

*MARVELS OF THE INVISIBLE*

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This dissertation is comprised of a collection of poems preceded by a critical preface. The preface considers the consumed animal body as a metaphor in contemporary American poetry, specifically in the works of Galway Kinnell, Li Young Lee, and Brigit Pegeen Kelly. The consumption of the mute creature allows the poet to identify the human self in the animal other, and serves as a metaphor for our continuity with the natural world. I revise Owen Barfield's notion of "original participation," positing that through *imaginative participation*, the poet and the reader can identify the animal within the self, and thus approach a fuller understanding of both the self and the outside world. We identify the animal other within the human self, and in of this act of relating, we are able to temporarily transgress the boundaries of the individual self to create art that expresses continuity with the outside world. This argument brings about a discussion of text as an act of consumption, and the way and which this can symbolize the ways in which the self is altered through the act of reading. The book-length collection of poems, entitled *Marvels of the Invisible*, won Tupelo Press's 2014 Berkshire prize for a first or second book of poetry. The poems look to sources like 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century scientific letters, modern and contemporary art, and recent studies in biological phenomena in order to parse the intersection between personal experience and the outside world. The title of the collection points to the conceptual interests of the book: through the lens of scientific phenomena, memory, and personal history, one begins to see that what seems very small (the ant under a microscope, a Russian nesting doll, two people on horseback) are, in fact, individual offerings that articulate one's place in the cosmos. The collective voice I advocate in the critical preface appears in these poems, especially "Echolocation," "My Name in Sleep," "Civilization," and "Narrative," all of

which make use of the animal-as-metaphor. This collective voice is particularly female, and deals with motherhood, loss, and childhood experience. Poetry, as part-myth, longs to transgress the felt boundaries of the self; it must see that self as inextricably dependent on the natural world.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page  
iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....vii

PART I:

CRITICAL PREFACE.....1

The Hunter and the Hunted:  
Consumption and Continuity in Contemporary American Poetry

Introduction.....2  
Parabola of Bear Transcendence: Imaginative Participation in Kinnell’s “The Bear”.....10  
Becoming Duck: Collective Continuity in Li Young Lee’s “The Cleaving”.....15  
A Doe Will Never Speak: The Mute Totem in Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s “Pale Rider”.....20  
Works Cited.....26

PART II:

MARVELS OF THE INVISIBLE.....28

I.

Marvels of the Invisible.....30  
Mirror.....32  
Chrysalis.....33  
Nocturne for the Elephant.....35  
Necrosis.....36  
Superficial Heart.....37  
The Dream, the Sleeping Gypsy.....38

Phosphene.....	40
Our Lady of the Rio Grande.....	41
Echolocation.....	43

II.

Pomegranate.....	47
Matryoshka.....	48
Atropos.....	50
Christening.....	51
I Am Not Thine, But Thee.....	52
Her Hand, the Compass.....	54
Learning to Speak.....	55
Propagation.....	57
Sound of the Spinning Wheel.....	58
The Muse, Posing as Maria.....	60
The Uncommon Mirror.....	61
Creation.....	63
The Pheasant.....	64
Follow the Sound of a Voice.....	66
Invocation.....	67

III.

Storm Coming.....	69
-------------------	----

My Name in Sleep.....	70
Civilization.....	71
Oyster.....	73
Voyager.....	74
The Outer Core.....	77
Fourth State of Matter.....	78
Teepee.....	79
Hypothesis.....	80
Offering.....	81
Niagara.....	83
Narrative.....	84

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*Copper Nickel* : “Necrosis”

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*Louisville Review*: “Pomegranate”

*Mississippi Review*: “Civilization”

*Mudlark* : “Nocturne for the Elephant,” “The Dream, the Sleeping Gypsy,” “The Muse, Posing as Maria,” “The Pheasant”

*The New Guard*: “Matryoshka”

*North American Review*: “Marvels of the Invisible”

*Oberon Poetry Journal*: “My Name in Sleep”

*The Rattling Wall*: “Superficial Heart,” “I Am Not Thine, But Thee,” “Teepee”

*Smartish Pace*: “Niagara”

*Third Coast*: “Narrative,” winner of the 2013 *Third Coast* Poetry Prize

*Verse Daily*: “Narrative” (republication)

PART I:  
CRITICAL PREFACE

The Hunter and the Hunted:  
Consumption and Continuity in Contemporary American Poetry

*A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work.*  
-Emerson, "Nature"

*There is no happiness like mine.*  
*I have been eating poetry.*  
-Mark Strand

I am animal. I am human because I am not animal. The definition of the human self depends on the existence of the mute creature because our ability to use language creates an invisible line of hierarchy between humans and animals. However, human consumption of the animal both reinforces and complicates this notion of hierarchical differences: what one consumes becomes, metaphorically, a part of the body, and thus a part of the self. If we are animal in nature, how certain are we of boundaries that exist between the human self and animal other; conversely, how can the creative human draw a bridge across a river made of language? Historically, humans have not only consumed animal material for food, but also for the purpose of expression—the hunted becomes both the material and the subject of art. Think of the Lascaux cave paintings: many of the subjects are animals associated with hunting rituals. Not only does early human art portray animals, it is *made* of animals: color is thought to have been applied with tufts of animal hair and blown through animal bones as a primitive form of spray painting ("Lascaux"). Many of the first writing tools were also crafted with animal parts: vellum born of calfskin, a wing-feather quill. We are thus indebted to the mute creature for, as Denise Levertov

would say, bringing us to speech.<sup>1</sup> The consumption of the mute creature allows us to identify ourselves in the animal other: we recognize in the animal fear, flight, and submission, because empathy transcends the boundaries of language. We identify the animal other within the human self, and in of this act of relating, we are able to temporarily transgress the boundaries of the individual self to create art that expresses continuity with the outside world.

Literally, consumption is a process that changes the body; figuratively, it signifies a process that can change the mind, and, in some belief systems, the soul (e.g., transubstantiation). In “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible” from *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write about the process of writing as *becoming*: “Writers are sorcerers because they experience the animal as the only population before which they are responsible in principle” (240). To behave like an animal, through “metamorphoses of the imagination with conceptual metaphors,” is not a “regression,” but rather a “becoming” (236). Deleuze and Guattari point to a criticism of D.H. Lawrence’s animal poems, ““Your tortoises aren’t real!”” and Lawrence’s answer: ““Possibly, but my becoming is”” (244). The poet, in imaginatively becoming animal, consumes the animal-as-symbol in order to better understand the human self. This is different from anthropomorphism; the human identifies the animal in the self as opposed to merely identifying the self in the animal. Thus, the human conception of the self becomes imaginatively continuous with the animal.

However, it is difficult to understand the mind’s consumption of a text in the same vein as the body’s consumption of meat. This is because we often see a separation between bodily

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<sup>1</sup> From “Some Notes on Organic Form”

consumption, intellectual consumption, and spiritual consumption. Language can create these distinctions, but it can also destroy them. In “Nature,” Emerson gets to the heart of this notion when he writes,

Because of this radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts, savages, who have only what is necessary, converse in figures. As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or, all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols (19).

The animal can be literally consumed by the human body; however, intellectual consumption depends on boundaries between self and other, and spiritual consumption must involve the blurring of those boundaries. In order to blur these boundaries, one must identify the animal in the self imaginatively in order to see the continuity between animal and self. Thus, spiritual consumption involves the imagination; often it also involves metaphor. One can consider the literal consumption of the animal symbolically, as a way of connecting to the animal, the land, and to other people (a luau pig seems an apt example). “The world is emblematic,” Emerson writes, “Parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind” (21). If one hunts and consumes an animal, then translates this experience into language, the animal has been consumed both bodily and intellectually. If the human then identifies herself in the animal other, and recognizes this connectedness between two beings, then the metaphorical transformation of self into other has the potential for spiritual continuity. This sort of metaphorical or imaginary transformation is akin to the Eucharist in the Christian church: the body of Christ metaphorically represented as bread and wine. The receiver considers the bread and wine intellectually, then metaphorically; through this metaphor, she feels a spiritual

continuity with God and the church. This analogy is dependent on metaphor, and excludes a belief in literal transubstantiation.

Some of the work of Deep Image poets like Kinnell, Merwin, and Bly similarly embodies spiritual continuity with the animal. In “The Bear,” Kinnell’s speaker transcends the single-minded self and becomes, imaginatively, both man and bear, so that the reader considers continuity between self and natural world. One could argue that in order to accept the idea that text can be consumed as food, one must adopt some form of mysticism or shamanism. However, if we consider Emerson’s definition of language as a network of signs that are symbolic of the intellect and the spirit, then we see that metaphor can do sufficient imaginative work. Kinnell says,

Since words form in the poet’s throat muscles, they can be said to come out of his very flesh. And since the reader’s throat muscles also have to form the words, the words enter the reader’s very flesh. Poetry goes not merely from mind to mind, but from the whole body to the whole body (qtd. in Zimmerman 118).<sup>2</sup>

In this way, language can inhabit the spirit, the intellect, and the body. Poetry becomes a visceral act that serves as the self’s instrument for union with the world.

