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Redeye Waking| [Poems]

Caeli R. Wolfson
The University of Montana

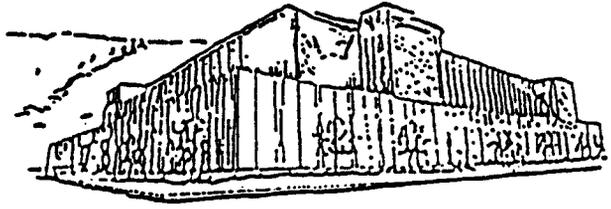
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REDEYE WAKING

by

Caeli R. Wolfson

B.A. Wellesley College, 1996

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1999

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Redeye Waking
Poems by Caeli Wolfson

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SPECIFIC GRAVITY

BOSTON SUMMER

All day it's been Turkish bread pulled hot
 from steel drawers in the boxy red restaurant.
 By the early lunch rush my apron's powdered over
 and the Irish guy handprints me square on the thigh.
 He's new, squinty and five-four, freckled orange,
 says the lamb smells musky,
 talks obscene of the half-raw *adoner kepbabs*.

Soon he asks me to dinner: enormous plates of noodles
 heaped with tomatoes and cream and shrimp.
*(They knew they were going
 to fuck, I wrote, they knew
 when they were spraying Windex
 on the salad bar sneeze guard,)*
 I liked how he used the words *lovely* and *America*.
 His freckles bled into sunburn and he adored
 his small brother, just outside Dublin.

Noodles were thirty-five bucks on my credit card
 and we were off— fingers linked loose
 down the sidewalk to Fenway,
 past the stadium heaving and into the grime
 of Kenmore Square where the whip-skinny
 club kids *queued up* (he said), twitchy on Ecstasy,
 the Beacon Street brownstones
 frowning with history. Then up
 up the Mass Avenue bridge toward the haze
 of stars, city-muted, a thousand white
 window eyes at our backs.

Arranging and re-arranging on a bottom bunk,
 the sweat rappelling my spine,
 the scoop of him cooling and leaving
 before the first Riverside train.
 (Some mornings I wanted to give in to the heat,
 climb straight
 to the plush steam center of Nadia's bread.)

[new stanza]

Days of wistful headaches and plaid-skirted guilt:
I tossed full cigarette packs into mailboxes
and afternoons drank thick black beer next to cheese
fried tight in fillo dough, *cigar pies*.
We wrote little Turkish phrases, phonetic,
on napkins: *Anlami yorum*.

Summer like hands across my face I scrawled
in the green notebook July I wrote letters
on lunchbreaks, telling my father
that cities are lonely.
(and nights, the baritone train wheeze
through my screenless window.
Look homeward, angel -- his old books I don't read.)

The Irish guy packed up my apartment and said
I love you, but not fallen-in,
left for Allston with seven more Irish
(two Dermots) and roaches.
He mailed me a tape ("August, die she must")
and painted houses,
while the heat pressed between buildings
like scrunched legs, warbled the air.

PRETENDING I'M FAMOUS

You've found the upstretched canyon leading to a place
 that sees Los Angeles tremble like a face before tears,
 seismic and pointed toward water.
 There your ship of moon lifts bodies into skyline,
 into tiny mimes of city shadowed at your feet.
 From here you see the Ferris wheel against a blacker
 stretch of land, the pier and Santa Monica, where you rode
 and wanted to fall down, fall in,
 know splitseconds in your belly that finally
 the ocean would have you,
 would swallow, flood, distend you,
 turn your every opening watery and unimaginably deep,
 the end of land and all machines
 gone down screaming.

After all, you are just salt and water held in
 by something dead already, *dermis. epi*,
 you're growing heavier with wine
 with spit and sweat
 you leak, you drip, deserts could not dry you
 of liquid or dream.
 (Here, they dream like dogs:
 twitchy, close to the surface, symptomatic)--
 Driving through the hills you concentrate
 on corners, accelerate, push deep against the drop,
 laugh at Spanish cliffs until your lips
 sun-parch into cracks and bleed
 and you remember
 what is wet is hope.

Nothing on that pier will actually submerge but motion.
 You are not dropped but lowered,
 near-drowned infant eased to crib, fleeced and warm,
 every drop of water shook away.
 Your score is canyon-funneled siren
 howling for cloudburst or powder,
 your rain is just transplanted sea on a Chinese theater,
 not eroding famous handprints pressed into the sidewalk.
 In a sushi bar you'll dance on top of tables,
 the music slamming and inane,
 the hover of fish delicate in air,

[same stanza]

you'll run your hands down strangers,
breathe euphoric, over-brimmed, re and re-created.

HOUR IN COZUMEL

Behind the skyline of her brothers' frames,
she walks the neon edge of Mexico.
December drapes around them, fine-disguised
as June remembering the cold. Across
the mothwing air at dusk she intercepts
their voices, flip as seaspray, unaware,
and thinks that when they reach her most,
she fumbles, quiets, can't look square.
Their boyish backs imbalance her.
uninterrupted throws of amber skin
made perfect by the sun. Inside her head
she almost knows the words. She conjugates
and endings change, it's easiest to hang
in present tense. In water earlier
that afternoon there was no need for sound,
the youngest mouthed the names of garish fish
and that was all. Unthinkingly, on land,
she says *Don't leave*. The ocean never moved
her much, but near it they seem beautiful,
unharrowing and mild as the green
Caribbean. Receding light gives way
to heady moon and soon she can believe
a careless stride cloaks sideways love. that blood
and deep-set eyes will bind them fast and long.

REASONS FOR LONDON

First, there were the nights: narrowing over & over
to the choice between flat meat
burrowed in bread and newspaper
or the bus fare home.

