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Lights I leave on| Poems

Meghan Howes
The University of Montana

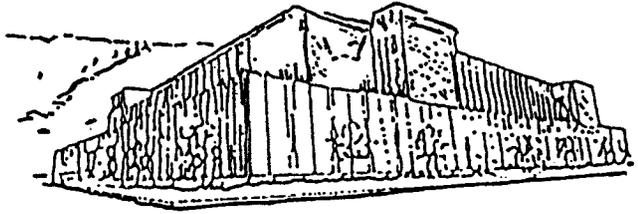
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The Lights I Leave On

Poems by

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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The Lights I Leave On

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Deaf I One Ear”

Ascent: “Beyond Form”

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one

Observations of a Novice Augur

for my father

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.*

T.S. Eliot

Need is not quite belief.

Anne Sexton

Beyond Form

There are prayers for misprints,
Bishop-like moments when the Man-moth teeters
above an atmosphere of crowded strophes.
Any metamorphosis is a sight
unlike any other.
The cocoon rips, peels
partly away, reveals a prize.
Some live, some die. Nakedness relies
on what surrounds it:
shadow, sunlight
or revision. A good nightwatchman
always checks the doors
twice, just to make sure.

Whatever You Call This Light

In the minutes between a gin and lime
and a dinner of roasted duck, there is
a bright hood of twilight pulled on like a cloak.
All the islands have auras.
A transparent moon rises
over lake water pleated by a slight breeze--
tiny hills of wave intersect
and move towards shore.
Birches are peeling, gangly lamps,
inwardly lit. From this front porch,
Craig's Island is caught
in the last of evening's light:
the upturned belly of a Criss-Craft glows
fire-orange, the old Evinrude 9.9
tied with chicken wire to the back
of the aluminum boat shines new.

Late August

This is the last time we can be like this
above the surface and below,
all at once. We cut the water
with our movement, our goosebumps blue,
our skin yellow, like the belly of a pickerel set
in a basin, waiting to be cleaned.
You slide the knife around the gills, quickly
down the chest, unveil innards stringy and cold.
Then that moment when you think

What if it isn't dead? And you roll the fish
onto its side and say a tiny prayer, scratching
away scales, translucent chips floating
to the sky, settling in your hair.
Afterwards, you walk to the dock,
wash to your elbows, lie against the grain
and dry in the last of the day.
Hear bats speak through the dusk,
and hear yourself answer.

Aftersight

The sunset weaves through
particles and ash from a distant volcano,
a halo of blue moving into eggshell.
At the edge of the world ochre and orange
bleed through earth. I remove my glasses
and let the colors blur.

In arrogance, distant firs stick the sky,
while the stars emerge, calling order
in their own unordered way. They remind us
that a constant is not always consistent.

How often has this gone on,
this bantering of nature?
Species to species, back to ground,
we float somewhere outside of ourselves
and pray for gravity when footing is poor.

Stony Lake

I drink tea the color of honey
in a beachcomb cup. Fog on the water

splits to reveal two loons, eyes red
as the restless sun, swimming

near the dock. Never having risen
this early before, nor witnessed

such an anxious dawn,
I can only sit and wonder at the ritual

of the loons' path, a zig and a slight zag,
perfectly measured. I catch one loon

preening the back feathers
of the other, tucking them in tight

like straightening the tie of a lover.
Gliding towards the mouth of the bay,

they slow near the frog cove,
nipping at lily pads with thin beaks.

Their movements are tender and gorgeous.

What Leads to Another

I read an old love letter, paper weathered,
then pause to watch the wind.
The leaves lick the chilled ground
with brittle tongues.

What do those same leaves, on related trees,
do in Iraq? Curl under themselves
until all that remains is a ribbed telescope?

Strips of rain wash red
communiques from crumbled walls.
Carrion offer up meal and spirit
to speckled sky.

I open a window and let rain
smear words on the page, baptise
the world in one mess
of greyness, touching down in the sea.
Thousands of miles away,
salt mixes with salt, ghosts
moving to claim me.

Lesson

When you cut the wood, remember
to step on the stump.

