twist into narrowing branches; from each bifurcation, a flock of birds takes flight, like leaves sprouting from the oak's dead heart.

On the Way to Father's Day Dinner with your Family

I saw the blanket first, still and spread out like a picnic next to a fresh grave—
and only then the woman, rigid against the insistent wind.

Six American flags slapped to break free, to loft into the darkening sky,
and below the manicured grass rippled, littered with fake flowers.

I told you what I saw, then caved into silence, save the radio, the air's
low whisper: so many ghost notes echoing across the prairie.

When you finally spoke, I knew my mistake—your voice cracked like wood
consumed by fire. *Why would you tell me that?*

So we are always alone, I thought, as you stared down the horizon
toward the city's distant offing, as if that thin line were permanence.

Salt Down to Cure

The birds went silent early,
making their leave when the trees
first went slick with ice. We braced
for a bad winter, secured tight the shutters
of complaint. The second storm never came.

We didn't know what else to call it
besides indian summer, so we argued
about cultural insensitivity while squirrels
skittered along the roof line, looking for a way inside.
This time of year, I said, you should know what's coming.

I meant it as a threat, realizing you'd failed
to gather enough rations to last out the cold. Nothing to can,
nothing to tan. I remembered a class pet hamster and three babies,
starved to death over Christmas vacation. I didn't say
I'd been hoarding pills like acorns for months.

It was too easy, I thought, our preparations.
The landlord mulched the beds and wrapped the faucets,
still heat rises, escapes through thin shingles.
Bank the fires, tell me of the chill in your fingertips.
Your words are brine strong enough to float an egg.

Apology

The evergreens cringe white over open wounds—
a disused rail line slit down into bedrock, raw
earth smothered with snow. I remember

when someone dumped a body near the old trestle,
hidden in a drift: red and blue lights
caught on every edge, fragmenting with the frost.

We watched the scene fade slowly into darkness,
turned to the other and said what we meant.
You left without leaving a note, sometime

before first light. I wanted to be buried
with the quiet of flakes, disguised
and protected. I was afraid the thaw would leave

no trace of you, only the earth, visible and needy,
but now the sun's glint spotlights
every scar carved like a limestone vein.

Blame winter and the way it smells
of gunmetal against the teeth. Blame
stillness, the deadweight of ice.

Frost in April

That winter had taken my strength for itself—
a child's shriek dashed out against blizzard winds.
We'd been living out our discontent
together for months: exiles alighting on nothing,
and writing notes, sharpening knives in every fantasy.
Until, in the end, I thought only one end would do.

Still, your wide grey eyes were my sky,
an expanse that demands complete servitude:
a universe of silhouettes shocked still before you.
The day you left, I led a parade
through the badlands, through shitfields,
searching. I read into rocks and suicide cliffs,
into your echo, this breaking world.

Yearly, Nature gives birth,
then eats her young like a starved pup.
Little else to say except ice has the power
of language to shape and overtake the world,
and you were the glacier, the last word
carving into my veins.

Plea for Asylum

For years I was constantly moving,
blaming broken blinds and picture windows,
the way apartments beg for prying eyes.
I slept like a stone turned by water,
each headlights' sweep a breaking wave.

I dreamed of cyprus, mold, brackish
water rising. Here in the plains,
it is always drought season. Easy
to envy cottonmouths, wood's rot:
harder to forget what does not drown.

Then mother called to say the worst
had happened, the city six feet under;
around me, the apartment a hurricane of refuse.
I wanted to evacuate, abandon to white water
everything tangible: keys, wallet, phone.

All I had were images: *Water, water, everywhere,*
and not a drop to drink, someone scrawled
above the bathtub ring of an elementary school
that had floated its foundation. Search and rescue
codes like brands—structural damage, no one to save.

Buildings are no more housing than the body,
any medium will tell you. Spirits are like lost dogs.
I wanted to be nameless and faceless,
triage and wreckage. I wanted to pray
to the waters, take me home.

IV.

Stasis

Slack Tide

When the current is not even a caress, dive.
You are blind and lost without anchor, with only a pole
dragging the sea floor, a rope ascending.
But repairs must be done, so work can resume
amongst the give and take of the moon's want.
Suspended beneath an industrial island,
still the tug of rip tide, its quick thick fingers.
Safety is only the wait for injury, disaster.

Calm is only the eye of a hurricane, a blink
of blue. The winds' screech still ringing
in your ears, sit in silence, watch the sky divide,
the wall of gray disappear, as if forgotten.
I do not have to tell you about crystalization,
that the air will turn to glass in your mouth.
Often I imagine what it's like to drown.

I want to sound the channel until I find the river's
secret meanders, their cradling waters.
Take me back to the oxbow; I want to go home
where I trust the soil to keep settling
into the river's sluggishness. Until the bend breaks
against the sediment, reclaiming old habits,
spreading into the wide floodplains.
We are only waiting to be swept back to sea.

Parallax

1.