On the three-mile walk accidentally
she said *I'm not your mother* and cringed
toward the small possibility
of ruin, but he walked on and talked
of lolling through Greece
and motorbiking Thailand.

Dragging the fumeey warm breeze she knew
he would never go.

They laid in bed listening to English traffic
lurching the illogical streets and nothing
like American cars, she remarked,
who pass as if they might never return.
No, they were webbed in this city for good.
Say *Tottenham*, she asked, say *Holburn*.

Her arm knew the birdy tremble of his elbow
was not because they were coiling the city
at death speeds.

It was the year of elephant colors and soot streets,
water clung to concrete shivering from the dragon
authority of the Underground.

Their daylight soured with street vendor leather,
used shoes and hours-old falafel
above the dip and roll of Pakistani music.

Frank Zappa was the only good thing
to ever come from America, he maintained,
craning his thin neck for the 28 bus,
last stop Hampstead Heath.

There would be sharp red wine
and loose tobacco smoked
in the rare spring grass, and he
would not kiss her.

At Regent's Park a half-rabid squirrel sprung
to her leg, wrapping its rodent arms around her calf.
It loved her frantically, diseasedly.
Kiss me, it might have screamed.
(Him with his bird bones and mild duck walk,

[same stanza]

yet nothing in the eyes was bird. she thought.)
He claimed to have been brown at fifteen
with long sheets of surf hair and bad acid
he took on Greek beaches.
He screwed Spanish girls and swilled tepid beer.
Sentimentalize me, she thought.
I am the redeye westward.
This is the outbound to Gatwick a hair from on time,
the cracked spine of *Sons and Lovers*,
I will leave you.
She heard *knackered* from his mouth and loved him
in her shoulders. Accidentally she said *sorry* and *want*.
Accidentally she said *please*.

IMMUTABLE

The self had gone too hideous to be claimed.
Like the time she trudged halfway
across London to sit at the base
of the giant column in Trafalgar Square.
The sky was a frail blue, at the edge of spring,
and looking up toward the thin clouds
she pretended Nelson was swaying.
Lulled the whole narrow rock
into slow hurtle,
until she grew afraid.
Shaken by even the illusion of movement.
Since then she'd thought on Nelson and how
to make fear out of the right
stillnesses, herself
the monument teetering,
a hazard so heavy and drunken
that the truth of it was secondary
and unspeakable.
And meanwhile the culpable
clouds whisked soundlessly past,
safe in their wisp and lightness.
Who, after all, would suspect?
I'd trusted her to show me the center
of damage. Look at me,
she demanded, and then
look up:
There is so much to dread.
So alone I am going to bed,
reminded how little she's changed.

AS FAR AS I CAN GET ON LAND

Flying to California I'm seated between two
 seven-year-old girls, one blind with milk-sheer skin.
 I must link them both to you but again
 and again the knots fall open, the ends are both charged positive,
 or both are only you. Distance

is almost always a choice, but please believe that something's
 pulled me here. (The caramel-skinned one praised the other's
 handwriting though it was all red scribble -- "you just forgot the A")
 I couldn't be any further away —

How can you love food as you do and whittle down like this,
 turn so brown and dry? The time we snuck away to eat expensive banana
 pie on the side of the road, the house long asleep, my eyes straining later
 in charcoal bedroom light, trying to write of your underwater

eyes (hers a malted blue), too weak to read the clock on the night stand.
 Everything is lengthening and that was long ago; now
 my toes are dragging the Pacific and when I think of growing
 into myself, I can only think away to another wet street,
 to California, to these hills I'm running, headache-green.

but always calling you, black curls and fat blue threads of blood
 across your hands, my own tight wire hair. What scares me
 is this love unbared, that could you tell me *everything* I'd think
 you loved me less. Or that you smile when I shuffle west and tell me Go, it will
 be fabulous. Or that you haven't bruised in years, but deflect,
 deflect beyond repair and still I skim the miles, as far as I
 can get on land.

— *This is heaven*, the brown girl told me, just before we dipped
 below the clouds, *and my mother will be waiting on the ground*,
this is what she wrote to me in Washington, here, read —

In airports, then, and every poem somewhere you're waving,
 twisting the face of a watch up to your eyes.
Is she there? the blind one asks, and I can't say,
 thinking the old chasing games and backyard monsters guttural
 with love, catching me with soft claws at the shoulders,
 lifting my little girl legs off the ground.

THIRD MONTANA NOVEMBER

End of fall again, the dying quiet
 all around me and what moves
 electric through me
 crackling lower.

Three years running I've resolved
 and failed to cradle
 what deserves,
 what shakes the language
 out of me.

Not these mountains
 I never wanted.
 turned to turtle backs.
 Not the trees nightshifting in August,
 or the lake warm and alive.
 (Though it was easier
 to love then.)
 Not the damp memory of me
 turning animal shades,
 smart and oily
 and naked in the sand.
 Not bicycles when the air
 was navy with midnight
 and motors everywhere left
 mean sounds in the breeze.

But there's only so much
 to eliminate until I want to crush
 them all back to me,
 until I twitch and summer
 floods my face again,
 gold-ended.
 I tongue the names
 of other cities too see
 how they feel,
 how they roll,
 but the old eyes
 are rote in me now, waterlit.

A girl I love brings me tea
 so we can hold the afternoon
 in place a little longer,

[same stanza]

squint in the washed-out light,
pretend this lock of mountains
opens things for us,
like when we'd driven singing
into so much wind
our voices couldn't edge
in front of us.