Since Wordsworth and Coleridge, most poetry is inherently romantic and defined by the quality of its imagination. Metaphors exist because of our longing for continuity between subject and object, and we can perform this continuity with the imagination. Poems are necessarily contradictory—one cannot have a metaphor without two unlike things, one cannot surprise

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<sup>2</sup> From “Whitman’s Indicative Words,” by Galway Kinnell, in *Walt Whitman’s Autograph Revision of the Analysis of Leaves of Grass*. New York: New York University Press, 1974, 53-63.

without form, one cannot participate with the outside world without seeing oneself as apart from it. The language that most embodies experience is sensory language. In *Saving the Appearances*, Owen Barfield suggests that primitive thinking considered natural phenomena as both apart from the individual and made from the same stuff as the individual, and thus sensory experience, stripped bare of the constantly evolving series of representations we call language, was more actively connected to participation with the outside world (41-2). Barfield defines ‘original participation’ as an experience of the outside world in which a person considers herself “to be only *one* of [the] stopping places [between the self and the represented] and not necessarily the most significant” (42). Language, as a mediator, allows this imaginative work; a metaphorical inhabitation of the animal consciousness can blur hierarchies and temporarily displace the self, permeating the boundaries of the animal other. This imaginative experience is beneficial for both poet and reader, in that one can see one’s own connectedness, and thus one’s responsibility, to the outside world.

In poetry that seeks to “become animal,” one could argue that touch, smell, and taste better fulfill Barfield’s idea of “original participation” than sight and hearing, as sight and hearing are more commonly mediated by language, and exist in a place further away from “original participation.” Participation, or a feeling of continuity with the natural world, happens because of our senses. Since images and sound (or prosody) are, on a surface level, the most striking characteristics of poetry, we should consider the ways in which sight and hearing are more culturally and socially intertwined with learned representations and symbols. Art that is made from animal material, literally or metaphorically, engages the non-linguistic “animal”

nature of experience by emphasizing taste, smell, and touch through the surreal experience of embodying the animal's perspective. This kind of art is interested in creating a human experience that does not seek to represent or aestheticize the animal experience, but rather to inhabit it through language. It does not project a human perspective onto an animal figure; rather, it imaginatively inhabits the experience of the nonhuman animal through metaphor. Barfield points out that we should not strive for "original participation," that this was the effort of Wordsworth, who never matured and who, because of this yearning for the idealized sublime, exhibited "puerility" and "nostalgia" (130-2).

Though I have reservations about the use of the word "puerility" in this assessment of Wordsworth (Barfield exempts Coleridge from this accusation on account of his Kantian thinking), it is important to note that late twentieth-century poets who have been sometimes called romantic, like Kinnell, are not "dis-godding" nature (as Barfield writes of Wordsworth), but often, they are re-godding nature. The object of idolatry is both the animal and the animal's presence in the human psyche. The existence of the animal-as-metaphor depends on the human ability to create this symbolic transformation through language. Barfield does not seek a return to original participation, in part because original participation lacks theoretical thinking.

So I suggest a revision of his term—that, in building metaphors that engage with the natural world and seek to bridge the inevitable hierarchies language creates, we should strive toward an *imaginative participation*, which seeks collective representation through the animal "I" and the smashing not of idols, as Barfield insists, but of hierarchical boundaries. For example, in Kinnell's "The Bear," the speaker transgresses the limits of the singular, human

experience to inhabit the mind of the bear. Clearly, this transgression is impossible, and happens in order to create a metaphor about human experience in the natural world. In this way, Kinnell is not only inhabiting “original experience” in his effort to think *as* the bear, but he is also “beta-thinking,”<sup>3</sup> because the poem understands this impossibility, which, in the end, Kinnell likens to the experience of poetry (“[what was] that poetry, by which I lived?”). Poetry that “becomes animal” does not suggest that “all goes onward and outward,” as Whitman put it, but that all goes both onward and backward, both inward and outward.

One of the most effective ways to bridge the separation between humans and animals is through the senses of touch and taste, which are further from representational experience and closer to original participation. The attempt to destroy human/animal hierarchies and to imaginatively inhabit the other’s sensory experience is, of course, metaphorical and mediated through language. The question remains: is this closer to sensory participation or further from it, than, for instance, a confessional poem that retains the perspective of the particular “I” and his/her visual and auditory experiences of the world? These contradictions are inherent in inhabiting the mind of an animal, consuming the animal, and mediating this kind of connectedness that occurs in language. Poetry, though, as part-myth, longs to transgress the felt boundaries of the self; it must see that self as inextricably dependent on the natural world. The projection of the human self into “becoming animal” is essential to challenging the hierarchical divisions between people and their natural world. Though language is the dividing wall between

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<sup>3</sup>In *Saving the Appearances*, Barfield defines “beta-thinking” thusly: “[W]e can think about the *nature* of collective representations as such, and therefore about their relation to our own minds. We can think about perceiving and we can think about thinking...It has been called reflection or reflective thinking” (25).

human and nonhuman animals, it is also in fact the *vehicle* for “becoming animal,” or making metaphors that help us better understand our place in the natural world. If language is the instinctual, human way of expressing ourselves as social animals, then poems are like bodies: things we can consume, things that can transform.

In contemporary American poetry, some poets emphasize a feeling of spirituality by writing about the consumption of animal flesh as a sacred act. In Galway Kinnell’s “The Bear,” the speaker, in order to hunt the bear, must *become* the bear. As the speaker “eat[s] and drink[s]” from the body of the bear, Kinnell writes, “[I] open him and climb inside and close him up after me...” Later, the speaker of the poem dreams of the bear and then becomes it: “one / hairy-soled trudge stuck out before me...” Li Young Lee echoes this transformation, considering flesh as a metaphor for language in “The Cleaving,” when the speaker eats a duck at a Chinese market. He writes, “its / shape complements the shape of my mind. / I take it as text and evidence / of the world’s love for me... my reading a kind of eating, my eating / a kind of reading.” Finally, Bridget Pegeen Kelly, in her poem “Pale Rider,” creates a totemic creature from the body of a hunted deer, one that gives birth to a human boy. In all of these poems, there is a connectedness between the stuff of flesh and the stuff of words, which serves as the poet’s metaphorical representation of continuity that challenges the notion of a singular “I” perspective. Once the poet figuratively inhabits the animal body, he or she creates a parahuman—for Kinnell and Lee, this is a metaphorical gesture; for Kelly, it is the surreal dream-image of a boy born out of the breast of a hunted doe.

These imaginings in contemporary American poetry could manifest a romantic tendency toward narcissistic projection, but poets like these do not yearn for a return to original participation. Rather, they acknowledge the role of language and the fact that this kind of participation, *because of language*, can only be metaphorical. Thus, in poems like Kinnell's "The Bear," Lee's "The Cleaving," and Kelly's "Pale Rider," the hunted body becomes metaphor for the consumption of text. The metaphorical flesh of the text alters the speaker's experience or state of awareness. These three poems all use the hunted animal body as a vehicle for expressing human-animal continuity in order to blur hierarchical lines. Poems about consumption, made with language that captures the sensory experience of the hunted animal, fabricate a bridge made of language across the chasm that separates humans and the natural world.

*Parabola of Bear Transcendence:  
Imaginative Participation in Kinnell's "The Bear"*

Lee Zimmerman, in *Intricate and Simple Things: The Poetry of Galway Kinnell*, takes up Robert Pinsky's analysis of "Ode to a Nightingale" in *The Situation of Poetry*, which says that Keats' "nostalgia for unconsciousness, the nostalgic wish to live only in each unreflecting moment, is strong, but nevertheless it is firmly identified as a nostalgia for death" (qtd. in Zimmerman 114). Pinsky's argument, as Zimmerman summarizes it, is that because of a fear of abstraction, contemporary poets must deal with the "gap" that forms between language and the world. This gap could be seen as the division between "articulate subject and mute object" (i.e. human and animal) (115). Zimmerman makes an apt distinction: that "one traditional

interpretation of the Romantics holds that, starting with this separation [between “articulate subject and mute object”], they envisioned the imagination—and its manifestation in poetic language—as capable of bridging the gulf” (115). Or, in other words, “what Coleridge calls a ‘unity in multiteity’” (115). Like Coleridge and Wordsworth, Zimmerman argues, “art doesn’t alienate Kinnell from the physical world; rather, in the Coleridgean tradition, it is the process by which he discovers it” (117). I would add that there is one key difference in Kinnell’s expressions of nature versus the Romantics’—the fact he manages to both express the ‘unity in multiteity’ and the particular experience Pinsky discusses, and this is because the particular experience *changes form*. Rather than looking upon the sublime natural world from a singular first-person perspective, Kinnell permeates the flesh of the animal other through language. Coleridge and other Romantic poets often write from personae, but never from a shifting perspective which embodies both the human and the animal psyche. Pinsky’s argument about Keats resembles Owen Barfield’s about the Romantic poets, in that both posit a necessary “naiveté” about the attempt to embody a certain unity with nature. That said, the corporeality of the language, the fact that Kinnell tends to embody the “particular experience” of contemporary poets, suggests that Kinnell understands that language and metaphor cannot, in fact, bring us entirely to “original experience.” If we theoretically inhabit the space of the other, and try to engage this metaphor with the entire body, then perhaps something about the natural world will be revealed—not fully experienced—but revealed.

There are two perspectives in “The Bear”: the hunter/speaker and the hunted bear. The poet inhabits them both through language—at first individually, then simultaneously, so that the

linguistic man and the non-linguistic animal fuse to become a metaphor for the experience of poetry. Every image that does not capture the actual body of the hunter or the body of the bear possesses some corporeality: “I sometimes glimpse bits of steam / coming up from / some fault in the old snow / and bend close and see it is lung-colored / and put down my nose / and know / the chilly, enduring odor of bear” (Kinnell 59). The sensory experience of smell—the excrement in the “old snow” (the idea of snow being “old” conjures a distinct, earthy, wet smell) is characterized with a color that can only be known if one has opened an animal. The excrement is “some fault,” as if the product of the body is out of place in the landscape as the human speaker *reads* the snow as textual evidence of the bear’s presence. The word “enduring” implies that the bear is more ancient, more mythical, than the human in the landscape: the scent of the bear *belongs* more than the hunter’s. In section one, the reader is already engaged, via the speaker, in the hunting process. We track the landscape for evidence of the bear, and though we have not seen the creature, we begin to experience the animal through sensory language.

