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END OF THE LONG YEAR

By

WILLIAM ANDREW DOEHRING

Bachelor's in Fine Arts, University of Maine at Farmington, Farmington, Maine, 2018

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Poetry

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Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Keetje Kuipers, Chair
English, Creative Writing

Sean Hill
English, Creative Writing

Amy Ratto-Parks
Assistant Director of Composition

ABSTRACT

Doehring, William M.F.A., Spring 2021

Poetry

End of the Long Year

Chairperson: Keetje Kuipers

This collection of poetry reflects my growing understanding of my own poetics, as well as my growing understanding of my own body, identity, spirituality, and way of being with the world. This growth is ongoing.

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prayer

new snow pulls the prayer
from the precipice of my lips,

softly covers my mouth,
shushes into the cradle

of the old maple's bones.
this snow is master of cracking the prayer

open and flaking it like chapped lips,
of turning the prayer to brown leaves,

of crisping the prayer.
later the snow will crush the prayer,

its body a boot. it must be forgiven,
this snow's first step forwards.

it knows no better than I
what will happen next.

first poem

your feet are cold against my leg and I jump,
laughing, balling myself up

until I am a star. in the light you are beautiful
because you are always beautiful.

outside the wind bangs against the window
like the paws of a dog who wants to come in.

we do not yet know the difference between
our two sides of the bed, what it means

to look after our own bodies, speak
to our own fears. We pass laughs

between each other's lips, feed each other
until the room goes

and becomes the night, with us two
suspended in the dark like a prayer.

early rising

I shower with the lights
off in midwinter. eyes
still closed, dreaming beneath
their lids, asking to be
close to you. steam drifts off
skin, sleeps against the dark
like all the night's sleeps
I could have known, your arm's
weight across my ribs, breath
on the back of my neck
warm as water, quiet
anchor dropped in a dark
sea. my eyes adjust too
slow, the heat of the night
still wrapped around me, loose
as your arm around me,
not ready for the morning
that rises just outside
the window, calls me out
of the sheets of water
still running warm as hands
across my skin, wordless
in their calling me back
to the dark of our bed.
there is ice melting off
the window, fingerprints
washed away like the night.

in the fitting room

I go for a swim in a sea of flannel which hugs me
loose like a man who does not hug, like a man
who does not have a body like mine.

the broad shoulders in the fitting room mirror try
to take up space like a man. the sea is so cold
in maine, men swim just to prove they can take up a whole sea.

I stay on the beach watching waves of long grass sway,
warm wind carrying seagulls to shore,
running from the sea behind me.

I catch myself crying in the mirror as the man
In the flannel tells me to try harder, to be hardened,
but I won't keep the shirt. I'd rather dance

in the long grass for a long while, trade my shoulders
for milkweed and a gown made of beach grass
and every beetle I've ever talked to. they'd dangle from my ears

and wrists and fingers and hug gently my delicate bones and I,
exposed for the whole sea to see, would not swim.
I would be as the warm touch of sand, as the gull lifted by the wind,

as the milkweed's soft pink flower,
breakable as a body of water with honey
where all its salt should be.

holy place

There's a cross on a mountain overlooking the whole of the valley below, and beyond the valley the ridges of the neighboring mountains. It is not made holy by its design but by the bodies of the trees that became it, by the bird's nest that rests on its shoulder, by songs sung in summer from the ridge on which it stands.

My brother sang there, and when he did I heard his voice from across the whole of the country between us. He could have been born there in a nest of twigs, might have leapt from the ridge and landed in our lives—our lives being mine and my family's and yours, now, too. You know the kind of place this place is, where prayers are uttered soft and shouted loud, where the spirit stirs and shakes. A place where the world is listening.