Now all the unforgotten
hibernates deep in my chest
because it is November,
because we've reached the end
of confident daylight.
There is nothing new to write---
I'm fat with secrets and starved
for a long winter sleep.

MAINTAINING PERSPECTIVE

The morning light was streaming precisely from Sunday.
 Through the window it splayed a yellow square
 of warmth on the bed, where a tri-color
 dog slept with occasional ticks, far inside
 the cottony layers of sleep.
 Like his sight, the dream read only in gray.

A man awakened and wished for gray.
 It was winter still and the sharp light of Sunday
 demanded unseasonal cheer and shorter sleep.
 It wanted a certain ease across his face and a square
 look in the mirror, the kind that sees inside
 the chest and loves its bright, corporeal colors.

January stripped his skin of color,
 the mirror noted, and coaxed his temples gray.
The day of rest and dread, he thought, back inside
 his nest of crushed goose down, *That's Sunday*.
 Staring at the mountain framed square
 on his wall, he resolved to return to sleep.

The dog never had problems with sleep,
 and girls' cheeks on frozen ponds turned colors
 that made the man ache over his heavy square
 shoes, sadly vogue beneath his gray
 coat found at a perfect yard sale last Sunday.
 He paid, thought, *Can't yet go inside*.

Yesterday he walked miles toward the hills, inside
 the bend of the river and past the invisible sleep
 of sunlight animals oblivious to Sunday.
 He found pleasure in the ground free of color,
 disrobed and rekindling for a spring graze,
 and in the snowkilled lawns' neat tan squares.

He knew the problem lay in squares,
 the locatable shapes of his out and insides,
 siamese to each other and toned a bone delicate gray.
 They might unmeld only at the core of sleep,
 where a voice demanded bright and discernible color.
 There the dog was speaking, doglike, and the man awoke to Sunday.

[new stanza]

He craved gravy and biscuits the moment sleep cleared.
Plush humid squares of dough inside a lake of rich brown fat,
a taste that screamed for color and hot flush and a deep strange laugh on Sunday.

RETROSYNTHETIC ANALYSIS

I.

Everywhere, precise hues of failure --

I'd been drinking tea to cancel tobacco.
 The bed was from childhood
 and I propped the *New York Times* up on my legs to read
 about the man who killed himself over a failed experiment,
 over hazy flasks and rows of small pearly rain,
 glassed-in sour fogs and gibberish equations for faith.

And I let the fan hum even when it had turned cool
 after midnight, because it reminded me
 of a girl with so much hunger
 for drama she tried break her own arm.
 It swelled and reddened
 and she couldn't go on.
 Then the cave of distractions and no thought,
 pockets of cinema darkness and the shut-out
 blast of Saturday sun through bloated heat,
 thought *I am not for here*.

II.

"That's the lonely place you end up in,"
 his friend explained to the reporter.
 "It's just you and the molecule."

III.

I'd snapped awake and knew he was in ruin,
 thought someone should have known to say,

*Yours is no place for struggle.
 Concede to ocean rhythms,
 think whole and fluid, trace the line that recedes
 straight back to embryo, to
 the whistle-clear pink of arterial highway.*

IV.

The man took a girl walking one autumn, when
 he was living alone in a small city and driving
 a purple Lincoln and his own mother was dying

[same stanza]

from diseases and quiet heartbreak.

They dragged their ankles through the crisp
dead leaves and ended up at the river
where she was close enough to graze his face
with windy strands of hair.

V.

The zigzag grew out of me and returned
without good evidence for disassembly.
I was waiting on a pale turned-afternoon winter morning
with a battered chest and a little death
in the basement where he cradled
the stricken phone,
anyone's brown sludge, inert,
looked up, asked
What have I done.

THE END OF ABSOLUTE

How have I arrived here, unable to locate where I was once earthed?
Here, where I may exchange clouds for the clean glass that holds them,
and feel equally at peace?
Where I may sing no particular song into the Easter wind
and feel lavender, feel limpid sunrise in Kansas
or midtown dusk punctured with skyscraper and butcher smells?
I love him, the checker with faded acne and an earnest mouth,
or the gilded boy on the screen with his freshwater eyes.
I should choose between acorn breezes or baked sea sand,
but then there are horses kicking through fragrant lake mud
and canyons piping their nymph voices to the river.

I sit at my window bleary with spring snow.
There are wolves and antelopes I won't see,
there is the certainty of moose near the northern roads
and coyotes frantic by moonlight. Once I summoned them
to the howling place in my mind, but here I've landed
without authority or distinction. Claws or his Renaissance hands,
my discretions are this far undone: he could touch me,
anyone. My legs do not ache so I hike on.
The snowmelt distends to waterfall, I flower
toward the sun or grieve the loss of winter, I am canceled,
I am even, animal or broken David, clambering surf
or flinty tongue kiss, Montana snowcap, anything,
choose for me.

ZIGZAG RETURNING

IN GRAINY BLUE AND THE HORROR OF SOMETHING

It is true I had a rabbit-heart in algebra and cried when water broke hard
over the bloated tonsils of a tiny boy, washing him with a red deep ache —

That summer I shared a room with my brother and the closet light was blue,
a bruise allowed to burn all night against the room's black skin. I never remembered

to pray then, evenings when the darkness dropped long after nine, but lined
my shoes like cavalry instead, took eight steps precisely before getting into bed.

The beginning of the games was there: in grainy blue and the horror of something
that could happen, a flash of blood or metal so developed in my mind I began

to fear I *wished for it*. Mornings I was third-seat-back of a wood-flanked
station wagon where young boys squirmed wiry with violence. In a vinyl corner I worked

to make myself small, though I would feel nothing more than a wiffle ball to the stomach
— a square, wet sound, a *thwack* before the snatch of oxygen only imagined.