In section two, the weapon is introduced: a wolf’s rib, “coil[ed]” and frozen in some other animal’s “blubber.” The hunter/speaker manipulates the weapon and leaves it for the bear, knowing that it will be drawn in by the smell of another animal’s flesh. The speaker moves as a bear over the bear’s tracks, “roaming in circles,” until he sees the bear’s blood: “the first, tentative, dark / splash on the earth.” The speaker then begins to run, hunting the bear until he is exhausted and “dragging [himself] forward with the bear-knives in [his] fists” (59). The wolf-bone that kills the bear and the “bear-knives” that sustain the hunter are explicitly characterized by the animals with which or for which they were made—this devalues the hierarchical role of

the human hunter. The speaker of the poem is sustained, even trained by the bear, and now, in section three, is “nourished” by it—he eats the bear’s excrement and continues on (Zimmerman 125). Zimmerman suggests that the hunter, through the trail of bear-blood, is “taught” by the bear; however, it may be more apropos to say that the hunter *reads* the bear in its absence by the stuff of the body it leaves behind (125).

Finally, when the hunter reaches the corpse of the bear—the turning point of the poem—he cuts it open with his “bear-knives,” climbs inside the body and sleeps. Though what happens next occurs in a dream—which would support Pinsky’s point about a romantic nostalgia for the unconscious—it is important to note that the speaker of the poem never fully emerges from this dream. Thus, the dream experience leads the hunter closer to a literal experience of continuity with the bear. The hunter, in section five, relives the hunt, but does so now from the perspective of the bear,

stabbed twice from within,  
splattering a trail behind me,  
splattering it out no matter which way I lurch,  
no matter which parabola of bear transcendence,  
which dance of solitude I attempt,  
which gravity-clutched leap,  
which trudge, which groan (60-1).

In the dream—because of the dream—Kinnell reaches an acknowledgment of the contradiction implicit in the effort to inhabit the mind of the mute animal with the phrase “no matter which parabola of bear transcendence.” Transcendence, by definition, could never be a parabola: transcendence surpasses or ascends, is sometimes even thought of as a movement out of and above this world, whereas a parabola is definitively a curve—what goes up must also come

down. Inside a parabola, the limits are fixed: a parabola is the locus of the points of the focus and directrix and is thus a contained curve. Therefore, a “parabola of bear transcendence” is inherently counterintuitive and logically impossible; yet, the speaker cannot seem to wake up from the dream in which he inhabits the body of the bear. Arguably, he never does.

Even though the parabola of transcendence is impossible, the hunter still *becomes* the bear. Thus continuity with the animal other is both impossible and possible in the world of a poem. By the last section of the poem the hunter believes he has reawakened; then, Kinnell gives us a somewhat perplexing image: that of the “dam-bear,” a female bear, waking her cubs. Zimmerman surmises that this is the mate of the hunted male bear, and we could see this as an image of the aftermath of the hunt, but then, Kinnell writes, “And one / hairy-soled trudge stuck out before me...” The hunter has, in essence, become the bear, which leads to the much-discussed final lines of the poem: “the rest of my days I spend / wandering: wondering / what, anyway, / was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry, by which I lived?” (61). In the last line, it is as if Kinnell cannot be bothered with line breaks—there is no longer a foregrounding of divisions and hesitations, because he has reached a state of continuity and faith. The hunter is now both transcended and trapped within the parabola of language; he is man *and* bear, the poet and the hunter, both of the body and outside it (“that rank flavor of blood, that poetry”). It is through these contradictions, what some may call the failure of the poem, that Kinnell embodies the idea of imaginative participation—we have imaginatively experienced a hunt from both the point of view of the man and the bear, but of course we have not literally experienced this, and neither has the poet. However, it is in the embodiment, in the reader’s

experience of sensory language and in the human/bear hybrid Kinnell creates, that we come closer to understanding the function of poetry.

Poetry connects us to the natural world. It infuses subject and object; it is made from and occurs within the body. It is important that the speaker of the poem never truly becomes the bear (except in the dream) and never truly returns to being a human, because this helps us to understand that when we consume poetry, we never truly transcend the limits of singular experience. We never entirely return to our old selves.

*Becoming Duck:  
Collective Continuity in Li Young Lee's "The Cleaving"*

More than twenty years after Kinnell, Li Young Lee embodied a similar kind of permeation of the animal other, a similar articulation of a collective self, in the poem "The Cleaving" (from *The City in Which I Love You*). The speaker here visits a Chinese grocery and sees the face of his family in the face of the butcher, then proceeds to eat meat, all the time contemplating collective and textual experience. The sensory language of the poem, much like Kinnell's, is driven by taste and smell: the burnt pork skin is "flesh I know to be sweet," the duck oozes "scalding juices"; the duck brain is "gray" and "grainy" as the speaker notes the grease on the butcher's cleaver (77-9). Every time Lee describes the animal-as-food, he weds the image with some reference to the human self and its relationship to the other. As the butcher dismembers the duck, the speaker dwells on his "sorrowful Chinese face": "he could be my brother," Lee writes, "he's delicate, narrow- / waisted, his frame / so slight a lover, some / rough

other / might break it down / its smooth, oily length” (78). The speaker, the duck, the butcher and everyone the butcher recalls (the speaker’s brother, his grandfather, the Gobi nomad, the speaker himself) illustrate a collective experience of consumption that brings to mind Barfield’s notion of collective representation:

[W]hen we leave the world of everyday for the discipline of any strict inquiry, that, *if* the particles, or the unrepresented, are in fact all that is *independently* there, then the world we all accept as real is in fact a system of collective representations (20).

Thinking about “The Cleaving” in terms of collective representation not only evokes the literal experience of the poem as the speaker imaginatively journeys across geography and time, but it also attunes the reader to Lee’s complicated layers of representation. The poet’s creative process and the reader’s consumption of the text is an experience akin to the consumption of meat. Lee begins by imagining the self in the position of the human other (the butcher), and then recalls Kinnell’s bear by imaginatively participating in the duck’s experience of being hunted:

Did this animal, after all, at the moment  
its neck broke,  
imagine the way his executioner  
shrinks from his own death?  
Is this how  
I, too, recoil from my day?  
...  
Is this how I’ll be found  
When judgment is passed, when names  
Are called, when crimes are tallied?  
This is also how I looked before I tore my mother open.  
Is this how I presided over my century, is this how  
I regarded the murders?  
This is also how I prayed.  
Was it me in the Other  
I prayed to when I prayed?

...  
The butcher sees me eye this delicacy.  
With a finger, he picks it  
out of the skull-cradle  
and offers it to me.  
I take it gingerly between my fingers  
and suck it down.  
I eat my man (79-80).

In contrast to Kinnell's hunter, this speaker's experience with the duck here is closer to personification, but is complicated by the fact that the speaker imagines himself contained within "the Other," or the duck, and because he refers to the animal's brain matter as "man." Within the speaker's imaginative experience of the animal, the consumed animal body becomes a vessel for prayer. In prayer, the speaker invokes both the duck other and the divine Other, but obfuscates this by imagining that the receiver of the prayer is actually the self. Prayer, then, occurs both within the subject and the object—and finally, in the act of the consumption, as the speaker ingests himself. It is through imaginative experience of the animal that the speaker consumes the self and, arguably, becomes closer to the self.

Lee continues to evoke scenes of social union throughout the poem: "the butcher working / at his block and blade to marry [the shapes of lovers] by violence and time," and "four kinds of meat / prepared four different ways." Later, he writes, "we constitute a many-membered / body of love" (80-1). This expression of the self's continuity with a collective, social entity, though, always returns to the speaker: "In a world of shapes / of my desires, each one here / is a shape of one of my desires." "Each," Lee writes, is his own "corruption" of "texts, the face, the body" (81). Consumption leads to corruption, or, in other words, eating leads to the process of translating multiteity through language; this corruption that leads the speaker closer to an

understanding of the self and the soul. “God is the text,” Lee writes, “The soul is a corruption / and a mnemonic” (81-2). The soul as “a debasement / of a text,” or as a corruption of God, allows us to possess memory—it even assists memory; memory, mediated by language, corrupts the soul. This paradox gets to the heart of imaginative participation—to exist in a continuous self is both necessary and impossible because language exists and thus can corrupt and be corrupted. The speaker of “The Cleaving” is deeply aware that when one makes the imaginative gesture toward inhabiting the space of the other, one risks corruption, even failure, because of the representational nature of language.

Lee echoes the spirituality in the act consumption of Kinnell’s poem, but in a way that more clearly invokes metaphorical transubstantiation. Much like the Christian Eucharist, the speaker of the poem then “holds up an old head / from the sea” and eats it; though the fish is “whole unto itself,” “its / shape complements the shape of my mind,” Lee writes, “I take it as text and evidence / of the world’s love for me...my reading a kind of eating, my eating / a kind of reading” (82). The consumption of animal flesh, in its mirroring of the human mind, can be *read*, like Kinnell’s bear tracks, as a text or evidence that the human self is continuous with the animal world. Also, for Lee, it expresses a connection to the divine. This metaphorical transubstantiation—the consumed animal body as a way of reading one’s continuity with the world, and reading “the body of the world” as a form of consumption complicates a Christian notion of flesh made word. For Lee, flesh becomes word, and then becomes flesh again. By consuming the animal body, one can read the animal in the self and the self in the animal, and can read one’s own place in the world and with the divine; by reading, one both consumes and

feeds one's own self. Before language can occur, the speaker must consume the world: "What is it in me would / devour the world to utter it?" (82). The speaker, ravenous for animal flesh, as well as the flesh of the self and the other, longs to read the world not with the mind, but with the whole body. The metaphor of consumption becomes a way of communicating what Kinnell wrote about the experience of poetry, that it is an exchange "from the whole body to the whole body."