I learned through a telescope focused
on the black between patches of stars
that the stretch of the world, the depth threatened distance.
I wanted to be close to you, so you showed me
how to find Andromeda by following Cassiopeia's crown
into darkness. You said we cannot
know directly the biggest truths of the sky,
its pinprick galaxies. It was just like staring
into the sun, I thought, searing blind
optic nerves. I was afraid to look.

2.

We learned, living in that first apartment,
not to look. When the shouting began,
or sirens broke the night, we ducked under covers,
inhaling the other's toothpaste
and stale sweat. The neighbors argued for company,
their words shaking the walls while we slept.
Then we moved: there were no more raids,
no rats—each white wall freshly painted,
undisturbed, with only our silence
to fill the hours before morning.

3.

I learned, trying to fill hours without you,
how to look but not see the whole,
the growing expanse between us. I remember visiting
that sea-side village carved into cliffs, where the ocean
eroded every memory of you, like so many gulls'
shrieks dashed out upon the wind, each truncated cry
echoing. I tried not to look at the distance
as a thin ledge, but there was nothing else
to do but sit, dangle my legs over the land's absence,
and the dark water churning, its promise of space.

Explanation

I learned to time my breath
with the train, screaming out the hour,
the end of the day. The way words
were interrupted, there was no need
to give air to circumstance,
then no need for air. A train's passing
is only a vacuum, like the wake of a bullet.

I wanted the engine to stop ripping through
the dead grass—the wind to stop warping
to its demands—but leaving was the same
as staying. Nothing stops the sound
of a whistle echoing miles from its source.
I awake at midnight to the static
of movement, the darkness ringing.

Words Borrowed from Sensible Things

That first duplex we shared, the neighbors' front walk
was always a pastel collage of backwards numbers
and letters, blurred by the tracks of a miniature fire truck
overturned in the drive. We wrote notes in stolen chalk
to our future children, as heat lightening spiderwebbed
the cloud banks between distant glass towers.
In pink, you printed: *there are places where the sky
gets dark at night. Go there and name the stars.*

I told you we had our own constellations:
subdivisions, sidewalks, a line of streetlights
with no darkness between. Nights you worked I'd walk
without destination, listening to the patterning of sound,
of need, of people squawking to themselves
like so many flockless birds. I needed to understand
the city's conversation with the earth, the way the subway
shook bedrock. When the baby came, we called him Polaris.

Idiopathic, they said of his silence, an unnamed expressive
delay. My mother reminded me my first word was lake,
and then nothing else, for months, like winter migration.
Syllables would come: we must be patient like water
for the wind. He was pointing at everything with wheels,
growling and sputtering like an engine
with low oil, when suddenly you said *car, car*
he's saying car. All I could do was stutter.

This was how I came to know the interstate's
habits like a birdwatcher, its hesitancy, its rush.
Internal combustion, the timing of the tongue's
force against palate, different dialects: I have forgotten
my words, the river's current. I have forgotten the sky
for a tangle of taillights mapping the northern horizon.
Polaris, I know only turbulence and order,
cacophony and silence. Learn from my losses.

Removing the Nests

With the wire of vines cut from the house's
back eaves, siding crumbles into tinder,
dry prairie grass and rotten wood.
They say it is all to save the foundation:
drywall new joists, disrupt patterns of migration,
but for years I've thought it is only the furious
beating of wings that keeps us together.

At sunset, dinner's silence is interrupted
by the warblers' return to tarp and tape,
the weak chirps of hatchlings beyond.
Full throated, they throw themselves
against plastic, double-paned windows.
You are not sympathetic to their stun,
their restlessness: either us or them, you say.

It is not that easy, I think, to change habits,
to fly over familiar rivers, to rebuild
next door to ruins. It is all cyclical.
I want to remind you of the way my body rounded
with the spring rains, the trees budding.
We will continue to return to absence,
to the desperate flutter of wings.

Mizuko Kuyo

I. Water Child

When the levees broke,
there were those who said it was God
punishing the sinners, destroying Sodom
and Gomorrah, the Lower Ninth Ward.
Meanwhile, a priest in the Upper Ninth
wrote from the flooded rectory of his church:
God was surely protecting the city
that day—the storm was already over
before the levees broke.

Child, someone will always be left
to the flood. I could not protect you:
my body was nothing but a sandbag, I tell myself
every day. I keep telling myself
I have nothing to feel guilty for, nothing
to explain, like putting down a sick dog.
There will always be victims,
and there will always be survivors.

Ignoring the warning signs
is part of living in a flood zone. The news
is all red fractals; the freeway runs backwards,
and the neighbor still goes to work, comes home,
plywoods his windows, waits for the water to rise.
It is forgivable, really: there was just a little
blood at first, a little pain, until the hemorrhage.
I thought I deserved to die with you,
for ignoring your warnings.