Their noise was just soprano threat or laughter, but I learned enough for violence
to root in me like tense black scars, a boy's straight dark brow. Since then I've wanted

more than once to kick a knee concave because it made me *mad*, because some nights
I thought of my brother's careless limbs and turned-out walk swingy as a girl too young

for sex. How those flimsy legs could make him hurt the way my scalp might burn
if a fist grabbed deep into my kinky hair, and so I was *afraid* for him,

for me, trying so hard *not* to think of violence that it swelled fat in every place
like little bulbs knotting the jaws of a boy in hate. A boy or boys who'd stab, say,

my youngest brother because it was *the worst thing I could think to happen*
and thus it *might*. Even his nervous little laugh before he understood the knife

broke through, details born because of *me* and late at night, when I was nine
and moonwashed blue with fear, the scenes rolled on: an arm twice broken clean,

snapped easy as chalk, a baseball dropped from the sky, turning an eye
backward in its head. I am, I was, tight-nerved as sunburn and as fast to break

and shed. I could not help myself, inventing backseat station wagon
games with just one rule: *When it hurts too much, say 'zap'* —

[new stanza]

(thinking the schoolboys, how they endured the hot rip of each other's Indian burns) And I slept on my brother's floor until I was *twelve* because I feared

death in the night, death only a second little falling chest could keep away.

LIGHT FOR YOUR ROSES

Light for your roses was the end of your dream, the one with the little
tuxedoed boy knocking under the snowy light of streetlamp.

"Light for your roses." he answered, when you asked why he'd come
at this small hour, and to your particular door.

"Light for what roses?" I wondered, but too late -- you'd already woken,
re-wrapped the blanket around your shivering frame.

Light for your roses was perhaps the last thing you needed, I decided,
as we scorned flowers and phrases begging dissection.

Light for your roses was rising demurely between the Virginia hills when we
were nineteen and had driven all night, recounting strange dreams.

And light for your roses was what I was thinking when the sun was slanting
the mountains in April, and you were leaving.

Later we used it for telephone silences, "Light for Your Roses."
As if your graybeard dog alive again.

Light for your roses is the story I tell when we are taking late and of odd
sounds or ghosts, when the wine is gone and I miss you,

as though he were still knocking.

ROAD TRIP

I.

Having left the sea behind,
I am crying toward a car window
in northern Idaho.

It is raining cold in May
and my tears on the glass
sweep backward and flat,
streaking quiet salt.

Beside me are the angles of you,
tuned to the thin-voiced radio girl
in static, thinking the smell of her
left on a piano bench.

II.

I doze in the afternoon,
but wake to a phone scream
in advanced darkness.

It is my brother calling from
a bus station in Boston,
thick and staccato-breathed:

*I have dyed my eyebrows black,
third-degree. I wear a woman's apple coat.
a gift. You never knew the shade.*

I strain to clear the sleep and speak
but it slurs me under, casts my tongue
in stone. I want to tell him I remember
a boy of four, licking his arms
on a bench in Paris, holding them up:
here -- smell. The bristle of all around him.
I want to ask him if he's traveling alone,
but then light cuts me, morning,
and I'm nowhere near a phone.

MISPLACED, IN EARNEST

A boy two-quarts-drunk fumbles the radio out of my car
 while I sleep on, right through the dog's growl
 held wet in his stomach as he does in the face of things
 not indisputably wrong.

Outside the boy's fingers work under
 a July moon, slurry as when they lifted her
 elastic waistband and dragged lightly over the thin
 ditch in her flesh it had left.

Inside a year ago, I was writing something
 about *earnestness*, about how these rooftops
 nearly touch and we slept on two beds pushed
 together, a lip of salt between our skin cooling
 fast and sun-sore from the days too high for specific memory
 but seeped in through the arms and chest. After all,
 this town is known for winter -- it was the mornings I could
 smell the cold that didn't collapse into each other
 and the first time I'd made love at such an hour.
 What did I *mean* then, when I wrote

the trail carries us like blind horses, where was the smell
 of swamp in those buckled-up mountains?
 Could the square green tin of poems have been for
anyone while I was running barefoot for the swings,
 ten years old and unaware of mis-
 association? Even when the beer-logged boy pried the box
 away from its sad little wires, the trains clanged from their
 bellies in the dark morning and your head *was and then was not*
 resting on my stomach weighty as a small whole child.

And then, where I began, this morning,
 with the details of *here* and *gone*:
 So simple, the gutted hole where the radio used to be,
 or the bed half-empty and dented soft,
 the quiet evidence of things *I could love*, the song
 missed only when cut by a quick wrist.
 The silence and tenfold memory, what endures
 is not
the red shell of dusk waving us home,
 but a burned-off morning you were driving

[same stanza]

in new rain, far south where egrets nick the dawn white,
fierce and uncertain in loving
their particular sky.

ANYWHERE BUT HERE

The growl of the marigold bus
and your stomach tense as grasshoppers.

Lacquer-bright voices knock
in the lunchbag air of brown paper
crept with hand grime and tunafish grease,
and out the window three o'clock sun
chisels snow to teeth.

Gritting to a halt, the bus sinks you off
and the traitorous clock
snatches its cushion from under you.
Now only the gas station bathroom
remains, eggy in the nose, rust tears
in the sink streaking your name.

The pit of you smarts like an Indian burn,
little coils wringing like washcloth
and you wish urine or bile, delay,
but nothing comes,
and the second hand clucks, skinny red tongue,
you're late, you're late.

Outside, the space unpunctuates,
leaving only a leash-yank of road
between you and the door.