While splitting the raw grain
of that image, roll your tongue.

Whistle in revelry.

Out to pasture are the sheep
that will soothe your conscience.

An imaginary manger
collects them. Vagrants
journey to touch wool.

There are no stars in the sky.
How one finds this mangled hut is
some miracle, the asses quieted
then slain for food.

Young children have left their homes
to bring gifts. They shove
their hands into the backs of sheep
and forget their names, join the dust
in a dance of salvation.

For Plenty

My family goes to church on a rock
in Lower Stony Lake, right in the middle
of a channel where boats slip through
with a whirl and scripture drifts out windows
propped open with one by fours.

At the edge of the pew I see my father
lean on the sill and still I try to count
the thousands of bright golden hairs
from his elbow to his hand as I had
on his lap as a child when I would lean
out the window, see tiny sunfish and perch
waggle among the shoals, watch fishermen
cast their Rapala's further than I could
ever throw my worms, and wait
for the minister to call me to Sunday school.

Today I watch the children
squirm their way to the altar,
their tiny heads bobbing atop
their Buoy-o-Buoy jackets, and I look
past them to trillium-bordered windows
at the back of the church. I notice
two men casting toward the island,
intent on stunning a great muskellunge
with their skill and fancy depth-finder.
They are close enough to hear us
sing our hymns, even close enough
to hear the sermon, and I know
their wives sit near me, wishing

(no stanza break)

they could lure the men here, praying
for company and praying for plenty.
I want to tell them
that they need not fill themselves
with wishes, that the fullness of God rests
in the swirl of water, in the belly of fish.

Observations of a Novice Augur

If you grew up believing in the Book
of Revelations, wouldn't you be steeling yourself
for an ultimate conclusion?

The man next to me says his scrotum
is pierced, turns a silver hoop in his nose
and asks why he can't get a job.
He does the pierces himself, the numerous holes
in his body shallow proof of healing.
In a state of self-induced decorum,
he is prepared for any steel-toed Armageddon.

A woman in the produce section
weighs her perishables.
The hem of her leopard skin coat--
a steal at the Goodwill--
covers everything between
what she wants
and what gets in the way.

On her toes, she leans to select
the perfect orange, the perfect bartlett pear;
her hair is any color she desires, so long
as it washes out. Macintoshes the color of lips
grin in their pyramids; she rings
the produce bell and asks for mangoes.
No mangoes today. Playing with the stud

(no stanza break)

in her tongue, click click click
she rides the whole way down aisle five.

On the day after they aired the post-apocalyptic *The Day After*, a thirteen year old girl walks to the bus stop, and wants to think of what will happen next on General Hospital but she thinks of filling water jugs instead, storing them in a dark corner of the garage in case there is no water.

On the bus, she asks a friend if he saw the movie last night.

Did you see the survivors, he replies, eyes wide, *did you see what happens to people that survive?*

The man offers to pierce any part of my body. By midnight he has told me of all the labias he has pinched between two fingers, of the women supine above him, cajoling him to move further into their delicate folds, of how he will not pierce unless the women are aroused.

These women, I ask,
my legs tightly crossed,
are they sober?
The man doesn't hear.
He orders another drink.

A father fishes for olives in his martini
while a mother sips her Cabernet,
wipes the bottom of a glass
where no condensation collects.
Cocktail hour drones on,
becomes dinner. *Remember,*
 he says to her, eyes cloudy,
 when we could remember?

The crystal decanter
sugars at the lip. He snaps
his newspaper in half, reads
the back page, shifts his weight
away from her.

The man is sketching a flower
on the arm of a red-haired girl.
He uses a black fine point pen,
coloring the petals with red.

Her friends blow zeroes of smoke toward
the ceiling fan, their lips moving
like the mouths of fish. The whole room
breathes with gross deliberation--

and as the pen winds thin vines
and thorns all the way to the wrist
it is as if pause induces movement,
a winding down, a stoned ceasura.