Abbot Park, 3am

I couldn't sleep for three months,
so I went speaking into that tiny pond
at the edge of campus until it could recite
back to me the details of my own walks
in the dark, tell me how I thought God
lived in the park, how my brother lived
in Arizona until he dropped out, how
my mother was better at least
my anxiety was increasing
my need for long island iced teas
and new shoes I was always walking
through melting snow which was increasing
my love of melting snow and while I spoke
nothing melted and everything in the park
had sharp angles like cracked ice: the surface
of the pond, the muddy grass, the worn
wooden bench, my body.

I had almost told the tiny pond everything
when it came: a great heron, blue
against the darkness, taking up the entire night.
I stopped speaking and was wrapped in the warm
breeze which sighed through feathers
and water and skin— through all pieces of heaven
that might have been glass.

prayer

what will happen next? persistent as birdsong
the prayer, broken as it was when it first came

swirling up and out of the throat, asks quietly
into my pillow. this snow muffles even

what it does not touch— even now it breathes
into the pillow alongside the prayer, holds

the prayer like a parent, *shushes* the prayer
to sleep. my body in bed shakes itself apart,

a parent attempting to answer the prayer
of their child, and in doing so asking

the birds if they compose their own songs, or if
they were taught them the way we are taught to pray.

silence accumulates, becomes a cold mouth
whispering questions into a drift of snow.

elegy for familiar grief

all those long winters the sky was wet with white blood cells and white lights
they dripped off bare branches like rain they gathered around my ankles as I stood
in the road those nights praying to snow and stars and once to a car with broken head lights
it might have scattered the wet leaves of my body

my mother is stronger than I am she swam into the sky and back I know
I should be happy I can't see the stars amidst the night hanging thick and wet
against my windows a certain sick strain of privilege to be warm and dry and pining
after white stars they used to bother me now it's all the new bulbs

the scent of them I mean their florescence I mean the lights remind me
of the buds dotting the branches of the maple trees back home
spring was always my favorite when she asked when I asked it was fall
always gathering leaves and dreaming about what the leaves will look like next year

now every lamp in my apartment is a maple tree
and the night is piling up like leaves wet with snow

before you go to work

I grind coffee in the dark and play indie rock from my speaker
you put on eyeshadow quicker than you would like to

we turn the lamps on and then off when the light cuts too harsh
I scramble two eggs and you spill them across the coffee table

by accident you apologize more than me which is decaf coffee
meaning it does not happen and am not sure whether to be proud

of taking *its okay* and *don't worry* out of your mouth and into mine
or whether to gather them up and trade them for apologies of my own

I do this too often and you know – you say *we've traded places today*
so I say *looks like I'm going to work, then* and these jokes are quiet

enough to avoid laughter but soft enough for both of us to grin,
teeth white against morning, the door not yet open to the muted blue

poem with blood drawn

curled under the waiting room chair,
my small body shakes
at the thought of the needle.
father speaks until his voice
becomes two hands, pulling
my balled-up body easily out
and up to the needle.

*

blooming out of my hand
and into the bathroom sink,
a scarlet peony I sowed
carelessly with a kitchen knife.
I watch it wilt into the water,
wondering how my body
could produce such delicate,
accidental beauty.

*

in line for the blood drive,
I am shaking, wishing
my friend would squeeze my hand,
comfort me. I watch the girl ahead
of us squeeze the hand of her friend.
my shaking is too well hidden,
goes unnoticed as we wait.

*

the red flesh of a tomato splays out
on the cutting board, bleeding
pale fluid and seeds. my knife
enters and exits its body as I try
not to think of it as a body.
the veins in my hand shift
as I work. I can feel the blood
inside shifting with them.

*

*don't look
at the needle.
look at me.*

*

in the mirror my veins are great rivers
dividing up the map of my body.
the doctors always told me how easy
it is for the needle to find its way home,
which made me cry, squeeze the hand
of my mother tighter. I could feel our
bones shift as she squeezed back.

*

*I know you can hit harder
than that! the words of my sensei
as my fist retracts, loosens.
I'm a grown man, I can take
anything.*

*

a whole bouquet of peonies
in the sink now, all from a finger.
I feel more calm than I ought to,
something about how separate
it all is from me now. how
othered my blood becomes.