What, then, is the body? Is it metonymy for the self, a permanent state, or a vessel through which one can read and be read? For Kinnell and Lee, the body is permeable. Lee's conception of eating as reading and reading as eating points to Barfield's definition of "beta-thinking" in *Saving the Appearances* (41). Primitive people could not have performed beta-thinking, Barfield suggests, because "the essence of *original* participation is that there stands behind the phenomena, *and on the other side of them from me*, a represented which is of the same nature of me"; in other words, the mind could recognize the self in the outside world, but could not recognize "the *represented*" within the self (41-2). I cannot pretend to know the mind of a primitive person, but Barfield draws a line along which human thinking progresses—beginning with "original participation," followed by "alpha-thinking" (under which he characterizes history, medicine, and earth sciences), and ending with "beta-thinking," a kind of thinking which recognizes the significance of collective representations, like physiology and psychology (34). He stresses that we should not try in vain to return to original participation; because of the existence of language, this is impossible. I agree, but not fully. In "The Cleaving," the speaker thinks about thinking, and recognizes both the self in the other and the animal other

in the self through consumption. Poets should understand both primitive thinking (original participation) *and* beta-thinking, in order to fully explore the paradoxes inherent in metaphor. As with the primitive man that put an animal bone to his lips to create an artistic representation of the animal, one must see the continuity between the human self and the animal other, and must also recognize that uttering it is a debasement of that very continuity. “As we eat we’re eaten,” Lee writes, “Else what is this / violence, this salt, this / passion, this heaven?” (85-6).

*A Doe Will Never Speak:  
The Mute Totem in Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s “Pale Rider”*

The animal’s inability to articulate suffering in a language we fully comprehend disturbs us, since language is the self’s vehicle for coping, for understanding. Thus, people often long to put words in the mouths of animals, even after we consume them, in order to stress the continuity between us and blur hierarchical lines. The poet does not need to invent words for the mute animal. The poet, in imagining and articulating the animal’s suffering *performs* continuity. Through metaphor, the poet can identify the self beyond the boundaries of the body, and is intellectually aware of the self’s own imagination. In Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s “Pale Rider,” the speaker, rambling in the dark gardens of the subconscious, encounters the body of a discarded hunted doe. The surreal dream-state of the poem attunes us to the warped nature of language when it tries to navigate the subconscious:

I could feel it before I saw it, stirring like the clouds  
Of insects that sift through the swales in summer.  
And then the mist took on weight and turned silver.  
And then it grew heavier still and turned white.  
I was having trouble seeing. I heard the call of a night bird,  
Far off, perishable, and from the branches, high

And low, water dripped, a dull repeating sound,  
Like the sound of many mute people flicking one  
Finger slow and hard against their palms (39).

After seeing the dead doe, the speaker forgets her, but when she ventures into the darkest part of the woods, her perceptions of sight and sound begin to fail (“I was having trouble seeing”). The night bird’s call is “perishable”—it is subject to death or rot, like the doe, like the speaker, but possesses a faint trace of life. The word “perishable,” along with the image of mute people trying to communicate, suggests the instability of expression, of words with which the poet tries to articulate the experience. The reader feels off-kilter, as if she is squinting through the mist of the poem, in a world where nothing is truly dead, but everything smells of death: “I smelled flowers,” Kelly writes, “I could taste / The honeysuckle on my tongue, a taste that was faint / At first, slightly rancid.” The images in the poem are hazy, “milky, lit from within,” and “not clear” (40). When the speaker begins to encounter the creature of the poem, a ghostly reiteration of the dead doe, she cannot make sense of it, and compares it to the gap that occurs between words and the world. Kelly describes the reappearance of the dead doe as “a shape my mind / At first resisted, the way my mind sometimes refuses / To make sense of words that are perfectly clear” (40). The doe begins to take shape in the vaporous, dark corner of the woods, but it is not really the doe—its head materializes not once, but four times, in the cardinal directions, until it becomes clearer to the speaker that the doe has four heads.

Again, sight and sound become muddled as taste and smell ring with a foul vitality: “one golden swollen body / That smelled of fallen fruit splitting in the sun and shone / The way an image from a dream will darkly shine,” she writes. Kelly mentions bread and honey, and then

describes a dream-image of a honeycomb, “with a marbled black and red substance, / Dense and sweet as charred flesh,” so that we see the connectedness between consumption and bodily death (41). Though the speaker does not actively project the self’s consciousness into the animal’s, the speaker, reader, and the four-headed doe are alone, all hearing “the hot air sucking in and out / Of the doe’s many nostrils.” Kelly writes,

...I knew even before  
My eyes confirmed it, that the fifth head was not  
The doe’s head at all, as I had thought, but the head  
Of a grown child that the doe was trying to deliver  
From her breast, and I knew that the child would never  
Be born, but must ride always with her, his body  
Embedded in hers, his head up to the sky (41).

Like the experience of Kinnell’s bear, there is a distinct holiness in the creature that is both human and animal; here, Kelly creates a part-human, part-doe, mute totem that acts as a guide for the speaker, the boy’s head perpetually looking up.

To create an object of idolatry out of the hunted animal reinforces one’s continuity with one’s social group, as well as with the animal-as-symbol. Totems are tribal emblems; the chosen animal is a mark of identification for the human. In his essay “Romanticism and the Life of Things,” W. J. T. Mitchell quotes John Long, a fur trader and military adviser for the Chippewa tribe, who experiences a ritualistic ceremony in which the Chippewa chief tattoos a beaver on his chest. Long uses the Ojibway word “totem,” which translates to “he is a relative of mine” (174). Not to be “confused with fetishism and idolatry or equated with animism and nature worship,” Mitchell writes, “totemism” is a “[window] into deep time and dream time respectively, into the childhood of the human race and the earliest stages of its planet”—the totem is a metaphor for

human, and animal, and collective union (177). Like the image of the beaver on Long's chest, or figures on Pacific Northwest totem poles, Kelly's doe-human is a speechless symbol, a tutelary spirit, meant to guide the language-driven human through the navigation of the natural world.

Kelly's totemic creature is a human iteration of continuity; its explicitly "loud" "muteness" asks the reader to think about the limits and gifts of language. In this way, Kelly's totemic image, like Lee's permeable body, performs similar work to Barfield's "beta-thinking." Kelly's speaker participates imaginatively with the animal figure of the poem—in doing so, she becomes closer to animal and closer to an understanding of the human self. In experiencing the totem, the speaker of "Pale Rider" becomes keenly aware of the damage and release language creates:

...And I thought  
Of the tongue, of how it is a wound, a pool of blood,  
And of how you should bind a wound. And I thought  
Of the earth covered with poor forked creatures  
Walking around with broken faces, their substance  
Pouring out in the form of words (41 – 2 ).

Humans aren't "humans," but "creatures," and because they simultaneously possess and are damaged by language, they become "poor" and "forked"; speaking (or writing) is a way of bleeding. This brings to mind the way in which Kinnell's hunter reads his own animal nature through the bear's splashes of blood in the snow. It is only through the recognition of the human self in the animal that the speakers of these three poems begin to see language as an act of transubstantiation—words can be consumed, words can destroy, words can bleed out. Language and its limits become a bodily experience.

As “Pale Rider” comes to a close, the deafening silence of the poem quiets to the perishable sounds of the beginning—the “mist” “thicken[s]” once again, the air begins to smell once more “of sewage and poor man’s roses,” and the noise “of the water dripping from trees [returns], / Tinnier, less insistent, as the water [grows] colder” (42). As the natural elements of the woods grow quieter as they begin once again to make sound, so does the speaker experience a kind of paradoxical gain and loss of the self: “death,” she realizes, is “a great mercy,” “the doe’s form bec[omes] more ghostly,” and the “pale rider,” or the grown child born of the doe, is “lost in the woods where I was lost.” The poem ends:

...And I stood  
In the dark until I closed my eyes. And then I stood no more (42).

The speaker no longer fights the urge to try to *see*, because in the experience of the totemic creature, she sees with a subconscious eye, an “I” that loses agency—she no longer stands in the woods—and by disappearing like the doe, the speaker and the doe become continuous in their absence.

The identification of the self in the animal through the process of consumption helps us to see language as a collective experience. Through imaginative experience, one can see the self contained in the animal, and the self contained in words. Animals and words can be consumed and thus can render the structure of the consumer’s mind and body; it is through the process of consuming the self-in-other that we become more wholly ourselves. Barfield writes,

Collective representations do not imply a collective unity distinct from the individuals comprising the social group. On the other hand their existence does not derive from the individual. In these two respects they may be compared to language. Like the words of a language, they are common

to the members of a given social group, and are transmitted from one generation to another, developing and changing only gradually in the process (33).

