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Wanting

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B.A., Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, 1998.

Presented in partial fulfillment

of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts:

The University of Montana,

May 2002.

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Definition

- 1: the bed after either has left it. eg. the light, the shapes in the flat-sheet. indentations. soft fossil marks.
- 2: to have or want to have. to imagine in violet corridors.
- 3: to reduce in intensity. to lavender.
eg. the air three days after the house was shut; not three years— the air itself an inhabitant; not three lifetimes— even the air has moved on.
eg. a full nothing. <she ~ed most in the mornings.>
- 4: to wake from. to polish the edge of dream.
also, to see oneself in another's pupil, then to watch oneself dissolve in light. to wither in skin. to retreat into bone.
- 5: to shine, as one scoured by some clear substance.
- 6: to say the exact opposite. to sully pages. to idle.
to walk, esp. when pines bear white branches, flaked fractal patterns, esp. when
- 7: *to desire to come, go, or be.*
- 8: to hunger. to redefine hunger as something not tied to the body. to murmur, to fail to fill, *esp. in desired or customary grace.*
- 9: to follow prints, evidence of presence and passing, in order to find and chew, sharpen teeth against. <he is ~ed>
see INTERIOR.

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Go back before the body you lay down beside the man who borrows your breath at night and leaves you, you want to say for his sake, breathless, in a rent-split house, before the dream of your sister ripped and stitched back together, the dream of falling, the dream of your life as you've lived it. Before the scent of other bodies on you, sour milk of children, curdled seed of men, waxy smack of lips and peanut grease of your own skin gone unwashed too long. Before the scent of other countries, palm oil and dried fish, tang of soy, dream of a whole world impossible to wash from split, tender heels. Before the fields stripped of any dark nutrient, before the eyes leveled at you and never empty, the let-loose avalanche of laughter, the night like a throat open above your own throat swallowing. Before the man with the scars and still sparse hair who reached across your cup of green tea and pressed the enameled pin into your palm and said, here, it is yours, we used to wear it when we had radiation sickness. Go back, you remember, the way is open, though memory has not fastened its teeth to the garden, circle of brick and the earth you turned under bare toes, cuffs rolled above adolescent ankles, before you looked down the hill you'd looked down every summer so far and thought, it turns, the road turns, and goes. Go, though now you start to borrow from mother's memories, back to stripes of red wallpaper like your own vocal chords stretching floor to ceiling, screaming and kicking at the door to be let loose. Going back, the beginning's always stitched with other stories, and yours is no beginning but one sentence no one writes in the book of this hand-stained nation, making decisions to drop light, devouring light on a city, searing one hand permanent against stone, to pack souls like spices in crates over oceans, or send shuttles to the bright, pocked surface of night's eye. Keep going, you cannot claim a clean beginning anymore than you can say how far back your life is tied to, how far back you want to stop and start the story.

Aubade

It's early, yet. Here

at the hip, and again
at the collar, I see you
are only a frame
of bone
almost piercing skin
held together by more
skin, surface tension
rippling air

I feel

in tightening wings
across my sternum,
in morning
tracing you with its
white finger
and night retreating deeper
down your mouth.
Between you and me,

I don't know

how this happens
when we're not
touching I dissolve
in dark. The breath
last thing last night
I fed you tore neatly
from my mouth.
The air

I can't see you breathing

doesn't reach me.
Sleeping, I have no way
of knowing
what you're thinking
or even thinking
I know. I know.
I only trust
what I can touch.

Proportion

I like these petals opening through shapes
I know: stacks of pink canoes
loosening into pointed tongues
so slow you can't see it happening.
When I was small I liked to gather
miniature versions of the world
I was learning. Holly berries doubled
as elfin apples— even the pulp
when my nail slit the skin was yellow
as a red delicious. Also I'd find
grape hyacinth, plum-dusty
berries from juniper bushes,
magnolia seeds like mini-mangos
from grenade-shaped stamen,
and arrange them all in an acorn cap
for the center of a small slate table.
Even sprigs of creeping flox,
moss pulled up in ragged sheets and puzzled
edge to edge like strayed continents,
could serve as a little lawn hidden
in tall grasses only I'd uncover.
Certain scientists say that if you look
at anything on its smallest cellular level
it resembles the shape of the greater
whole. In truth, I'm not sure I knew
what I was doing— liking anything that could be
what it isn't, digging my dirt-caked nails
into whatever entered my eye's bright orbit.