STAR CHASM

As a child, I learned the word as *starcasm*
 in a car with seats that turned so hot
 and slick by afternoon I could imagine
 skin sheeting off like cellophane when I stepped out.

Not until driving through Idaho
 years later, with you, did I realize
 I'd learned it right. A childhood of prose
 and county spelling bees had told me otherwise--

Now this mountain stretch of interstate swats
 them both away. The sun's stretched wide, mouth pinned
 open, and still we have nothing to say. I caught
 your lips, lightly chapped, moving to pretend

you knew the songs, ignoring the *star chasm*,
 my eight-year-old-prediction, long before
 I knew your skin, or days like these had happened.
 (Forgive my stinginess, my tilt toward talking metaphors.)

Once, you sketched me lovingly in crayon.
 I smiled, thanked you, while resenting the in-
 exactness of your trade, your approximating hands,
 how I hear white-clear voices and you select the din.

Another anecdote stripped down:
 In an airport last May, I passed a baby on a changing deck
 screaming from the stomach, rooted, wild sounds--
 A pang of recognition, for an instant, cut my chest.

This was sound mislearned, our common
 error, an animal *star chasm* passing between us.
 I kept walking, through carefully conditioned
 air, outside to a dome of full-blown sun. . .

These car seats are cool and gray.
 I'm wearing boiled wool, as this far north the sky
 conserves its heat. Soon it's trembling with rain--
 space sluiced open, throaty unsingable lullaby.

INTERLUDE: 6 HAIKU

Wind slammed a glass door
in the path of a small girl:
Forgive me, I plead.

When I spilled soda
twice, you yelled *fuck* in public,
we'd never heard that.

Silent telephone
in the center of the room
smirks with turned-down eyes.

My mother driving,
the clean cracks of her knuckles --
I pressed my own hands.

Yellow scum creeping
across the fish tank's blank face
reminds me of you.

Unexpectedly
a letter with green writing
arrives in the mail.

AS IF I DIDN'T ENTERTAIN THE CONCEPT

for Justin

Like something sharp inside
had grown fast toward both ends
was how you talked
the last time you pried loose—

Inside the cabin we barely quiver
though the ocean bucks gray below.
Toward night rain whips the deck
and soon you're shuddering open,
you're rolling down ice without grooves
to me, saying *I lie, and sister*
I drive 120, a tap to the brake
would be death.

(As if I didn't entertain the concept
of *without you*, as if I needed a threat.)

Thoughts of you move like this:
the arc of your little hawk
nose, the quick fingers that scooped
sugar from rectangle packets
and the rapid ascent of your voice
before breaking, the tiny hysteria.

In flesh you swat this away.
Six feet and child-faced
you cough wet
you make me afraid.

(*You know why I love you? Went our old*
joke, for the line down your nose.)

Capsuled here, your words
spring like veins from a neck,
nerves flank your laugh
and you smoke hard, little boy,
but talk death, I'll take it,
these three thousand miles
have forgotten the edges and
heartbreak of you.

BISECTION*A Bedroom Conversation*

Brit: All morning I thought about what he does on the morning commute

Kelly: My hands were shaking

Brit: and then I remembered something someone'd said to me

Kelly: and I couldn't get away from the sun, as if in the desert, how it blares all around your temples

Brit: in a bar one night, said, *You are less important to most people than you can possibly imagine*

Kelly: and when I shut my eyes everything went white and sharp like an ice cream headache

Brit: so I began to make a list of the people who love me

Kelly: in my eyelids, and I thought of peeled skin and fever

Brit: Mother, possibly Father, Nana and PopPop, Trailer, Antoinette and debatably Jesus

Kelly: and how in England they'd be saying *bloody hot*, absurd thought given the situation's gravity

Brit: until it became depressing, you know, there are certain conditions you assume exist

Kelly: Out of nowhere fell a curtain of snow

Brit: and then you start testing them, making lists

Kelly: the kind that you simply have to touch, I had to and was crying with relief

Brit: and crossing various people off, and feeling embarrassed that you'd written them down in the first place

Kelly: that cold cutting into my hands and burning right off again, it cleared me in a way

Brit: I began thinking of the train, newspapers and how his hands shake with caffeine

Kelly: I knew needed to stop the cycle right then, that I'd been given a last chance somehow

Brit: The pleasure I take in ironing his shirts

Kelly: The last thing I remember was a woman with eyes all pupil, blacked over and hard like onyx

Brit: I know, it sounds silly, but

Kelly: and it scared me because so brutally and instantly I wanted

Brit: I don't think I've ever felt this way before.

Kelly: her beneath me.

INSIDE IT

He is talking with the pace of autumn.
 Pensive, the motion inside spaces
 filled with heavy light. The nostalgia of New England
 on fire and I want to write *dusky kaleidoscope*,
 but have come to know better: he will hold up
 his hand and say Don't. It's too soft.

Out the window, instead, there are
 fierce scarlet leaves tunneling the path
 of the bus we're riding from Boston to New York.
 Leaves and a man speaking low
 with rings half-mooning his eyes,
 his stomach beyond flat, caved in.
 His beautiful hands splitting the pent-up air
 and all long words falling away.

He pares it down. Maybe when he was driving that fast
 he *did* want to kill them both. It was September then, too,
 the trees pressed down gold toward something
 a nervous heart might mistake for death caught
 in the deep glow of the highway.
 Against the langour he was violent-in-love,
 the pedal flexed *hard*
 and she kept her face in her hands.

Tonight, I could say, is winter at our heels.
 Logical, the roll of seasons. The almonds cracking
 between our teeth just small terrible noises.
 Here we are tucked in
the belly of the bus mother-humming,
hurling us safe through the interstate night.