Poetry, as the most emotive form of myth-making, seeks to evoke and recreate the worlds of words. Language belongs to us and we to it, much like the way in which we own and are owned by the natural world. Because we can identify the human self in the animal other, the consumption of the animal is one of the most productive metaphors for the way in which reading a text is akin to consuming the self-in-other. The subject and the object of art are equally important to developing our continuity with the natural world—we must understand that the figures on the Lascaux caves were hunted animals, that their creators were hunters, and that the artistic representation of the animals helps us to understand the vital relation between the animals in the paintings and those who paint them. In metaphorical terms, the poet consumes the animal, the animal consumes the poet, language consumes the poet, the reader consumes language. In the end, all are irrevocably changed.

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PART II:  
MARVELS OF THE INVISIBLE

# MARVELS OF THE INVISIBLE

*Poems*  
*by Jenny Molberg*

**I**

## MARVELS OF THE INVISIBLE

*With your new Microset Model I, you will discover  
marvels of the invisible.*

The night I find my father's toy microscope  
in the hospital-cold of the empty house,  
I dream of him, a boy in 1964. He crosses the yard,  
kneels beneath the sprawling live oak,  
and fills his specimen jar with fire ants.  
His father, in the garage, sings softly in German,  
mounting the head of a deer shot  
that winter; its antlers blossom like capillaries.  
My father is six years old. The light  
spills in as he bends over the microscope  
and folds a single ant into a plastic slide. The body,  
almost sickening in its translucence,  
curls into itself; the bright red thorax, close up,  
is butterscotch. Pressed beneath the plastic,  
the antennae shiver and are still.

Half a century later, my mother's breasts  
are removed. In the waiting room, my father  
takes a pen from his white coat pocket,  
and clicks open, and clicks closed.  
When someone in the family asks  
a question, he takes a walk. I go with him,  
and we wind through orange-tiled hallways.  
He shows me the room full of microscopes.  
I imagine his eye, how it descends  
like a dark blue planet,  
and his breath as it clouds the lens.  
He shows me the refrigerator  
where they keep the malignant tissue.  
He shows me the microtomes,  
the biopsy needles, the organ baths.

In the recovery room, we listen  
as my mother's new systems of blood vessels  
shush through a speaker in the room.  
My father comes in quietly,  
places a white orchid beside her bed.  
The large white blossoms are hands  
cupping the empty air. Suspended there  
is everything that came before this:  
the day my parents met,  
the wedding, each of the three children  
so different from the last. His hands  
that know, like breathing, every inch of her.  
He matches his breath with hers,  
as he does each night  
in the slow river of a breathing house,  
and beneath her skin, her blood blossoms.

## MIRROR

The little girl spoons  
the peas into the milk.  
(How is it that those hands are mine?)  
My mother's long hands,  
reaching to pull the plates away.  
My father's voice from under a door,  
the balcony impatiens  
that wither, fall, pucker, bloom—  
today's sun that flirts,  
the bee as it curves its abdomen over  
a weed flower, the dog as it sniffs at the bee,  
the dog in midair, the bee in its teeth,  
the stinger's depression on tongue,  
the flinch, the paw, the cower.  
Hold a mirror up to clouds: you'll see.  
The way our lives pass as storms.  
The way I am young and old at once.  
The way, when we remember,  
we take out the memory, change it  
before it returns to the cagy coves of the brain.  
Seaweed in current as it wafts and sways,  
knowing nothing of itself,  
or the sea, or the moon as it pulls the sea,  
or the fish that rubs with silvery scales,  
like a cat would, against it.  
I am all of this, and none.  
By this, I mean God.

## CHRYSALIS

*Butterfly rainforest chrysalis webcam,  
Florida Museum of Natural History*

I want to see, somewhere,  
the hot, cocooned unfolding  
of metamorphosis. The caterpillars  
are flown in from El Salvador,  
or New Guinea, and inside  
the dewed glass, shadows  
of men in white coats cloak  
the tic of emergent wings—  
What of the future do you hold  
inside yourself? See: if you take a scalpel  
and puncture the chrysalis,  
it will explode—yellow goo  
of cells, burst cells, amino acids,  
proteins, here a bit of gut,  
here a bit of brain.

A thing builds a shell around itself,  
dissolves, becomes another thing.  
The way, when you are wrecked  
with love, you take only what you need;  
you, liquid version of yourself,  
all heart cells and skin cells—  
here a trough of heart,  
here, gutter of liver, channel  
of hearing or touch. What remains,  
as with the caterpillar, is memory.  
See, we melt entirely.

I have been a child, a lake, a glacier,  
glacial pool, woman, river of woman,  
another woman, an older one.

The oldest scientist asks, if we are all  
creatures of transformation,  
if we are never quite the same  
what are we  
when we arrive at the moment of death?  
It is easier to think in death  
that I am me, but dying. See: 1668.  
The Dutch naturalist Jan Swammerdam  
dissects a caterpillar for Cosimo de Medici.  
And though we now think  
everything ends,  
turns to soup, to river, to ash  
and what's passed is past, he unfolds  
the white sides of the insect and reveals  
two wing-buds, tucked  
tight inside the skin.

Now, as I watch the knife  
pierce the chrysalis,  
a river of cells swelling through  
and out, I remember  
what my father once said,  
that what you see is only a fraction  
of what you refuse to believe,  
and against the edge of the chrysalis,  
embryonic half-wings twitch  
without a body, waiting  
for their slow decay, and then  
for the next body  
that opens itself  
to the risk of flight.

## NOCTURNE FOR THE ELEPHANT

In the upper menagerie at Exeter Change,  
where walls are striped with iron cages,  
a musician sits down at his piano forte  
to play a nocturne for the animals.

To him, the audience is familiar, each  
a different beast, and each in its prison.  
Adagio, he plays, and when  
his hands spill down the scale,

the Indian elephant tilts the broad leaves  
of its ears forward; tusks blunder against bars  
as ivory keys prod wooden hammers,  
felt-covered, like the animal's ancient tread

on desert soil. The song is a downpour  
and the elephant begins to pace. The pianist drops  
to the low b flat and, in the base of its throat,  
the elephant echoes the tone—dirge for a time

when, head bowed, he plodded  
into a pond, tube of his trunk sloped  
in milky water, lifting the drink to his mouth,  
roping the trunk to drench

the ashen body, each wet-darkened foot  
lifting, stirring, a vibrato of water  
emitting, from the body, watery rings  
which enclosed him, then disappeared.

## NECROSIS

*for my father*

You, microscope, are a hungry priest. I wanted  
to confess to you: the nursing home, the fear  
of travel, the land, sold long ago.  
But you were too busy,  
combing the pantry of diagnoses.  
Molar pregnancy: bloody grapes, endometriotic  
sac: chocolate cyst. A slice of grapefruit leiomyoma.  
Only God's fingers could become so small.  
Your lenses are the wooden crosshatch  
of a confessional, eyes darting in the gaps.  
I could see Him in a young girl's  
bone marrow. Her cells swelled,  
vacuolized: ribosomes, cytoplasm, leaking  
like spilled jelly. I draw the lens to a focus.  
You can never know repentance.

## SUPERFICIAL HEART

It's monstrous already, the human heart, so think  
of the child born with her heart outside her body.  
It pulses in a membrane sac like a frog's  
translucent throat—oversized, two-chambered,  
auricle, ventricle. The fist-beat of it, her mother thinks,  
must be contained. And so with two pillows, she dams  
the heart—the heart, inside the crib, a tremor  
in water, impossible to hold or protect. Days later, death.

If only she'd lived.

With sentinel hands placed over the heart, her mother  
would wade with her into the pond, or let her  
whisk the eggs for breakfast, pushed back  
from the stove; later, when she was older, short walks  
on the moor, a book before bed. And at night,  
as the child rocked between two pillows, kindling  
caught in tide, her heart would burst, again and again.

## THE DREAM, THE SLEEPING GYPSY

In what would be his last work  
Henri Rousseau painted a moon  
in place of the sun, passive

as a dying woman. With his brush  
he lit the girl's breasts,  
two bright pomelos, the orb

voyeuristic eyes of the lioness.  
My mother's skin is artless,  
her hands deft. She turns each page,

whispering the names. Seeing  
in Rousseau not shadowless  
brushwork, not a child's misconception

of the world as flat, but layers  
over layers, his hand patient  
as the acacia that rings its own grain

as the years pass, its wide taproot  
drawing up from the earth  
a strange, unutterable music.

I want to say my mother loves  
the gourd-like lute as the thing  
that most reflects the moon,

for it moves the eye from depth  
to surface as if they were  
the same. The few incisions

of light in the desert sky  
strike the woman's long  
sleeping hair, the lion beside her.

The moon's face  
a cold white god. This

is the metastasizing beauty

of my mother. My mother the gypsy.

I, the pinpricked sky.

The lion her cancer.

## PHOSPHENE

There is a way to see the other world.  
My father quarters the red potatoes,  
strips the husks from the corn  
like little dresses, extracting  
the shrimp from their shells  
while I, on my back  
in the sun, press my finger  
against my eye because when I do  
globes appear over and over.  
Some are red; some are long-dead stars.  
When a slit of sunlight  
rushes in, I shut tightly the doors,  
and close my ears to stop  
the paddle of waves or somewhere  
a gull, wrenching open a clam, the squeak  
of a crab's machine-like legs. And after  
the shrimp shells, my father plucks the legs  
in fingerfulls. He pushes my mother  
gently with the blunt  
of his hand on the small  
of her back from the kitchen.  
I orbit the low red sun, keep  
pressing and pressing. My father  
stirs each ingredient into the pot  
by a timer. By now, I know  
his knife is running along their backs.  
Or, he is washing the veins down the sink. Or,  
Look, look at the sun on the bay. It's in flames.