Fig Thirteen Ways

Color of a two-day new bruise,

pored and faintly fuzzed like the pad
of a dogs' paw.

Skin so thin faucet water risks
rubbing through to moony fruit,

the shape and pitless-centered
weight of testes.

No stone, too malleable
so, not a drupe.

Dropped, it wobbles
to find plumb center, comes
to rest on star-shaped navel,

the smell of chemical, venom,
jaw-locking tannin.

Squeezed from the stem, bursts
to coral crop of seeds,
to sea-tentacled center.

First fruit and God-prescribed
diet, eat four before
they start to taste

like echos
of other fruit: peach-sweet, cucumber-
clean, musked honey of plum

sucked by a bat who wraps
dusk-colored wings
and throbs till the casing's
scraped clean,

discarded skin
of a boxing glove.

Stain

Coffee comes out. This is one
you learn when you are older,
even, than the age you start
to worry over preserving
clothing, or just avoiding
mother's silent, half-turned back
beside the washer— bowed head,
motion of her wrists rubbing
cloth against cloth like struggling
in handcuffs— the age when you
first reconsider sliding
into rain-softened Home or
crawling on elbows through blades
of dew-dampened grass. Blood—
even your first, you learn— bleeds
freely from panties soaked in
the cloistered cold of a school
commode, and a sweater tied
like crossed fingers can almost
hide you— sitting half tilted
in Social Studies, imagining
it is somehow easier
to fade in layers of skirt
in coffee fields, where the sum
of seasons of hands browning
under beans roasted over
fire, leave nothing— even
worlds away— but a faint trace
on the teeth.

Pastoral

Just one more day tacked on
to her sixteen-some-odd
years, but suddenly the
smallest, common gesture
can make her come to blush:
after supper, the dog
jawing deep in his dish
could do it, or the sight
of one slow hand rubbing
down each mound of mother's
muffin tin. In the den,
a pair of hips shifting
low in the recliner,
or the breathless batting
of moths like palms against
the porch-screen.

She clutches
a bucket, lets wind catch
the door on its back-swing,
and calls, calm as can be,
she'll feed the horses this
evening.

All day she's been
straining towards this long,
soft walk across the lawn,
towards the smell of seed
and trampled dirt, the low
licking light of someone's
lamp and sound of the stud's
musty grunts as he knocks
tensed, heavy flanks against
the one mostly empty
stall in father's stable.

Liminal

He is hustling home in early evening,
fingers looped through the blades
of his skates like fingers through the gills
of fish, dripping where they skimmed against ice.

Tomorrow he has school but any time
that's not almost-now doesn't exist for him--
taking quick, whistling strides across lawns,
crunching old snow with a sound bigger than he is,

half of him still sliding over the little slick of water
he found miles from here, where he leaned against air,
arms held wide like sails blown open, every inch of skin
alive but listening for the night's arrival,

half of him already sitting to dinner,
his good, red face steaming with sudden heat,
blowing into the bowl he looks into like a mirror
and drinks from, spoon by spoonful,

his mother standing by his chair, quiet to find
all the wet and chill and wide-out-there
he carried in with him, her hands smoothing,
smoothing his hair like a breast of feathers.

Fever Dream

Imagine a child trying to sleep
through fever, lying bright-eyed
in the dark, sickness
quickenning blood and whetting
her to pain like a whip thinning,
her body alive with alien
sensation, and what other reason
than this and a thousand like it
that she'll lose herself to another continent,
and a circle of faces dark against sand
rainless for half a year. She doesn't speak
the language there are no books
for— doesn't understand bending
everyday to the same
small labors or how thirst thins
blood to almost nothing— but she hears
the drumming— sees the hands
milking hot air, legs like pistons
pumping and quickening
with a rhythm she'd always imagined
her pulse invented— and she shadows
their dance, drawing down
the rains giving flesh to fever
with no thought of it breaking.