Even the taps are running slow.
Neon flows through the word BAR,
 (no stanza break)

a stream of blue light to beckon
the thirsty. It's not just me, it

really is raining, I see tears
falling down the big front window.
I want to lie down in flooded ditches,
backfloat through the entire town,

but I need company, every
soul slowed by the sap of questions
swimming through the downpour with me,
veins of ink smearing in the rain.

The man reads aloud from a menu of scotch--
Cardhu, Lagavullin, Oban.

We've come for a change of scenery,
To drink a wise elixir and find the faces

Of our fathers among these suited,
Wing-tipped men. We summon the intellectual

Drunk. The man tells me he prefers tequila
And writes fiction in sentence fragments.

I watch him watch a woman
At the other end of the brass-railed bar.

The din thrives. A dark television in the corner
Flashes on; crowds shift to acknowledge

The arrival of sport.
We order another round,

Lowland malts this time, and the man
Puts his hand on my knee. "I' m going

To buy that woman down there a drink," he says.
I nod. Someone yells "score!" and whistles,

Inciting a whistling contest near the door.
I can't hear what the man says next.

He leaves me with his cigarettes
And childproof lighter, and as I

Watch the bartender lift each bottle, pour high
Then low as the heavy bottomed glasses fill,

The exactitude of mixology seems more intriguing
Than anything; the rows of hand-blown, half-yard vessels

Lined against the back of the bar, the bearded bouncer
Weaving a carnation-selling homeless woman

Through the front barroom and out
The triple-locked back door, the man

At the end of the bar, his glass raised to the light,
Leaning in to toast a stranger.

Witness

And this is family.
Half-deaf, palate cleft,
fake knees, fake nails
no breasts, closed eyes,
scarred skin, scarred chest--
the unsatisfied, the indolent,
the single grandchild.
Law, journalism, poetry, law.
The full circle of the father.
Arms crossed, arms open,
reaching out to hold on.
Cracked hip, cracked ankle,
cracked bannister.

Canada, Sweden, England.
Origins and disinctive orators.
Billy Graham, chinese checkers
and blackberry wine before bed.
Generations of forgetfulness.
Hymns and the clatter
of cocktail rings
over piano keys. Lone weekends
and weekends alone.
The cleaning and the airing out.

The patriarchal over-eater
addresses the court.
Bless this food
to our bodies nourishment.

(no stanza break)

Bless this food--
carbonara, picatta, ciabatta.
Elbows off the table, feet on the floor.
Spaces between, miles between,
a country between us all.
The familiarity of familial distances.
A scheduled trip to the Great Wall.

**Could You Use the Microphone While Reading
As I Am Deaf In One Ear**

You read your poems to an audience
of lightning bugs. The stage door is open
and I watch as one, four, ten, fly
about you, switching on
their abdomens at the mere sound
of a natural image.

I single one out and watch it daub
the velvet curtain behind you.
I listen to your voice, stretch
my body forward, twisting
to the right my one good ear.

You lean into the lectern, place
your hand under your chin and continue
reading. Someone sneezes. Everything
is vying for attention.

No delicate bones.

A moth drums its body
against the window.

It's all intentional.

You pause to drink. I count five
lights left behind you,
hanging on for closure.

Solo

People who won't drive
long distances alone
can't stand themselves.

Silence reveals memories
folded into tiny sails,
kept clean for the next
crossing of the past.

Diagram an image
on the blank space, where
your pleasantries
often rest.

Simmer those images
on the front burner,
a rolling boil
to evaporate regret.

Landscape is childhood,
the mast by which all else
sails.

Vertigo

They said nothing could be done,
and what's the spinning girl to believe?

Strung across the inner ear
pure webs of disease; the bones

of hearing a scattered skeleton clutching
a tattered drum drumming silence.

Led straight to a microphone room,
she stares at instruments lined up like lumber .

A cold-fingered speculum
pries open canal walls

for *one good look*. Just one--
and what's the spinning girl to believe?

A doctor says *facial paralysis*.
The spinning girl hums

with her eyes closed.
She sees hymnals laid out

for the service but hears
no music. Eardrops roll

down the canal, create drunken
spins without the drink. She sees

parquet floors for ceilings--
white coats and white hands then

wingtips and the futile exit sign.
The doctor says *oval window*.