OUR LADY OF THE RIO GRANDE

*after the installation pieces by Dan Flavin, military barracks,  
Fort D.A. Russell, Marfa, TX*

*for my sister*

I let you walk ahead:  
blued silhouette, little  
sister, *luz de día* in desert,  
dazzling, dressed in what you've yet  
to live. Bulbs buzz  
in the barracks. Standing before  
incendiary hallways  
we are parallel in panels  
of electrified glass, rarefied neon:  
mock mirage in this,  
the West Texas we knew, noble  
gas, glow lamp, plasma, you  
on one side of the light and I  
on the other. This is how  
we see ourselves,  
swelling out like hours.  
Us, Texas, the hills  
bulbous as fractured skulls  
dusted and surging, sanded smooth.  
You, stepping back from the light;  
I, stepping towards, backlit by blue.  
You, humming violent, violet—  
now yellowed, not yellow of aging  
but yellow of new light, or also  
yellow of our aging together. You,  
little echo of me; me, looking on  
now green, now blue, now violet, now pink.  
Little sister of light and dark.  
Little wasteland beacon.  
Little saint of glowing hope, scintillating

in tumbleweed wind.  
What lies ahead of you. What lies  
behind me pulsing fluorescent  
in the red canyon between us.

## ECHOLOCATION

*All water has a perfect memory and is forever  
trying to get back to where it was.*

-Toni Morrison

I think of you, my lost girl, when the wing  
of a tailfin rises beside the boat, dripping  
in salted robes. This movement, like song,  
pulls me under, where murk reveals  
the obscurities of loss. The language  
is epic, invisible, submarine. A child  
hears her home in clefs of water, in whale song:  
unfathomable, pliosive, drummed, the loudest blues  
on earth. A thousand feet down, more join in the refrain.  
Another endangered syntax descends.

\*

Nothing on the sonogram for weeks.  
The nurse's dull hand like a river stone  
on my belly; the doctor's wintry eyes  
scolded me, I thought. Oh, secret grief.  
Are we not all sick with our own scolding?  
When they found your heartbeat  
I thought *this could be a girl*. Just as quick,  
you were gone. The question, the what-if:  
always regret. But that is too simple.  
To regret is to be too late.  
To regret is to refuse to swim further down.

\*

On the operating table, I thought of Jonah:  
three days, three nights he prophesied  
in the sunken body's cave, his mean bed

the boggy, pagan tongue of a monstrous fish.  
The squelched prayer, *when my life was ebbing  
away, I remembered you*—then mercy,  
the sonorous brute relieved of his god-  
fearing freight. Jonah, spat out on the beach,  
reborn in his fear, the heart of the sea a God-stone  
in his gut. But the whale was the merciful one,  
holding a dove on its tongue. Don't you see?  
You pulled me from my mind's shadowed corners,  
near drowned in the cage I'd made of my bones.

\*

You were the bird inside my veins' blue trees.  
That night, I woke; I remembered you—  
a small heartbeat inside me, gone still.  
I try to convince myself of an afterlife:  
when a whale dies, it lives a second time.  
It must drop to great depths, then an ecosystem  
is born of its body. The sleeper sharks will tear  
soft tissue from the corpse, its skeleton  
colonized by a million worms. A root-like structure  
grows into the bone and all the little animals feed.  
No one is sated. No regret.

\*

The dream again: a beach strewn with humpback calves.  
Each spews its white jet into catacombs of air.  
I press my whole body's strength against them  
to no avail. The bodies are black dunes  
on the mute white sand. I give up, walk the road  
of corpses, and come to it, the puzzle:  
the clean jaw of a female cow.  
I measure the slow lines. Each baleen plate  
a glassy divot. When my work is done  
I hear singing. The whales, fins like wings,

flood the atmosphere as clouds. The heaviest,  
the lightest things. My heart is full of them.

\*

I was prey in the hot slick belly of the sea.  
I wanted to die of anger. I wanted  
to watch all things burn. A tamarisk sprang up  
beside me, and I thought it was God.  
A worm ate the green plant and I thought, God,  
devour me. But the worm was full  
of the saltcedar leaves. The earth refused  
to wake, to weep. So I walked the tide's edge  
to hear the waves' hushed dirge.  
The muted tongues of the dead whisper,  
God is covetous. He will not tolerate your sorrow.  
I lose what I love and stay alive. I try.

\*

I walk the shallow water, for what emerges  
in its absence. And yours. Deep down,  
whale song so loud: if not for ocean water,  
the human ear would burst.  
The sun harpoons the late day sky.  
Beneath my feet, a million shards of rock  
and shell, things that once housed the living.  
And deeper, the call of one animal to another.  
Now and again, you breach the heart's surface:  
this is your sounding; this is your wake.

**II**

## POMEGRANATE

Before I crack open the fruit,  
the seeds swell in their white caves, clatter  
and hum—red voices muffled by pulp.  
A song of berries. The fruit swings on a branch  
and the seeds clink together and ring out, one  
of the seven fruits of Israel.

613 berries—distended arils—  
the Torah's 613 commandments.  
Or, I am Persephone. For four months  
I will pull apart the flesh, and it will be winter.  
My hands are stained. I pluck the seeds.  
The only sound is a soft click: one last note  
as they fall. With each tiny death, I am fed.

## MATRYOSHKA

*For some reason, the early nesting dolls depicted what appears  
to be a family without a father.*

-The Mendeleyev Journal

### I.

When you take away the children  
the mother is empty. Her round head  
shrouded in red, her lips thick  
and pursed, her cheeks rouged  
with big circles of flush. And her eyes—  
she is keeping her inside secret.  
The matryoshka's arms, creased  
with plump, hug  
a glossed rose. Sprigs  
of cornflower and baby's breath.  
If you look closer, a thin line  
cuts the rose. This is where  
the mother is broken.

### II.

I have discovered the mother  
inside the mother. Her eyes  
are dark like mine. She doesn't want  
what is inside her. Her arms:  
thin. Her collar: drab.  
Her lashes: straight.  
Her flower is not a rose. This mother  
fits better in my hand. When I pull  
her open, she creaks.

### III.

The last mother has no arms,  
no dress, no collar.  
But she is smiling.  
She breaks willingly.  
I turn her open  
and find myself. Each daughter  
becomes my mother and I become  
each mother. I hold myself  
in my hand. This is my secret—  
I have seen how small  
I can be. I will put  
the wooden child back inside me.  
And the woman inside me. And the woman  
inside me. And the woman inside me.

## ATROPOS

*for my Opa*

In March, the hill country is an opus  
of golden-cheeked warblers, the storied  
turn of constellations. When flocks

of clouds pass over, so do birds,  
pulled by earth's magnet, or what lies below—  
a tribe of dreams, sleep gods.

Dusk in my grandfather's house: sharp  
cedar smell, night dancing along window glass  
like branches or fingers. Memory,

that dusky goddess, sleeps with no one.  
And when Opa wakes, the Alzheimer's  
wave of unfamiliar voices is wind

drowned in clouds, and now his ashes, too,  
gale in the tallest juniper, a rustle  
of warbler wings, Indian paintbrush

blistering the lawn. The fates weigh out  
good and evil in some future version of me.  
When she is born, stars

will burst from my chest, burrow in sky.  
Please, little someone, little not-yet-born:  
For us, remember.

## CHRISTENING

My mother is writing blue/brown under “eye color.”  
I am in an incubator, jaundiced. She is turning  
names over in her head. They had wanted  
to name me Melissa, like the Cretan,  
or my father’s sister. But Mom sees  
that I do not have the blue eyes of my father.  
She recognizes her own dark  
flash. And so she chooses a name  
she knows well. When she utters it  
for the first time, I do not hear. My eyes are covered  
with a sterile blindfold and a blue light  
breaks up the bilirubin in my liver like glass.  
Later, the blue eye slowly turns until  
indistinguishably umber, like its match.

I AM NOT THINE, BUT THEE

*after Katherine Philips*

A child is born in Winslow, Arkansas.  
He will one day be the man

who tells me I am nothing, the man  
I want to forgive, but can't.

Bald infant pitch, echo of cedar and ash.  
Grandfathers, the undulant hum

of rocking chairs. Fathers,  
breaking sticks in halves and fourths.

It never begins or ends, this,  
what we learn from men,

what violence, what mercy.  
The child is born to a midwife.

The midwife will be the woman  
who one day tells me, leave him.

He is just like his father.  
She is sometimes me.

She is also the bite of the woods  
and the bend of the foothill,

a warm egg beneath a hen,  
the cucumbers ripe for cutting.

She might have had a different life.  
The child was born on a cabin floor.

That cabin has always been there  
and the split light combs the shortleaf pine.

I am glad of the hate  
visited upon me.

It did not come from my father.  
The man paces back and forth in my dream.

Each night he kills me in my dream.  
Each night I allow it to happen

because I know I will wake.  
I am grateful for this, for waking,

for my father and mother,  
for having known mercy.

## HER HAND, THE COMPASS

My neighbor walks with wide steps around the yellow crocuses,  
moves her hand over the life that kicks in her.

She doesn't know that this child will never be born.  
She sees that someone cut back the herbs in the garden,

and can't understand it. Oregano, basil, mint.  
They are all green and want to be tasted.

When the chives are cut, they come back.  
With her finger, she traces a map

and the child hears its soft drum:  
*here are the crocuses and peonies.*

*Here is where your father, whom you do not know  
writes in notebooks. Here is where he will scold you,*

*then forgive you. Here, the lights  
will only stun you a minute. You will shoot up like a chive*

*and tangle with the world, where everything  
wants to be chosen for something bigger.*

## LEARNING TO SPEAK

October's state fair weekend: gasoline and corn dogs, funnel cake, sweat. Big Tex, the colossal cowboy, lurched in the wind.