*

it is less the needle's bite and more
the following pull, the redirection
of my body's flow, the drawing
out. my father holds me, still sobbing,
as we leave that bit of me behind.
see? it isn't so bad.

*

I grip the knife like a hand,
watching my bones shift now too,
each cut a new dance. the liquid
on the cutting board darkens
around the body of the tomato.
It takes two more cuts for me
to notice the sting.

*

*I'm sorry, but you have to weigh
at least this much to give blood.*
I leave my friend behind and cry
in the bathroom stall, useless
and relieved. when I exit
I see my face in the mirror,
red and flushed, and my body,
somehow smaller than it was.

*

my knuckles split open
against the punching bag
my sensei holds, leave smears
of red as he shifts his weight
to take the blow. *Yes!*
That's what I'm talking about!

*

in the mirror my body
becomes liquid, tears
welling without reason.
my blood hums along
in time to my heartbeat:
don't cry. don't cry. don't cry.

*

I cry into the sink only after
the last red petals swirl

down the drain, leaving
me only with my hand
as it was before, save
the thin, crimson accident.
the earth of my body dug up.

prayer

my lips cold against the night
want language like birds all the songs

have flown too far south I cannot
see the stars the wind

is too loud it pulls every limb
it bangs against my eyes

it is a wolf clenched in the chubby hands
of a baby named God

he does not yet know
the difference between play

and pain I want to know how
the trees can be so calm

their bony arms stretched
too wide towards the sky

body after a fight

skittering off-balance, my ribcage crawls
down our dark street, bones skidding on ice,

a fawn's young legs. this keeps happening—

pieces escaping, separating, spreading
ever thinner. it doesn't matter if I'm covered

or naked. once I turned up the bass too loud

in the shower and my heart beat out
onto the bathroom floor. veins puffed

their contents into steam until my skin

was a baggy shirt, easy for me to slip out.
I spent all day re-blooding my body,

a labor like loving an engine; blood

becoming oil, oil everywhere in the joints
and tendons and tender inner wiring

of arteries, where the blood should go

but I am messy. once I left a trail of blood
in every ice cream cone I licked

and I wouldn't let a drop spill

onto the ground for fear that bit of me
might be lost. o body, I do love you now

as I wander in the dark, shadow buckling

on the sidewalk. come back
inside, lay naked in bed until we fall asleep.

elegy for the friend who is not dead, but might be

Contraband beeps into Portland's tiny airport security,
so surprising that I drop my hands too early inside the scanner.
The lone TSA agent, moustache brushing his lips as he speaks,
gestures me back as my family watches from the other side.

*You know you got a blade in your wallet, son? And of course
the blade is your razor, of course I forgot, the same way I forgot you
might have moved to Florida, close to where I was headed now
but just far enough out of mind. I don't think you stayed there long—*

you never did stay long. After all our friends stopped talking to you,
you went to find someone else to hide every sharp piece of life
that found its way into your arms, the way you asked me to hide
your razor in our dorm room, well past midnight.

You told me to think of all the places you would look for it
after I turned out the lights and tried to sleep
while you played video games all night, both staying up
pretending we were alone in thinking about death.

Just before this flight I cut my hand on a knife while washing dishes,
a thin red line that blinked open my knuckle like an eye. Now the scar
opens again, expecting punishment as the agent asks me again.
I remember every place I hid that razor except the last place,

I tell him. His shoulders sag, soften. His familiar sigh: *My daughter
had the same kind. Looked just like this. I hid it in a picture frame.*
The sharpness in his hand presses into mine. I want to ask
whether she survived, whether he still has that blade, but I couldn't

give him an answer about you. He asks if it's okay to throw the razor out,
and I say yes, what difference does it make now? *Maybe that's best,*
he says, and I wonder if he means it's best not to remember.
Maybe forgetting means you are in Florida after all.