Handpainted horses strike poses
as they go around. In the distance,

the spinning girl hears a bell.

Orpheus Does New York

Why not stick you on a Manhattan street corner--
Who would listen to you then?
Admit it--you're the poster child for pity
And still we compare you to the worst of all
Worst case love scenarios--*shall I compare thee*
To a summer's Day?, nay, I'll compare thee to a spring
Tragedy, to a face that was so beautiful it incited
Complete loss of reason. (Beauty has its drawbacks).
Hades or Heaven, the distance between this world
And the afterlife is endless when you're merely
Chasing a face.

And since when was a great voice enough?
Everyone's a poet these days and the lyric is dead.
You traveled well out of your way only to find
That you should have stayed by the fire,
Playing the lyre, your eyes tightly closed.
Dare you set up camp in Central Park (no fires allowed)
And try to seduce a New Yorker with the power
Of song? (Your dirges might come in handy then.)
If you see a woman who's worth going to

Hell and back and you follow her,
Remember this: the Maenads have nothing
On the Crips. In Alphabet City, you wear that skirt
Or claim to be the stuff myths are made of
And you'll be wishing you were still
In your little meadow, arm hanging
By a tendon. Keep your mouth shut and watch

(no stanza break)

Out for thieves--they get good money
For lyres nowadays. Get yourself
An agent, man, and don't ever,
No matter how often you feel like
The past bears repeating, look back.

Professor Emeritus

Same time every year I stand
on the corner of Elm and Chapel and scream
the Apostle's Creed for my Sarah and the damned
Mustang that hardly slowed.

When it rains I read my book again.

Once in a while I piss on the Lin sculpture
in front of Sterling Library, the one
that recirculates all the water.

Sarah wouldn't like that one bit, but she
never paid attention anyway, like I told her
Hold on honey, I'm just going to tie
my shoe but no, she had to hurry because

her hair was getting mussed in all that snow,
and now when I have a headache I taste
rubber-- I close my eyes and see red lights
fading and Sarah's wool coat up around her head.

When I'm tired I sleep in the shadow
of tombstones, and on certain nights
when the moon disappears and the wind
picks up, Sarah and I share a nip and talk
until she says she has to go, and I
say where, and she says home, and I follow
her there, through town and all the way
to the shore. I wade. She swims.

She waves from the sign
that says Slow No Wake. I light
my book, let it really start
to burn then hold it high,
and wave back.

The Drop Box

Patrick and I wait out another Sunday in a dungeon
full of television sets. We watch
“Harold & Maude” for the third time
in two days. Patrick orders three new releases
and the just-out Orson Welles box set, ignoring
the requests of all those, as he puts it so bluntly,
whiny, scurrying Yalies. And though I often
share a bed with a woman who hung
For God, For Country, And for Yale
on the wall of her study, I laugh--
after all, it was she I followed

to this grey place, this jagged, choked inlet
whose name belied a new haven--
no safe, novel harbor, no fresh asylum.
Patrick steps outside, rolls a Drum.
I stick in “Amadeus”, for the music.
Surround sound, surround vision, eight sets
strategically placed for the ultimate video store
experience. Above us, on street level, I hear
Jackie O, Chapel Street’s own everpresent
drag queen, laughing her inimitable laugh.
She and Patrick talk film noir, Audrey Hepburn, late fees.

I once read somewhere that Mozart had very small hands--
Tom Hulce’s are large for his size, hairy, and bitten.
(A minor error in casting.) The drop box
bangs as another video plunges 15 feet
to a carpeted hole in the wall

(no stanza break)

behind me. Contents of the box
varies--movies, socks, condoms, textbooks.
One Sunday, Patrick retrieved a prayer book
snatched from St. Paul's on Elm.
We took it as a sign, cued up
Jesus of Montreal.