The stranger's hand recoiled like a clam, fingers retracting into the slippery palm.

And the words would not come, and I could not call out. Only—*book* or *banana*—but never *I am lost*, never *I have lost my father*.

I sat in a room with a woman in a white coat. She asked me to name the pictures on the wall.

*Peanut butter sandwich. Yellow*—no, not “la,” “ya.” Good. *Sandbox*.

The window on the door was crosshatched with white tape. *Stripes*. Keep your tongue behind your teeth.

In Fort Worth, the creek that ran behind our house was sludge. When Father found a dinosaur footprint, I spread my fingers out between its toes. *Prehistoric*, he said.

The day after the dentist took out his wisdom teeth, I peered into my father's room. It was dark—his mouth full of cotton.

I heard Mother say *unhappy*.

When she went out into the yard one day, I crawled beneath the sink. The words would not come. And I could not call out. *Shh*, I taught myself.

The cabinet air was damp; a drop of water ran down my back. I heard his voice and pushed on the back of the door.

He smiled slowly, running his finger along the drum of his stethoscope. *We're moving back*, he said, and she pressed her hand to his face.

Houses, fence and cattle flashed like negatives across each window. His hand on the dial, he sang. His squelched voice: *Maybe I didn't love you, as often as I should have... You were always on my mind, you were always on my mind...*

His hand would rest on Mother's knee and I would lean forward, check on the baby, make sure she hadn't fallen out of her car seat.

And his boot tapped beside the pedal, softly, like *chapters*, opening and closing.

## PROPAGATION

At the Halloween party, I sat in the neighbor's lap.  
His hand pressed against my knee. He said  
*we have the same birthday*. He didn't wear a costume.  
He spoke in a voice like mud and I looked  
for my sister. We'd only lived on the block a few months,  
and already I was having nightmares. I'd wake up  
on the cold wood floor. Out the window,  
the neighbor's house like a fortress. White  
as the castles in books. Years later, that neighbor  
would open his wife's throat with a pair of scissors.  
In the daytime, my sister and I sat in the yard  
and dug up our father's onions. I would tell her  
of the two girls in the castle, and their mother  
and father as I handed her a moon-faced bulb.  
We peered over the fence and bit.

## SOUND OF THE SPINNING WHEEL

*The devil has told you that! The devil has told you that!*

-The Brothers Grimm, "Rumpelstiltskin"

At night, in that threadbare space  
where the cry of a child should be,

a little man with hammered gems for teeth  
whispers his lines in my ear.

He riddles my heart. Turns  
the rest of me to cheesecloth.

Around my throat he spins a red scarf  
because I cannot say what cannot be said,

and I wear that scarf against the wind  
that blows through me.

Borne out of loneliness,  
he comes only with death:

the smell of a child's bloomy breath  
and the earth crushed under the weight of a body.

So I become someone else,  
my head full of tinnitus and fruit,

pitted and undiscerning.  
I put my ears to the ground

until they are planted there  
and I begin to hear the ground's singing,

the dead and their thousand  
dying verses. Only then can I say

what I could not say, that there is a hole in me  
where a worm crawled through.

That hole says, *mother*.  
It says, *father*. It says mother, father

until I rise from my barrenness,  
and tear myself in two.

## THE MUSE, POSING AS MARIA

*For her father, the sculpture represented Maria Mitchell's 'singularly sweet and blameless life.'*

–Philadelphia Museum of Art, on Saint-Gaudens'  
The Angel of Purity

But there is always more to it.  
The muse, the sculptor's mistress: her stone-kept pout,  
plummet of the neck, the yawning eyes.  
And Maria. Dead, diphtheria, age twenty-two,  
never married. The muse, his whore, but alive  
in a body not made of stone. And the stone, too,  
carried up from the quarry, and what he cut away.

The two of us stand before the sculpture  
a century later. You turn and say,  
you're not who I thought you were.  
What about before, I say, when it was different?  
You say, she is beautiful.  
I say, why, thinking her hooded eyes, the palms'  
flesh like white plums, the ruched wings. You say, she just is.

Outside, the wind is strong enough  
to carve ice. Outside, the girl I once was  
shoulders the cold.

## THE UNCOMMON MIRROR

*When the child cried, the features of the superior head were not always affected;  
and, when the child smiled, the features of the superior head did not sympathize in  
that action.*

–Everard Home, F.R.S., on a child born with a double head,  
Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, 1810

Twin, turn away from the fire  
and look down at the clouds.

I carry you as a woman's  
full water gourd

or the crest of green and gold feathers  
that weighs on a pheasant's crown.

Turn away from the onlookers.  
Think only of what is worth seeing:

our mother as she pestles  
coriander in a wooden bowl,

the black monsoon clouds  
clutching the river,

the mongoose circling the cobra  
as the sun rounds your neck.

Do not think of the chapel  
across the river

or the doctors'  
upended faces

that rise up in horror.

Breathe in the clotted air.

Do not remember the midwife  
who, in terror, threw

us into the fire. Do not  
think of the blue

and red of the flames  
or the white of the midwife's dress.

Think of India. Think of Kolkata.  
Think of the painful

beauty of the crescent moon.  
And when there is too much,

let fall the river  
down both our faces.

## CREATION

My sister and I used to peel  
the crusts off Wonder Bread,  
roll the soft middles in our palms.

The sheets on our beds  
were freckled with tiny flowers.  
At night, they came alive:

bees, or daddy longlegs,  
or little girls who looked like us.  
As they flew around the room,

we caught a few. Held them  
in our hands, named them:  
“Debbie,” “Bebe,” “Lady Catherine.”

Later, one grew inside me.  
It came too early—they showed me.  
Like a tiny flower.

I wanted to name her.  
To feel the weight of her,  
to catch her hand as it grabbed

at a pink flower, to warn her  
of all the world’s little dangers.  
To watch her bite into a pillow

of bread with a ferocity  
that I could say, with certainty,  
was just like her mother’s.

## THE PHEASANT

*...the variety of monsters will be found to be infinite.*

–John Hunter, “An Account of an Extraordinary Pheasant,”  
Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, 1780

### I.

For eleven springs against the April snow, the spots on her feathers  
were black eyes, the thin reeds of grass lashes, and she hunched

and cooed as the bright male beat his wings against her,  
bobbed his necklaced neck like a ship’s gilded bow,

held her head with his beak and curled his tail feathers  
around her body. The pheasant came to the woman

each morning for food, and each year, presented her  
with a small brood of chicks. The woman began to see

herself in the bird: the way she pecked and rounded up  
her young; her subtle beauty, dulled like tinted paint;

the way she curtsied before the glamorous male,  
who, almost refined, tucked her beneath him.

## II.

This year, after molting, the pheasant is no longer egg-colored,  
but deep golden red, her long truss of feathers

low to the ground on her small frame. Her spots  
not eyes, but sapphires, and the long cleft of her tail

cleaves the sky into two skies. The woman  
calls in the scientists and they pin down the bird with gloved hands.

They prod beneath the spectral plumage. They pluck  
and hypothesize and write things down in notebooks.

The colors of her are fire, imperious against the pale  
wood table, the humbled white of the snow.

FOLLOW THE SOUND OF A VOICE

*1971*

The prairie roses roll through the city like traffic,  
and the girl who will be my mother  
pulls roller skates over her long, brown feet.  
Her braids are tight and the wind lifts them  
as she splays her fingers. They lasso the air.

In Chicago, my father is waiting for the wrong bus.  
His toes are at the edge, where the street curves.  
His calves flex and slacken, his breath  
coils into the perfect cold. He thinks of heat,  
what it feels like to sweat; for the wind  
to be a nice thing, and the sound of it in your ears.

## INVOCATION

Praise my coronary artery, the Red River, and passing it, through the country  
of my heart, the Vena Cava, which is the Rio Grande.

Praise the trench coats, the umbrella bones, what looking out  
stirs inside: patches of wildflower that streak the Texas highway,

Enchanted Rock and the Brazos, God's river-arms; praise  
its prison songs that sing low like grandfathers—

my spleen, gallbladder and stomach, immigrant hills  
my great-grandparents crossed; my capillaries, the feathers

Oma wore in her hair. Praise the whitetail fawn we found, dead  
a day, its neck caught between barbs and praise

my father's stethoscope, that always hears what beats.  
Praise the Great Plains, the geode caves, arrowheads carved from bone.

Praise my bronchial pathways, breathing their thousand branches,  
the bluebonnet, and Baby Blue, the old Ford pickup. Praise this land,

its two hills, the house my parents planned to build.  
What the flood will take from us and what will remain.

Praise the elk heads on basement walls: those lords, specters  
of my family, cast like daguerreotypes in each marble eye.

### III

## STORM COMING

Before rain, my father stands on the porch,  
drawing in the metallic air. In his face,

I look for my own. I've seen the way he is  
with his father. He counts down the lightning.

The sky swells like an oath.  
Dad, he'll say, how about next time

we'll go and get some of those peaches you like,  
out by the highway? He'll laugh a laugh

that knows its own ending. And the drops fall,  
just like he promised. The storm is birth and death

in only minutes. So we laugh, knowing  
we don't have the time to love it.