we need to talk.

meaning: be honest. meaning: yes: I wish my bones
into shadows cast by long grass. yes:
I do it so you have space to rest.
you say: *bones make for a sharp bed.*
you say: *we need some tough love,*
to stop hiding ourselves in bed.
I say: I need time to answer questions
like *can we talk about the dishes.*
meaning: I do not know if I will
be a man or a field or a shadow
by the time we talk about the dishes, meaning:
I do not know what I want to say.
you say: *something has to change,* meaning:
I must stop deciding I am the something
that has to change. you say:
please just tell me what you want.
be honest: this is frustrating.
be honest: there are colons damming
rivers in my head. I lose all language
about the dishes. the grass. you. me.
be honest: I do the dishes
so that you don't have to.
you say: *I can take care of myself.*
meaning: *you need to take care of yourself.*
meaning: it comes back to the field
I made for you out of myself: my great gift
of sacrifice. meaning: I die
for you willingly, without you asking.
I ask you to take solace in taking me in.
be honest: you wish I wouldn't do this.
you wish I would just *be.* I try,
meaning: I wish my bones into
zinnias. maple trees. fresh mint. a river.
words about dishes. meaning: I wish my bones
into a whole pastoral for you to take in.
meaning: you are the only person
there. meaning: I am not a person
in this place made of my body.
be honest: I do not know how to be
a person in this place. this place is our apartment.

meaning: my sacrifice is easier than talking,
than being honest. *please*
just tell me what you want.
meaning: it is hard for me to talk
about anything and also be
the man you love. be honest:
you're scared I won't love him
enough. you say: *you need to get out*
of your own head. be honest: my bones
are only bones. this is how
you think I should wish them:
nothing but bones, nothing
but all I am.

possibility

I.

Heavy stroke of the oar in my hands
the still water turns unstill, breaking
like the day breaks upon the mountains,
fractal patterns dappling the window—
the water was always a window in my hands.
Fingers dappling the surface, pushing down

and in, reaching for a day full of possibility
just beyond the stillness, the heavy stroke
of an oar through the air just before it breaks
the lake's perfect rendition of the sun, breaks
through the window. Now there is nothing
between me and that day, the most holy
of days which bubble up and dapple me,
here in my canoe, with blessings.

II.

Heavy in my hands the photograph,
its shifting waters turned still,
its sun-glimmer caught in stasis.
the grey of the sky presses against the windows
of our apartment again, dappling
the glass in frost. I reach out and push

my fingers gently into it, reaching
for a give, a possibility of entry
into a world beyond the world's
own heavy stillness, a sign the day
might break over the mountains,
a blessing bubbling up through
the grey that remains in the window,
refuses to break on my behalf.

III.

Heavy and quick the breaths
of the river, rocks rattling with each
eddy they cause. the sky is still grey
and the air is still cold. I stand
on the bank, watch the water roil
and dance. when from over the mountain

the sun casts thin light into the river,
a sliver of it, my hand reaches
as if to scoop it up and out, cupped
into an oar. my arm moves through
the air without resistance, and the sun
dips back behind the grey peaks—
a blessing or the chance at one,
missed, I am not sure.

the church

it would be more natural to kneel
in the dirt to observe a flower
or a beetle, to stand when the sun
breaks through the branches, to feel
its warm on my lips in place of *amen*—
as *amen*. I watch your family, wait

to kneel when they kneel, to rise
when they rise. I try and catch the shapes
of their words between my lips
as they bounce from the walls—
how strange to be in a place
that echoes, speaks back
in your own voice, says
nothing in its own.

prayer

as the white snow outside
the window or the white space

of a poem, the silence surrounding
the prayer becomes part of the prayer,

which now refuses to fall
from the tongue. to be heard

in this moment is not to melt
away winter but to break

the promise of spring,
to smash the prayer

like a bird into the window.
silence would follow the fall

of that tiny body to the earth
as nothing else could follow.