II. Ritual

Against the season's din: insects, hungry
mother birds. Across the street,
a blue ribbon tied around a tree—
from open windows, the infant screams

over the lawn mower's buzz
that chokes, then dies. I hear you coaxing
caked turf and dirt from rusting metal
in the low tones of an older man.
Tell me we are no more

than weeds and clover, I think,
no more than the grass that grows
over our graves. I want you to say,
this gray hair is the ghost
of our child. Tell me this is forgetting.

Instead, you say, I found you a poem,
and hand me a baseball, backyard found,
out of bounds. The mower's blade gouged
soft stitching; the skin, on which is written,
I love you, Dad, peels away.

III. What Leaves No Discernible Trace

Sometimes the thin puncture of a glass shard
feels like reunion. When a vase full of old flower
water slips between the fingers' circle and shatters,
I am alone with the echo of breakage. You will not
speak of the absence between my shaking palms.

Sometimes I think I always knew, the way birds
go silent before a tornado, and it is no comfort.
I wanted to never stop bleeding our loss. I wanted
so badly to be marked by my sins. I am afraid
I am nothing to you now but so much broken crystal.

Sometimes repair resembles destruction,
I want to tell you. Sweep up the pieces, the concrete
will dry. I watch a single drop of blood disappear
into the water's spreading stain and evaporate,
a form of atonement.

IV. The Word Remaining Within

That first time, I must confess,
when your sister left the baby with us,
when he fussed through the night's storm,
and the wind's fury filled the space
between every breath, I doubted you
could ever forgive my body's treachery.

I wanted the bilingualism
my mother calls biological heritage,
to understand a cry's language
of wordlessness, distinguish each syllable
of pain, anger, need. I wanted to impress you.
I wanted to speak absence into being.

Instead, there was only distance:
the portable crib, the lightening window.
Even now, I wake to silence,
to dawn's insistence pressing against shadow,
trying to differentiate the fan's cycle
from the mind's hungry whimper.

V. Visible Horizon

After the phone call, we wordlessly agreed
vacation was over—there was nothing else to do
but start back at dawn toward the small house,
the sick pet that needed to be put down.

I wanted to tell you I was sick of playing
god: a cat, half a baby, half an ovary. All casualty,
all eventuality. Instead, I could only listen
to the west wind to tear through pine boughs.

Sunrise broke loudly over the mountain,
jarring fluorescent against black rock
above the tree line. It drowned out my silence:
this is your reward for breathing

at the expense of others. Shade your eyes.
I wondered how the world was so full
and yet so empty. I needed you to remind me
that daybreak was just the atmosphere,

burning itself out. I needed to watch
the mountains exhaust themselves
into flat tops and scrub brush, and the earth
return to the endless whisper of prairie.

Listen

Go where the soil consumes
your every step, and every night
the river shuffles through the shallows
like a sleepwalker. It is all current,
all whispering promise.

When limbs spread wide,
climb into the oak's heart
and wait for the wind to speak.
It will tell you where to find me.
There are always landmarks.

In this ocean of prairie grass,
I am the ebb and flow of golden
stalks. I am the well water's echo.
Sit and let the river rushes brush
your cheek. Let me say I miss you.

Notes

“The Blind”: The phrase “needing to be milked” is attributed to John Milton.

“Dona Eis Requiem”: The title, meaning “give them peace” Latin, comes from the Dies irae sequence of the Requiem mass.

“Time to Keep Silent, Time to Speak”: The title comes from Ecclesiastes 3:7, “a time to keep silent and a time to speak.”

“Looking for the Kurt Vonnegut memorial, Dresden, Germany”: The first section reimagines a narrative thread of *Slaughter-House Five*.

“Barbary Speaks from the Ruins”: This poem is a loose retelling of Rose Macaulay’s *The World My Wilderness*. The last line references this title.

“The Necessity of Movement I. Woman Hollering Creek”: This poem takes its title from Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. It is also the name of a creek in central Texas.

“The Necessity of Movement II. Medea in Exile”: This poem continues the story of Euripides’s *Medea* after her exile.

“The Necessity of Movement IV: To Strive, To Seek, but Never to Find”: The title is taken from the last line of Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” “to strive, to seek, to find, but never to yield”.

“No Root Among Us”: The title comes from a line from Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*.

“Heart’s Ease”: The title is a concept in ecopsychology, termed by Glen Albrecht.

“Salt Down to Cure”: The title, and the last line “brine strong enough to float an egg” is from Catherine Beecher’s *Housekeeper and Healthkeeper*.

“Words Borrowed from Sensible Things”: The title comes from a line in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature*, Chapter IV, “Language.”

“Mizuko Kuyo I. Water Child”: The poem’s larger title comes from a Japanese memorial ceremony for unborn children. It translates to “Water Child.”

“Mizuko Kuyo IV. What Leaves No Discernable Trace”: This poem reimagines a scene from Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*. The line “repair resembles destruction” references a line from Adrienne Rich’s “Meditations for a Savage Child,” “these scars bear witness/ but whether to repair or destruction/ I no longer know.”