Yes,
deep in these subterranean shoreline depths
where the walls and ceiling are painted black
and the pipes freeze in May we're the ticket
to the stars, we're the scalpers perched for ten hours
a day on stools, computers at the ready,
selling escape. Fiction is stranger
than truth. Truth is, Patrick's a highschool
drop-out film genius who rarely eats
but firmly believes in his Recommended
Daily Allowance of Guinness.
Truth is, I haven't yet told

my father that I'm in love with a woman
and now she's in love with another woman
and I'm stuck in this godforsaken city, watching
movies by day and movies by night, movies
by grey, ultraviolet light, waiting
for some proverbial ship to dock in my harbor.
It's all so melodramatic. I kick up the volume
and watch as Solieri breaks under the weight
of Mozart's genius. Such passionate
obsession, jealousy, & madness.
Identification with the antagonist,
lately a common occurrence.
I run the list of late fees.
Patrick ambles in, says it's snowing.

two

The Edge of Longing

Body of Your Body

Late last night I woke with a need
to touch what you no longer touch--
soft hills of flesh falling
to my sides, burdens
that strained my back
and pulled buttons taut.
Fingers traced the undersides,
the shadowy place
where underwires nested
and rubbed, traced the space
between the bone chasm
that widened, it seemed,
each year. I opened my hands
to take everything in,
and it was you

who lay in your bed of twenty
pillows, propped and shirtless,
running your own fingers over
the uneven scars, the uneven
implants, one sliding higher
than the other, feeling flaps of skin
fold like thick cloth under your arms
and form deep dimples, the tuck
and sew of old tissue into new.

For weeks after you returned,
you fled from the shower
to your room, your body

(no stanza break)

curled, arms crossed
in front of you. No more
talking with the shower door
ajar. No more nude dancing
through the laundry room.

I have memorized
ways to find you, followed
detour signs past and through
and out of your shame.

I have burned maps
of your stricken country
into the heart's eye.

These are the images inside, Mother.
These are the lights I leave on.

Leland

I pull myself awake,
watch you run along the shore,

blend with the sideline of bluffs
until only your head
betrays you, a golden stone bobbing
past laughing children towards
a jutting gooseneck of granite.

Following you, shoeless,
I scatter seagulls to a curtain of white.
You have walked to the edge
of what seems to be a pier
and you stand with your back
to the light tower,

your arms wrapped around it from
behind, as if it was
your spine.

I climb the sandy shoulder,
a warning at my feet:
hazards present
do not run
jump
play on around or in

I move to you as the gulls
nosedive for food, wings

(no stanza break)

turned fins on water;

and as the bird becomes its prey,
the spine becomes a body.

Listening to Jazz

Everything has to be inside
before it can mean anything.

I lick my fingertips, wipe
dust from the frets of your spine.

I am full, for now.
Odors linger, stay too long.

You move your head around to me,
your mouth barely open.

I exhale. A car drives
by and shifts the shadows.

We eat things whole, seeds
and skins and all.

Remember when we first met? How the night
covered us like tongue to mouthpiece?

Implicit with enveloping,
there is loss.

The bass vibrates the floor.
My body solicits itself.

Affair

Settling in to sleep you murmur
I lead too many lives
and I answer *yes*.

I lie next to your betrayal
as it is written, italicized and bold;
I swallow fists of your duplicity
as if it were a gift or a call
to arms or a key.

Enough with this graffiti
I cannot read, all those
different hands writing
my way, all those languages
I knew and unlearned.

The nights are too long
for such hungry vigils.
Give me the morning without an encore.
Give me a plate of you at noon
to prove there's nothing left to seduce.

Reeling

And when your mother breaks down--
when the only place she can be found
is in her yellow Cadillac, her shiny yellow
deathtrap, hoping your father will come back
and save her--you weep with hands
outstretched to me, thinking you can
somehow keep her alive if we just
keep making love. I have to trust
such necessities. I misplace
my hands and find them with your face.
And when I finally give way,

when my touch no longer conveys
understanding, my exhausted eyes
plead with you to let me rise
from sweat-stained sheets, to let me
touch you without such urgency,
and find comfort beyond these walls.
When your father makes the call

to say she'll make it through this time.
I dress slowly and walk outside
to catch the beginnings of the sunrise.
Later, we burn the sheets with leaves
in the backyard, plumes of relief
floating over a vacant field--
and you say *We've missed alot, being in bed--
I really thought she might be dead.*

Dreaming Backstory

This time, your mother kneels across from me
in a sequined dress, disclosing
secrets from your childhood--how

the summer you were ten
you stole a Milky Way from Walgreen's,
and later threw up because nothing
settled in such a guilty stomach--
your father found you in the bathroom,
the hair around your face matted with strain
and you admitted everything, willingly
followed him to the fenced garden out back,
where he sat you under the lean-to and said
think about what is truly yours ,
and you stayed until the sun
rose in absolution.