stillness

one grey cloud in the sky's blue, a spot in the paint, a billowing thumbprint pressed into the drying wall of morning, into the sidewalk like the pawprints of a small dog, unmoving in the grey, completely

still even as they follow the sidewalk, curve across it the way dogs always do when walking on a leash. they tangle the leash for no reason other than wanting to walk just there, smell just that, be just this

much more free. in the dark of the apartment the cold has a smell, sharp in the nostrils. I pace through the kitchen, into the living room, into the bedroom, back again, aimless in my exploration despite everything

remaining the same as its been— the table where the table is, the couch still sagging into the wall, the grey cloud still hanging in the window. still my steps are quiet, for fear my steps shattering what all seems so brittle.

time chips like paint from the walls, gathers on the floor even as the cloud remains suspended in the same spot, as if waiting for the tug of a leash.

**“Montana Trees and Flowers:
A Folding Pocket Guide to Familiar Plants”**

In the bedroom some part of my body is loosestrife,
an invasive weed, but unable to tell I unfold
in bed to study myself, watch the *waxy white*
of my skin as it *persists into autumn*, bumps of bone shifting
underneath— snowberries, perhaps, with the skin
being paper birch, *peeling off in thin sheets*
where the bones become *prominent spurs*, flowering
upwards, thin as a larkspur, which of course I mistake for a lupine—
so many lupines on the highway back home,
in the bushes I walked past, in my prayers.
the larkspur does not share the lupine’s *star-shaped*
holiness, and here on the bed I cannot find
a replacement. I see the trembling aspen
rustling *in the slightest breeze*, think of my body
and the way it trembles now. Discouraged,
I unfold and start again: the wild, *wiry* veins
in my hands are blue flax, bones now
four-wing saltbush: *pale fruits*.
husk. outside the window rain begins to patter
on the ponderosa. The guide says nothing
about how a tree sustains itself.
I give up trying to know
my body for now, letting grow
whatever grows, unnamed and still.

notebook in grey morning

a thin book with blank pages,
ice-blue cover, one of many
gifts from a faraway mother.

notice the fragility of its pages,
their perforated lines, flexible
enough to bend in a pocket,

to break the way the storm broke
days against the hard grey road,
dashed them to pieces like bodies.

the sky bends around the brown
leaves of the trees, floating them
on the surface of an ice-blue lake

as they quiver in the cold like pages
meant to be torn out, tossed out—
but by some grace, they remain.

for my brother

white sky cresting through the blue
sky atop the shadowed morning
mountains the sharp puffs of trees
the trails invisible as you hike
sideways ignoring the markers
but still going up always
graduating teal and pink
in your flamingo suit drinking
in the basement and in your suit
you knew what wasn't for you
in Florida in Arizona in Maine
our home was all mapped out and you
hate maps or at least I would guess
you do resist mapping Matthew
you drink milk and disappear
into the woods for days
making music listening to nobody
listening to all our favorite songs
you roll through people telling you
slow your roll you're a surfer
you make your own waves and water too
blue as the sky on the mountains turning
white with winter as you climb
up to some ledge nobody sees
but you, possibly drunk possibly smarter
than everyone you left when you left
college getting out to the sharp trees
getting out dreams just getting out
and away where you belong you aren't sure
but even when you're gone
I can hear you quoting Cudi pointing
to your tattoos telling me
you're still searching for a home telling me
once I get it I'll be good
as if you don't know how good
it feels to crest the mountain
with no direction but your own

anatomy of a prayer

green-bright bulbs of late March
flowers who know
the next snow, who could die

with the next snow,
who were born early but persist
in their smallness

against the frost, amidst
the frost flowering the windows
of the hospital

surrounded by love, surrounded
by loved ones they might not grow up
to love.

around the bulbs, beeping
machines, the steady pulse
of early spring kicking

inside late winter. light
bouncing off the glass
of the window, of the snow.