More evidence,
 with every swill of steamed milk in Connecticut,
 that I am *not* inside
living as hard as I can.
 The milk so mild no part of my body
 resists it, the pale warmth, all mine. . .

The tarred ground of a fast-food parking lot
 keeps me looking up, searching

[same stanza]

the cold sky for the clump called
Pleiades to catch brightest in the corners of my eyes.
No use in a head-on look, it is a word
lovelier than its light.
I remember hearing a man say *beauty makes me*
think of other things --

and always, I am thinking them:
For instance, his breathing through sleep sounds
like something *not* urgent, something *not* love.
And because I can, I will stop here, before
the gray-black curve under each eye,
stomach empty and desireless --
the common ferocious ruin.

INSIGHT

The usual ways reveal nothing.
The trigger, this time,
is the question of yellow dogeyes.
how he rests his chin on my leg
and growls wetly from the stomach.
How I should turn away,
but let meat stain my carpet instead.

It was not always like this.

The moments I pull ahead of myself
and neck-whip backwards
to startle the involuntary ghostskin.
the shadow barred from the days
of the brain, or when
the smoke of my breath
reveals foreign texture
and the stupid cape of me
flaps like a half-severed thumb.

Jaw-hung, I stare at the dog,
at my six-toed feet,
at the fishslip of my hands.

IN DEFENSE OF NOT READING ENOUGH POETRY

I've earned nothing
 of this rain I opened
 the windows for,
 not thinking
 outside its clean
 gravel sounds to, say,
 small hands,
 in all my cringing typical-
 ness and late-night
 commitments to candor,
 I have walked in clay
 circles toward the underground face
 of summer, and yes, I will
 sink unresistant
 into my sentiment
 and faith in dead
 language, into the tiresome
 cumulus of my childhood,
 or the bread and butter love
 stories I've told after failing
 to locate a new color
 for dusk.

 Reduced by the sense
 of myself
 I read magazines,
 pilot by guilt
 through chicken soup
 hallways of lowgrade
 apartments and wish
 in standard English, with
 the usual sense
 of Sunday doom.

 Tonight there was a draft
 so I walked to my window.

 Rain.

The sky split for the first

 time in months.

 Made coffee for its connotations.

 Tried to write, even smoked,

[same stanza]

but now that I know

my own cutout,

a hundred thousand times

paper-chained before,

I am, respectfully,

forbidden.

EARLY LESSONS: GREED AND MY FATHER BURYING HIS FACE

This high demand for love when I have had it
 all along is a strange guilt, the same marble that pitted
 my chest when my father flung his head into a pillow
 and wept high-pitched as a woman *I loved her so much*,
 he said between sobs, which I transcribed round in schoolgirl hand,
 maybe knowing I would need it to believe the memory.

That so forgettable, when *how lovely* our makeshift beds
 stretched seat-floor-seat inside the van barreling north,
 his elegant fingers curling the wheel and voice streamed low
 toward my mother's laugh choked back to keep us asleep,
 chests pumping off-key, four across and Justin's head in my lap.
 Or July, ignoring threats of sunset, hues of maroon spilled
 to every corner of the close sky dipped to the ponds
 where we plucked cattails and goldfish fat from corn.

Should such lilt and easy memory earn an unshared place?
 What of broomstick races I could win every time but didn't
 because mine was the sort of love that allowed me to
know better, know to slow my stride a length before the finish,
 my blood bay filly stretching her neck toward the hills,
 uncantered, all dignity.

She knew me in her nostrils. I imagined then,
 scissoring her sleek legs to the same *please-please-please*
 rhythm my father used. I *knew*. to pray for the gravelly crescendo
 of my tires making the slow right turn into the driveway,
 the small burn of fear, then *the seconds fear diffuses inside love*
 and permission to sleep.

THE UNDISCIPLINED HEART

RED-SHIFTED

... That is because the universe is expanding and therefore stretching out the light waves coming from stars and galaxies, shifting them beyond the range of visible light into the red end of the spectrum. At extreme distances, all objects are "red-shifted" and cannot be detected by human eyes.

- Report from the Hubble Telescope Project

That is the nightmare, exactly.

That the recession of matter is not a recession

at all but an opening I have failed to detect.

Spectral, you might call this breed of expansion.

What I mean is,

I do not understand why I pressed my face
against cold glass tonight, bracing for the first

step toward dissolve, toward a face shrinking

in the rear window until it can be blotted
with a thumb, until it has vanished

over the browning crests of hills.

Until I might finally unbraid my hair and weep.

This method I learned from the Russian nesting dolls

I loved as a girl, shinking replicas of themselves

with diminishing hollow space. They said:

further in means smaller, less demanding.

Like the little bump in the deep center of my palm

you might love me for.

But I am awake and roofless now, considering
the bonebare sky, considering

that when I burst into the room and dimness
rubbed all discernible form away--

perhaps you *were* there.

[new stanza]

Dropping blindly down to you because nothing
else was in my power, I knew the air

smelled as it only could here, of certain dusts
and strangely sweet. I thought, *if we have dispersion*

*we will have manageable pain, your body will travel
past mine like Doppler-effected sound.*

That was nothing like ripping awake to find you
not gone but shifted red, shifted

beyond the range of visible light, where,
due to limitations of science and my own heart,

I cannot see.

SATURDAY NIGHT MEMO TO ST. ANSELM¹

composed between fleeting despair and a wet street.
 The sky all pressed mist and unyielding.
 I had just waltzed, inappropriately,
 my hands not sweating inside of his.
 Cool and dry, with no hint
 of what I'd just seen.