As is the case with your mother, I never
get a word in edgewise.

I listen for a long time--watch
trees outside bow under the weight
of wet snow--and wait for her
pause, but she never says
my name, never once mentions how

you and I met, sudden and unexpected
like The End flashing on a big screen
when nothing in the world is better
than watching that same movie forever.
(This is my version.)

Instead she stops talking
and a lanky silence stretches between us,
its head on my lap, its feet kneading
your mother's stomach. I understand
what is meant by The Silence is Killing Me.
I feel it grow; it pushes a fist of urgency
against an apex of grief, and I want to know

all the rest, all at once, every last
shame and secret your mother possesses.
But no logic ties me here, no blinds will
block the light that waits to snap open
my eyes. There is a poem
in this day, and I ache to write it.
Your mother rises, turns,
and two-steps away.

Affair #2

Rations were so common then.
Daily I gathered the nettles
strewn about my feet, threw
them into the pile gathering outside.
In no time the nights were full
of hulking shadows at the window.

I stopped sleeping with you.
Leaving town, I drove home
again, strung out and back through,
frayed at every edge. It is true
that two months later I returned,
rolling in so strong
there was no time for provisions.

I filled my own cupboards, hung
curtains, cooked for a living.
Seperate ways became routine,
days strung together on unravelling
thread. The years passed like years.

Now, in reflection, Rock Creek
flowing at my feet, smooth stones
flash, then disappear. Distance
is chosen. Shallow comfort
floats on what is clear.

Sestina

Is it possible, this starting over, this meeting of our bodies
for the hundredth first time? The city looks the same but they've razed
the towering ghosts and sold the past as scrap. Remind me
how the ocean sounds, how such an endless blue keeps dancing
when the wind, a fickle partner, dies without warning.
I am drawing parallels here; just watch these hands.

Do you remember them drawing initials in the sand? We'd spent the day
skipping petosky stones between swells, our bodies twisting
with each throw. The wind kept knocking us off balance. We were due
in the city by seven, but the sun stayed late like a lonesome guest, and we couldn't
bear to say good night. You were stretched out on a blue blanket, half-asleep,
half-dreaming, in and out of this world like a restless ghost. What was it

Kathryn said about ghosts? That they are mere shells seeking shelter
from the unknown blue of heaven? I could just envision her
drawing hollow knees to a hollow chest, a mere wisp of a woman afraid
of her own brittle body. But three bodies in one bed was too much,
especially in a city that never slept, especially in a bed of regret.
The night she left, a tunnel of wind came wailing off the Sound,

wind that snapped flags non-stop and sent trash rolling. It is the wind
that carries me back to the beach again, back to where those resident ghosts
loved the undertow. We had left the city behind, and I couldn't stop
drawing in the sand, my hands and legs covered with a thin veil of tiny stones.
What embodied us then were those lines, interlocking M's turned into mountains,
the S a river, your J a steep ravine into the blue. We would return to this place over

and over and over again, but the shade of blue would change. Deeper
and bordering on black when the wind cut through sheets of rain. I thought
of the Gulf of Corinth meeting the Ionian Sea, two bodies of endless turquoise;
mix that blue with the white of ghosts and you've got a white-capped, cerulean stew.
I finished drawing and walked to the edge of the water, let my feet sink. Over
the argument of waves you yelled *It's almost nine we'll miss the last ferry to the city--!*

and I licked salt from my lips, called back--*The city can wait!* --- turning to see
you rise and wrap the blue blanket around yourself. You drifted towards me,
the blanket trailing behind and smearing my drawing, and all I could think was
Dear God she is so beautiful, the wind pulling your hair straight to the sky,
long blonde ropes climbing the air. The ghosts drowned all around us,
and in their parting our bodies were meeting again, greeting where water meets land.