a billion stars reflected
in a tiny pond, made deep
by melting snow

quiet by virtue
of its own smallness, the first night
like this since it happened,

the first quiet night. someone begins
to notice flowers, name
flowers, say the name

of a lost loved one, over
and over, persisting
until the memory is plucked

from the frosted dirt, warmed
in their hands, wrapped up
in love the way the fog wraps

up the whole street
in the still-dark morning, hours
before dawn. even the baby

sleeps. frost congeals
on the window, a scab
sealing a wound

would have been fatal
on a different day. dirt
loosens with each sunrise,

more seeds split open
to find the table set for a meal
and the next meal

and the next, a warm afternoon
with rain where there could have been snow.
a moment of relief

before the next storm. words exchanged
with a friend before the next storm:
sure to be brutal.

the brutal storm itself and the sky
afterwards, a slice of sharp blue
splitting the morning, an eye

opening after being squeezed shut
by fear. huddled close the bulbs
squeeze shut as it snows.

the moon arcs grey over the pond
and the pond freezes over.
tears are shed quietly

as a machine stops beeping
in the hospital,
the first quiet night.

the fog hugs the street
like a loved one, lights
flicker on in windows

as morning comes, still
as the night until the baby
wakes, the coffee is poured

as the sky blues
over the side of the street.
the bulbs tend each other

like old lovers, waiting
for winter
or winter's end.

prayer

so the winter passes quiet
with the wind, *shushes*

in and out of rooms, makes them
empty. the old maple's leaves

lie wet and still at its feet.
and in my throat

waits the prayer, a bulb
buried in the cold earth.

I fill the empty rooms
with plants, be kind

as I can be to myself
when they die only days

later, tell myself
I couldn't have known.

after you leave

in the still-dark morning, the dust on the sill
of our window sits how it always sits, watches me
splay myself open as a mountain laurel, glossed and glowing,
braced at the thought of your return. outside the rumbling of cars
on Orange street is the rumbling of the coffee pot,
is a winter morning in Maine opening the coffee shop,
cold keys pricking my cracked fingers, me not minding
as I thought of you. this need I feel now was more present then,
when you lived far from me when you would drive down
the snowy backroads just to visit me at work,
just so we could make awkward love afterwards.
now I am alone with my body, hands clicking like cricket legs
as my bones shift under my skin, slow but urgent. afterwards,
as dawn breaks through the blinds, I pour myself a mug
and stare out the window, pretending to write a poem.
the shop would be busy by now, snow-gleam brightening the street,
change sliding across the counter. you would be on your way to me.
tonight you will be tired from work, and I will be tired from pretending
to have been busy, and we'll hold each other before falling asleep,
last winter's fumbling passion replaced by this more tender ritual.

your desk

a candle, vanilla and bourbon
beneath the surface of its container,
becomes a makeup mirror in that it is the stand
for a makeup mirror, lifting it to the right height,

lifting it above the rest of the desk, with its desktop
computer and skeins of yarn, the hooks for the yarn,
the books— notebooks and novels, books on crochet
and watercolor. the colors and the little blue mug

for the water. when stacked and leaned against each other,
each object on the desk becomes another, a part of each other,
your whole singular desk tidy in its own clutter like a love note
written in your smallest handwriting, which curls to fit the frame

of a card without any particular purpose beyond being
an expression of everyday love. how everyday it all seems,
these objects that pile up into one single object,
this candle that becomes a mirror.

naked

the dress hugs my quivering form
like fingers steadying a blade

of grass in the wind, able
to yank it from the earth

but choosing to be with it
instead. my body asks me

to be with it, now, in this dress
that does not fit because it's yours,

not mine. *if you ever want to try*
on my clothes you can. I can't tell

you how much my shoulders loved
being shoulders in your dress, how my ribs

leaned longingly into its tightness,
how freedom traced its fingers

across the bareness of my legs.
It's hours until I'm not alone

but the dress comes off quickly,
leaving behind my naked body

in the mirror, a shape more
and less familiar than before.