And believed I'd felt, at least in residuals.
 Me, who knew nothing of hell.
 Who wanted to feel in sustained perpendiculars,
 and read Anselm
 and failed.
 Later the dry storm branches would lash
 the walls with shadow.

Come to my room, I would say,
 despite ambulances weaving the freeway
 mid-scream and the mountains diamond with ice.
 And to add insult, the stopgap faces
 flashing infrared somewhere below
 my hairline.

Think the worst possible thing, a friend advised,
 and then, what are the chances?
 And then the phone would ring, *it's me*,
 and I would drive, cinematic, through the thickest fog
 north at three a.m.

Geometry is a flawed method and desire
 enormous and cruel.
 I might waltz in anything's face.
 Sir, from the point of inscrutable goodness,
 back home in my feather bed
 and beside lucid sunrise, I refute you.

¹**Saint Anselm** (circa 1033-1109) -- theologian, philosopher, and church leader, who proposed an "Ontological Argument for the Existence of God" that is still being debated.

PRELUDE TO A GOODBYE LETTER

Topped boots throb the living room
like twin hearts stitched from leather.
Breathing harder now I wish a thread of light
beneath your door but find it dark-stripped,
a message stark as deadbolt.

When you went south for weeks
I dozed fitful in this orange canyon house,
stabbing pens against white page
to crush the scenes behind my eyes --
your arms flailed joyous toward the desert sky.

I've waited til the end of night to hear you
crunch the snow, and when the fallow light
of morning waved you in I hoped for strains
of something forced, but your laugh
rolled true.

In early winter nightmares pulled you
up the stairs. *I dreamt you were a traitor
and black hands held me down.*
Our sleep-fringed voices pushed into the dawn
until you trusted rest again.

You haven't been here at that hour since.
Now your hair's gone
blond again, and your nails are growing out
unchewed. You're going soon.
This stretch of years has left my eye knifesharp.

MY KINSEY

or The Hundred Thousand Options for Happiness

I.

The problem is, the physical possibilities, how easily they pass through the senses to something further in. We're not speaking of someone inside of someone else, or an unmarked hand giving rise to shuddery pimpled flesh. Not even of huddling under rain together; you see, all of these are genuine in that they're destined for exposure. Think of your last broken heart or other piece of body, did you often slip past it to wonder *what does this feel like?* That's not our problem. We'll get to that. The angels say fuck all you like. *Alone* is a resource firmly reusable, a dry good, impenetrable to ice -- certainly *you* in your weightworn sag of bed won't use it up.

II.

She is a breath before sleep when he says,
I was thinking about happiness.
Renounces ideas of contingency, calls honesty
her habit, a sentence of poetry.

Premature mornings everything is misted
and potentially fits --the stacked audience of houses to the south,
the curve of highway streaking gray to the mountains.
She tightens her apron.

The soft-bellied man in the shop talks
only through recommendation and apology:
Use a half-cap of bleach in your dishwasher.
But I became a wine salesman instead.

His sadness inevitable as his brown coat.
She could pat his shoulder to make him happy.
She could take off her clothes, gap-eyed, all empathy.
She could make him a cappuccino with cinnamon.

In the empty white afternoon, she could write a letter.
Does write a letter, not deciding to whom until the pen
first grazes the page. She could write *I love you*,
or of snow on coats of horses, or *meet me in the cafe*.

[new stanza]

On the way home she picks up lamb chops
because they smell good broiling, and he loves meat,
and there is even something pleasant in the small,
sour odor of chilled blood leaked through paper.

III.

Summers ago when our tan lines cut deep and our hair fell down our backs like sheets of water we had a creed: nothing fictive, nothing lost. Now we've grown albino-sensitive to light, and frail enough to know which things are always on the cusp of turning brute. What we'll do is get so good at living *care* it will become as good as love. Only little zones of our bodies will know the difference.

IV.

They'd fallen off the map of their own creation.

When I heard this on the radio one morning
I was waiting for the sun to rise
and trying to write a letter.

Coffee grounds were already half-mooning
my fingernails and the beans on the floor
were black and shiny as roaches.

The noises of the heater sounded like rain,
like everything replaced or costumed as its neighbor.

(*Why is the measure of love loss?* the novelist asked.)

I smell blood, meat growing hot and dark, they comfort me.

AFTERTHOUGHT AND FIRE

Spring light at noon forgiving nothing, not our bodies not
my shinbone lined with rocks you've carefully undrowned --

I remember first sifting through your hair, far indoors
and deep into the morning when I learned the moment

better than the kiss -- not the feathersweep of lips
but exactly before, exactly when the lips become

inevitable. The moment stood on end because I left
just in time, soon enough to keep it bristled in my

mind, through hours of keyboard the next day,
the first time

your body -- incidental, essential. an afterthought
and then a fire, mine

aware, turned in, conscious of your motion I cannot
mimic, fluid in streetlamp yellow. *there* -- a faint tremble of flesh

the way a horse's flank shudders from a place
at the bottom of its motion.

Sometimes I pretend my back can hold
its curve, lining you and away from

you, pretend the thought of insect wings
can imitate the graze of eyelash.

As if I could defy

the poles of myself, the breath hinged toward you, my skin of
physical directions, knowing where my legs should cross

yours or match them -- this is how we should tangle
in the afternoon, this is how we should

sleep summer mornings, too late, and walk.
to the open-air market where we eat

sugary podded peas and hunks of bread torn straight
from the loaf. Never have I lost the sense of your sun-warmed

arm around me -- Your body as an easy fact
escapes me, never a natural absence but strange

erasure the way a steaming mountain spring
would lapse fast in my mind

[new stanza]

if your leg did not glow dimly inside it.