## MY NAME IN SLEEP

The night of the half-moon, a pack of wolves  
scratched down the back door,  
and I could not stop them. I didn't want to.  
Call yourself coyote. Call me white horse.  
This means nothing of freedom. It means we want  
to name the thing between us.  
The Lakota dreamed the West into birds whose wings  
were blackest thunder,  
whose eyes blazed lightning. It has rained for days  
and this morning we knelt in the yard together  
to feel the softness of the grass. Your boy is sick.  
The doctors cannot find what's wrong.  
You lean on my shoulder, not  
crying. I am not a mother. But look at the moon tonight  
blinking through clouds that cover its half-face  
as hands. I give myself  
to the wolves. I will be a part of the wolves,  
I will be part-wolf, the wolves continue in my dream;  
I will be a horse, a woman, never  
a mother, though you or I may dream it.  
I hear you speaking to your son in sleep. When he is well,  
I will admit it is my name I want to hear.  
You say you try to lift your thoughts through and above  
the clouds to watch them disappear.  
The moon is a bowl of night birds. Kneeling by the bed,  
hands cupped in a prayer he has not yet learned,  
is him, your boy, and in his eyes, lightning.

## CIVILIZATION

We were mammoths then.  
Our tusks jutted  
into the star-soaked nights.  
Life was different, but it was still  
the same, and so  
was death. There was plenty  
of tall, lush grass.  
At night, alone, we would grieve.  
There were so many burdens,  
and we wanted them gone.  
One day it came,  
the flood. At the end,  
you tried to lift me  
from the water.  
Later, like now,  
you made music so pure  
it would kill. Each note  
was like a graveyard  
or unbearable light. Even I  
could not resist  
turning over my shoulder.  
We descend into worlds  
so large, only to find  
they are just under our feet.  
Later, and much later now,  
we walk through a park.  
We run our hands  
along the rocks  
in the creek bed.  
We stand on a bridge.  
Standing on the bridge,  
we look at our own bones.  
My bones lie across yours.  
You lift me,

as you are always lifting,  
as I am always suspended.

## OYSTER

When you came back from Westhampton,  
you brought a handful of shells.  
One, an oyster, was splintered and coarse in places,  
and in others, layered with dark silt.  
There was a hole in the palm of it, where life  
must have been. I know a shell can't feel  
but wonder anyway:  
the absence of muscle, that spot, its belly,  
like that spot in me you left. It's funny.  
It seems for months I've been waiting.  
Everything is just how you left it. If you look closely,  
there is a ring, mother-of-pearl, around the hole.  
It's the place closest to pain that shines.

## VOYAGER

*In 1977, for the Voyager Interstellar Mission, Carl Sagan's wife, Ann, was hooked to electrodes for a one-hour EEG. During the recording, she thought about falling in love.*

I.

On the shore, I cup my hands  
around my moth, ocean churning at my feet,

to ask the three white ships  
in the distance how to love.

The waves bare their foamy teeth.  
The louder I call, the further

the ships wane on the horizon's flat map.  
I disappear inside the mouth.

Whale-call of night, the sea's dark,  
each briny word an oyster on my tongue.

How many loves can live inside the body?  
Who will I have to cast out?

## II.

With the golden record, we pitched  
life on earth into the solar system: Hello

in 55 languages (the most beautiful, in Arabic:  
*Greetings to our friends in the stars, may time bring us together*),

the sounds of thunder, of waves,  
chickadees, dolphins. Tibetan bowls,

Blind Willie Johnson in his salt-covered voice, singing  
*dark was the night, cold was the ground*,

a Navajo chant, a Peruvian wedding song,  
the image of a nursing mother,

diagram of internal organs, photographs  
of a mountain climber, an old man with dog and flowers.

III.

I think of Ann, her forehead wreathed  
in electrode cups—

one woman's heart  
reeling, at 35,000 miles an hour

on the great open sea  
of interstellar space.

You tilt your wine in the air, say  
there is a place for us,

but not in this world.  
With every lift of the glass,

I hear my own heart  
a galaxy away, propelling

down that black ocean,  
both of the earth and outside it,

both mine and not mine,  
its language impossible to speak.

## THE OUTER CORE

I am sitting with the moon and we are drinking from the sky.  
We break open the earth like an egg and look inside.  
We discover equinox, sulfur, Aurora Borealis.  
I try to explain the names for things, why “westward”  
is different than “drift.” We find the dead  
beneath the rheumy crystals of quartz.  
The moon pulls the ocean to a curl and settles down,  
fat and orange, beside me. We discover  
each molecule, passing through and out of me,  
that has already known many others. Because there is no center,  
the moon keeps saying, we must give ourselves away.

## FOURTH STATE OF MATTER

The day Big Tex burned, it began in the throat—  
an utterance that caught fire.

That day, the other fathers

gorged lazily on turkey legs,  
graying beards littered with pink meat.  
I knew to find Big Tex, whose 75 gallon hat

mooned over the crowd; giant steel arm  
lurching up and down like an oil derrick.  
I tracked his cowboy drawl to the fairground's center,

scanned the dune of faces for my father's  
thick glasses and cumulous blond hair.  
Now, the photograph of that day (my father and I,

his blue t-shirt, my mustard-drenched corn dog)  
is an envoy for the memory—  
I remember myself then

only through the mediation of film: nebula  
of my child life strewn across the far reaches of some sky.  
Later, I saw that my father's life wasn't whole

but scattered, and didn't really belong to me;  
as he unraveled in grief for his own parents,  
I didn't relate, but suddenly, I could imagine

the absolute zero of loss—I wanted, too, to be done  
with being one person, the pixels of a single moment  
converging, bursting into flame.

## TEEPEE

Teepee and I were the same age. His eyes, whitish and filmy,  
tracked me vaguely when I opened and closed

the stable door, fed him an apple from my hand.  
Over one hill, then another we rode, until I couldn't hear

the voices at the barn or my brother's hammer,  
chipping at a geode, hunting arrowheads.

Teepee and I were alone in the hills  
and we were so quiet. The longhorns grazed

beside the pond and deer peered around the bur oaks  
and the redbuds. When I fell, it was as if I were suspended,

reins slipping through my hands like a lost argument;  
Teepee bucked, the russet ring around his eye like a bruise.

Not then, but eventually, both our lives  
would end, no matter the gall, the drive,

how much we fought. Teepee wandered back  
to the barn and I, picking burrs from my arms and legs,

looking across to the other hill spattered with Indian paintbrush,  
knew it was me who had fallen, and not the horse that threw me.

## HYPOTHESIS

If we climb the jet bridge  
in our wool socks.  
If my brother is last  
so we don't see him fall.  
If he falls beneath a holly bush,  
his blond hair a sleeping  
animal against the eyes,  
opal skin like a jeweler's light.  
If no time has passed.  
If the planes overhead  
make shadows on his face.  
If I dream this every night  
for years. If the light,  
its tilting mirror, strikes the skin  
and I see these many years  
have passed. If it is my face.  
I, a child in this world.  
My brother wears his funeral suit,  
my sister in green like a garden,  
my father's eyes to the ground  
and mine looking up.  
This, then, our strange procession,  
climbing the bridge,  
boarding the plane,  
our winged eclipse,  
our momentary shadow.

## OFFERING

Over the fog-dipped trees, a flock  
of whooping cranes, led by an ultralight aircraft.

The sun on nylon wings is almost like warmth  
on feathers; the pilot, a woman dressed as a bird,

squints through mesh eyes, careful of the V  
that unevenly heaves around her.

Weeks ago, the refugees brooded: rigged wings  
of a taxidermied mother—swan-bodied,

head of a whooping crane.  
A man with a puppeted hand

taught them how to eat and drink.  
Now, with the fall migration, new inventions

of color: white wings, black-tipped,  
spilled ink on new paper,

and the cranes' heads, ignited  
by a torrent of red, camouflaged

against the blaze of autumn maple.  
Scientists discover later

the cranes abandoning their eggs,  
not knowing their own biology,

that cranes are cranes; humans, human.  
Each October, though, the Wisconsin sky is swollen

with sound: whoops of the young cranes,

wings like laundry in wind;

the avian aircraft, a washboard  
clacking over the horizon. Which is closer to God?

## NIAGARA

The cliffs are studded fists. We cross over  
to the Canadian side, to Horseshoe Falls.  
Where the water tumbles,  
there is a space of quiet—

Geese fly in from three directions to make a V.  
You speak of your grandfather in a low voice,  
the one who survived the war. The sun  
catches the place on your eye where a cataract  
was removed. A boat chortles as it pulls  
away from the pier and disappears into the spray.

Nothing survives where the water strikes  
the rocks, an unremitting smack,  
a motor-like drone. To think  
of coming across it for the first time.  
To think, how many years  
we have been vanishing,  
as the water against the boat's hull.  
To think your eyes  
gather up the river like a skirt.

## NARRATIVE

Because there is no principle of love,  
you and I ride horses to a curve in the lake.  
Because we are ever-expanding cosmic bodies,  
but do not understand physics,  
my horse will be named Dakota, and yours  
Chip, and when he bends his head to drink,  
the forces of memory and dark energy  
erupt from the water like cattails. When we say love,  
we only know how for a few moments.  
And keep insisting on different versions  
of the same story. Chaos, or better,  
the original emptiness, is always a constant.  
One horse bellows and the other answers  
with a clip of her shoe  
on a nearby stone. Because suffering  
is difficult to define, the lake is this blue  
only once. The horses toss the reins from their necks.  
They have been here a long time,  
and know only the old ways.  
When we return home, we keep trying different ways  
to feel the same. And the old sun sets on the stables.  
The stable man lies down beside his wife.  
They hear hooves that kick against stable doors.  
And she cannot sleep without that sound.