prayer

the prayer that comes in the end
is smaller than the first,

hesitant, fragile, wet
as any newborn thing,

shivering the way wind
shivers through a body.

like the best prayers
it asks for nothing.

the snow melts into a cradle
for the prayer, lets it open

its mouth and sing
itself into a shock

of leaves, new and green
against the white.

last words

your head resting against my chest,
neck bent the way your neck bends
into your pillow in the morning

when I ask if you want coffee and you reply
without ever waking up. the window leaks
cold air onto my shoulders like the rain

we walked through last week, clutching
our coffees, fingers interlocking
against the smoothness of the paper cups.

in the rain you told me you're afraid of going to sleep
because you don't know if you'll wake up,
and so of course you haven't been sleeping—

until now, your breath warm across my body
like the sound of *I love you*, the words that stand in
for *goodnight* in case this is, somehow, the end

of this, the closeness of our bodies in bed
each sleepless night. I believe in last words,
the sounds we make as our eyes close

as your eyes are closed now. I, too, am afraid,
though I didn't tell you, of the pulsing heat
of your cheek against my chest ceasing

its rhythm, lingering just long enough
to lull me to sleep, unaware. I shiver
in the cold, and you in your sleep

hold me more tightly, as if to say
I love you, as if to remind me
through this many nights we've lived.

where the prayers go

where do the prayers go,
after we birth and raise
and cast them
up and out towards
mountains and maples,
towards the clusters
of lupines like stars,
towards the stars,
towards the sea
with all its salt?

where do the prayers go
once we pull our mouths
from the lake,
gasping towards God?
the lengths we go
for our prayers
to be heard
by anything other
than those we pray for.
we would drown

our prayers in any body
of water deep
and wild and cold
enough to become
mystical, mythical,
a spring god bloomed
into being at the end
of the first winter.
come spring the birds
return, singing,

where do the prayers go?
they never saw them
in the south, never
passed a prayer
as they passed
across the sky,
never waved down

a prayer as you would
an old friend.
when the leaves

of the trees crisp
and quiver and dance
their final dance down
to the earth,
they see no prayers
lying among
the bodies
of their fallen.
winter gathers
drifts of prayers

and scatters them
on the wind,
the words of them
lost as the details
of snowflakes,
cares not
where they fall.
come spring the sun
lifts the grasses up,
finds nothing but mud.

Where do the prayers go
if not the mud,
if not the sky,
if not the waters
we speak into so readily?
when the rain comes
prayers come, leap
from droplet to droplet,
sure-footed
as the mountain goat

who leaps from stone
to stone, towards
whatever we imagine
lies just beyond
the clouds. by now
it is clear the prayers

are not in the clouds, nor
in the stars beyond,
nor in the stars'
reflections, bobbing

along the surface of the water
like seals' heads
off the coast of my home,
where my prayers
and my family's prayers
were planted in the cold
surf, the heavy wet sand.
perhaps we hoped the wind
would lift the prayers
like gulls, the way it lifts

so many fragile bodies.
why not prayers,
the most fragile of all?
do we make them so
breakable that the wind
shatters their bones,
scatters them to ash?
do they drown
as we drown?
if they are so mortal,

where the prayers go
matters only to prayers,
the way heaven matters
only to us. now the mountains
and maples are peering
through the windows,
as are the lupines dotting
the side of the highway,
and the sea and stars
are listening in the night

to our prayers
as we breath them
out into the world,
watch them wobble
on shaky new legs

hoping they will survive
long enough to go
where they go.
or perhaps we are watching,
listening, observing

the birth of the prayer
through our windows.
perhaps they don't come from us.
perhaps we will go out tonight
and find a prayer,
hold it like a loved one,
wish it safe passage
through its fleeting bloom,
its tiny death,
its going.