MNEMONIC DEVICES

Take a cheekful of marble-cold grapes
and remember a mouth full of tumors,
your little swollen mistakes.

Stretch your lips narrow--
thin as you can-- red rubberbands
will make your sounds fatter and slow.

Split skins with a clean liquid sound,
taste juice like cool sugar blood,
stop drips with the back of your hand.

Muscle your tongue through blue
arcs of water, chilly as needles,
to help you think fluidly,

While keeping your breath mean
and steady. Hold your throat poised.
Reahearse saying you love me,

Good boys.

Anchor a fist at the top of your neck
and pull hard for a dry ripping noise,

Hold hair like a palmful of grass, mud-flecked
leaving bald spots I've learned to expect.

REQUIREMENTS FOR SLEEP

Afterwards, you ask what I am thinking.

When I was young, I could not sleep alone
or without elaborate ritual.
window shut tightly and locked.
shoes lining the wall like cavalry,
yellow pie slice of light
streaming protectively from the open door.

Sometimes my father would type late into the night,
the capgun shots of the keyboard like lullaby,
the promise of him towering over the
prowling blackness,
mechanical dance of his fingers granting
drowsy amnesia.

This is all I can think to say.

THE OBVIOUS ANALOGY IS WITH MUSIC¹

You run up the stairs.

Always run. Four steps up,

jerk right, stride three, four more. .

Pound the landing and stride in through

boundaries like oil, the music unrolling toward

a perfect edge of wistfulness & windrush.

Done so many times you can close your eyes

and feel the precise jar-kneed rhythms of ascending to him.

Or close them to the sort of beginning you hoped would be the center.

Where there really was unkempt summer air, pre-storm and the sky swirling fast

over the stars. It was veined with a lightning that moved the midnight valley

to a tick of noon, flashed to the back of your eyes, more private

than startling, because you'd never seen it in that white breath.

Like the first of a body in the electric wind, lit-up and understood.

The way you understand certain spaces but not enough

to define them. *Terrible*, you might say

Or, closer still might be him standing by a cold sheet of glass looking

out at the ashen street and pigeons, *so ordinary*, so weary and full

of weekday television sentiment, *you know this*, and still live guilty.

You go on addressing issues like the *space between self and soul*, etc.,

knowing you'll finish second, every time.

You've even gone so far as to ask God to tether them, say, the *unlooped ghosts* .

or some other soft mouthful, impossible as someone telling you,

Look to the mountains, high-up dry and powder white.

When all your life you have loved flat land and continents of water.

You continue. Here you are suspended even when the world sirens release.

[same stanza]

¹from *My Life*, Lyn Hejinian

Here, you might *not* believe in the sixth sense of doom.

As if the chants temporarily dimmed, you sleep weightless,
oblivious to the sauntering storm, the music refusing

to crash over the arc of itself.

You stride long, willfully, burst in without knocking.
Through boundaries like oil. You drift through, he saturates.

The ease of passage makes you weep, for no good reason, *I don't know*, you say,
and again, the permeable sound and his waiting skin, you stand

in the end, unlistenable.

APOLOGY FOR UNACCOUNTABLES

In some fissure of mind you might have known,
but it startles you, the end of a pathless
evaporation, how something has stopped
clanging in your chest.

Not the overused heart,
but the way you lost an hour today
and cannot recall its texture,
or how you moved inside it.

Cringing, memory leaves you
undisciplined. You wear a bathrobe
late into the afternoon
while the sky mocks its season;
frozen pellets bounce the driveway
and you long for swampy childhood
or shoeboxed photographs.

You imagine standing on a platform
while a train quakes past,
mild faces you might have owned
or loved smearing every window.
And then the empty glass,
rare and clean:
obsessions met by a quicksand death.

If watermarks remain they feel
like bruises still unpurpled.
A coldness that might cross to cruelty,
your own inexplicable winters
live by clockwork and television light,
specific gravity vanished
and desire rapidly horizoning.

BLUE SINK

I.

I am alone with a tea kettle scream,
having grown the habit of matching words

with mundane sound --

True true true in the low rasp of my front
bike tire grazing its brake,

Square heart square heart in the spondees of my clock,
the leak of the showerhead clucking tile

like *how how how*.

And finally the tea kettle,

its single possibility of soprano
hysteria, sound and word alike.

II.

Waking to the bald sting of sun
in January sky, I trace its blue expanse

to the blue sink of certain eyes, to the
the little hole of water I grew up near,

pooled mossy and still,
though underneath secret hollow tendrils

of suction tunneled a hundred
and fifty miles to Tampa Bay.

As children we knew the legend of the boy
and girl who snorkeled there, sixteen and heady

with bad beer, their first freshwater kiss, sputtering noses
and slick skin, brave on suspicion of love and swimming

deep, then narrow.

His body came up first, shining as fishbelly, and hers

[new stanza]

two hundred yards away, weeks later.

III.

When you left some things spoke
without frame of sound,

like the spider plant browned at the tips
or the trains without summer wails of panic.

The air had been sound-proofed by snow,
January, I sipped tea and thought,

Breathe in breathe in breathe in.
And slept a black sleep.

Because the only match possible would
have been you, breathing.

Mute and without counterpart,
all motions on shore:

the soft curl of our toes around
squeezed-through mud,

gulls screeching raw, or the underwater
flails of our limbs , thick

and no longer desperate.

Too salt stung to look, I braced for a morning

bleedy as eyes starved for sleep --
permeable, burning, and, in the end,

broken through.

Useless, abundant oxygen
everywhere. We could drown this way.