True, you kept your city and I opted for a different kind of wind.
We left those wanton ghosts in the hands of that rocking, endless blue;
now we sit in the drawing-room of forgiveness, re-aquainting our long lost bodies.

Squaw Peak

It is not enough, climbing up
to climb out of spaces we habitually
inhabit, but nonetheless
we climb, thousands of feet
up the side of Squaw Peak, the faint
smell of paper mills mixing with wet
pine and wet leaves, and there is nothing

between us and the sky but languorous
bodies of clouds loitering so close they
drift through us like precipitant ghosts.
The rivers below are a five fingered delta
joined at the wrist, open palm cutting
earth into streams of love line, fortune.
The voice of river joining

other river, a low murmur rising
to our covered ears. Clear-cuts shiver.
Here, stories follow the current
downstream, stories that sound
like the end of a dream just before

the waking. Here, the past is
a slim cartographer, beady-eyed
with shaky hands. We are not found.
You begin the descent. What we both
remember breaks ground, mixes with clean air

then sours on the tongue.

(no stanza break)

You look back half expecting
to find me behind you,
my feet in your tracks, my arms
stretched to feign balance. We meet
later, at the car, darkness eating
our faces. We drive. We cry.

Affair #3

*For some sin where innocence
sings sweetly among thorns.*

The winter solstice begins, a rhythmic
hum of slowed heartbeat and early nights
stitched with stars. Lying down
in withered rows of tomatoes and peppers,

a veil of snow in the valley
outlines the hourglass of our bodies--
the ground still warm, we stay head
to head for a time, children tasting

the sky. We are anxious, wingless
creatures caught waiting on the edge
of November for signs not turned
towards another gray season.

I forgive you. I forgive her, and all
other inhabitants of our dead paradise.
Dormant seeds in this plot of land
are enough for now. But who among us

will stay long enough
to pick the last of them, vines
curled and dry--who will warm
the young with blue hands or bend

with stiffened legs to find
the hidden fruits --I ask you--
what sill is wide enough
to hold such reward?

Taciturn Season

It's been two months since we parted company
and I've set myself to tasks,
preparations for winter:
wheelbarrows propped beneath
the broken window of the barn, stiff
yellow clothesline wound tight
around the fencepost, the old park bench
brought inside to hold
muddy shoes and wet snow things.
Each night I burn
two pillar candles and watch shadows
touch one another.

A solid rope of reticence unwinds
and falls from a visible window, signaling
that these arms may drop their burdens.
Autumn bows to the coming cold.
In the orchard, plum trees drop
tiny eggs of iridescence
among the strawflowers.
The plums are still bitter
and their skins are losing
their muted mauve finish.
Leaves snap under my feet as I pick up
one then two wrinkled purple heads.
I roll them between my hands.

Earlier

for MJB

Of course I wake to find you
not there. You are no doubt rising
yourself, minutes late, brushing
your teeth as you walk
round the kitchen, put stray
glasses in the sink, write
a line or two in your journal.
If time permits, there will be tea.
Water on, drawstring tea bag in whale
mug with a chip. Dressing is quick.

You sit at the kitchen table
on the edge of a chair, lean
back and braid your hair.
All elbows you are then,
clothed wings with fingers
lacing through honey.
The cut crystal in the east window
slides rainbows across you.

Maybe an orange or banana
for breakfast. Or to save for lunch.
Something simple, to keep sacred
the memorable noon meetings
on New Haven Green, falafel
and homemade salsa and those
oranges, peeling one juicy sun
to share for dessert. Today

(no stanza break)

they sit still in a china
crater, placed amid apple
moons and tomatoes
red as nebulae.

I imagine your pause, taking a moment
to stand near the window and absorb
morning rays of absence. You close
your eyes and summon the phrase
that best conveys the hearts' view,
but the overused *missing you* will not do--
there is no word, there is only
the scapegoat of *longing*.
Another day without stretches its limbs.
You open your eyes, reach for your coat.

Alarm

*"Longing, we say, because desire is full of endless distances."
-Robert Hass*

I wake to an unblinking moon,
roll in half-sleep to slide
my arms about your waist.
I want spoons of body
between cool limbs,
slow and sated
in the taste of infant light.
I want a murmur of sighs
in which to confide.

The stitches of this quilt
make tiny sounds.
Remember how
we traced the pattern
until our hands met,
curving around
double wedding rings that curled
into infinite eights?

Now there are nights
when your voice
reels in from the sea
on miles of static and wire,
moments when that voice
is enough to believe horizons
meet and take hands.

But distance is never prepared.
No presence can stir

(no stanza break)

such a thick, tasteless stew.
I rise and greet my first face,
one eye on the single
headlight of the moon
as it swerves to hit home.

Burning

Speeding up the Blackfoot River,
a six page single spaced letter
on the seat beside me, I pound
the steering wheel and curse, light
another cigarette and contemplate
the exact telephone I will call you
from, freezing, asking how
you could do it,-- fill yourself again
so soon, touch another, find room
within the life I once readily inhabited,--
and after minutes that pose as hours,
I stop somewhere along the interminable
tangle of wires stretching from the Jersey coast
to the mountainous valleys of a West
I'm only borrowing,--
and an answering machine
plainly says that you're not home.
What to do now but find solace
in someone who says, so simply,
*where are you, let me come
to you, why don't you come
here, I'm worried.*

I think no, don't say that,
not worry. Understand
that when I was fifteen, worry was love
because worry was tangible and brought
results, because worry was thought
and the thought involved me and who

(no stanza break)

wasn't terribly self-involved at fifteen.
Worry was better than I love you, better
than skinny, better than yes.

And because I'm already in full
memory here, replete with a mind
that's dressed to remember everything,
such barbed worry hits me hard,
snags my flannel shirt and rips
a clear view of need across my body.
From where I stand, I see
your letter on the passenger seat,
waving in the constant wind, waving
as if to draw attention to other
particularities and remind me it's
not just one kind of mourning
I'm busy with here, but variations
on a theme of mourning--

and momentarily I consider
wading through more of you,
allowing the eyes that loved
you then to love you again
in the weakening light of another
sorry Wednesday,--I even consider
going inside the bar and playing out
some deranged lover scenario,
complete with shots of bourbon
and the ghost of Patsy Cline.
Instead I opt for the quietude
of consumption, note the half-moon
crawling over the Garnet Range--soon
night will ingest this valley and I'll be driving

(no stanza break)

with all functions on dim.

This pilgrimage to anywhere that
is not where you are and is not here
winds down. Those constants
destruction and the reality of the situation
serve me well in times like these.
Even the most recent swath of trees, clearcut
and hauled to Bonner, is comforting.
Slash piles burn alongside the highway
unattended, muddying the pinpricked sky.
I crack the window, take a deep breath.
These remnants will spit and smolder for days.

The Edge-Dweller

At Lighthouse Point she walks
the brim of the outgoing tide.
Water takes her feet to the ankle,
takes the sand on which she stands
and moves it downshore. Again,
the seduction of retreat. Again, the lull
that follows the falling away.

The jetty is a broken thumb
set in a sling of turbid sea.
On days without fog, Long Island Sound
shimmies, a flapper in a sequined dress.

Two gulls share a jetty tip and peck
at a dying whitefish.
The shore collects
strings of seaweed, velour
rags of algae, foam from
the uncurling hands of waves.

The gulls carry their sacrifice
downwind. She remains
a curved line on the tight
arm of the Cape, pointing
north, yearning eastward.
The sway of vacancy.

Marking her path
with driftwood, she calls forth
the indistinguishable: horizon
from land, from sea, the lighthouse
rising to meet what little light is left.
If only she could take the Atlantic

in both fists, pull it over her head
and disappear under a sheet of sea--
lie down with all that sleeps
in the fathoms of such a body.
One wish of a woman balancing
on one rim of the world.