**Late Spring, Waking
From a Nap with the Window
Open**

White air, light
like solid
water leaking,
slowly
in tinted drips
bleeding cloud
to ground like juiced
stone. Tips
of slivers of torn
tin ticking, thickening
to aluminum,
to wide-mouthed
metal pails, maws
of moored alloy, rows
of ragged corrugate rusting,
hickory dust
dampened, deepened,
turned to grease
and musty fungus, black
granite slabs lying
flat-backed, steaming
mist against held heat,
riot of sudden
unquiet thudding, muffled
blood drumming, ears
sloshed shells rising up from under
slumber, water unraveling
in ridged strips, breathing
through skin.

Cityscape

After Hopper

The curtains across the alleyway are new.
Watching hands tug them into place, you
wonder at the yards of washed cotton,
faded floral someone must have bought
by the bolt forty years before
in a wood-floored country store.
Some farmer's wife would have worn
that fabric thread-bare, the torn
hem pressed flat then patched
with a mismatched swatch
of apron. Who'd think to save
that country cloth for a move
to city tenements-- bright hive
of stacked, intent lives
buzzing in flat squares
of light-- empty stage where
you turn through a newspaper,
lift a cup from its tight fit of saucer,
enacting this *vigorous*
standardized dance in your globe of hot glass--
your life vibrating at its fixed center,
a packed and coiled filament.

Voyeur

A plate bearing the burst casing
of an orange holds down the softened,
smudged sheets of the morning
paper against high-blown buffetings
from the window. A woman stops
reading, rubs a thumb into the soft spot
of her opposite palm. She risks falling
eyes-first into the hole of her hand,
circling her thumb as if to conjure
a seed from the cracked terrain
as the sun draws close against the glass

a man ten years past installed
when the building was built.
This afternoon he's still standing
in the light of his microwave watching
a cup twirl on the rotating tray:
ice-skater on a music box turning
in smooth circles, uninterrupted sweep
of the new second hand on the wrist
of his wife. He opens the fridge,
swings it closed and his robe unwraps
in the draft. Open. Closed. His hair--
open-- fluttered by canned air-- closed--

like air in the tall apartment
where a woman sits backwards
on a chair, one leg akimbo propped up
on the rung. Behind her, a man
squints, hands trained on her spine
as if winding her up or turning her off
like a toy. Her back grows stalky,
the ram-rod vertical of a dancer, her face
whitens, the tight coil of a rose. He turns,
crosses to a table. Her face loosens,
flushes color, and her mouth starts up

as a man shifts deeper in the textured lap
of a new recliner. His face reflects blue,
then flickers white and black, light
darkening the deep creases
of his slight smile. He fits the nails
of his right hand under the nails of his left.
Then switches. Then back, his fingers
forming a small ribcage. He could cup
a nest or the skull of an infant, so careful

(no stanza break)

are his hands in air. The tiniest movement—
almost clapping without the sound

of a soundless room, stained mattress,
covers at the foot twisted into helixes.
In one corner, the pale, curled shape
of a boy— arm winged over ear
so a hand cups his head, knees locked
beneath chin like bone into socket.
He is squeezing tighter and cleaner
into himself, rounding off
loose edges. By morning he'll hardly
be recognized— suddenly hardened
and whole and worth something.

History

Our most persistent nightmare
is of aftermath and a child
patrolling the silent
shells of buildings, the city a kingdom
of loose curtains, eyeless highrises,
and nowhere a home for smoke.
Please note— it's not as if
we left him there. His shoes
are sturdy and he has no need
for food— you see, we never dreamed
him hungry. If I gave him
a time and home to go to
and nothing else, not even a pack
of matches, you wouldn't worry.
You'd watch him lay hands
against the flanks of buildings,
watch him turn to the white-eyed
shapes of statues and give comfort
with his permanence— the way
the living watch the grieving
and weigh them down with fingerprints,
with a blood contract for more
stories and blankets of wild breath.

Hindsight

Below us, a woman crouches in a plot of turned earth, seed packets skewered on sticks like mast-heads of toy ships plotting the earth around her, the pointed tip of her trowel lifting and dipping in bright air like the glitter of waves seen from a bomber above, her neat nest of hair curled overnight on spit and twisted rags and pinned. Even in Shelbyville, Indiana, 1942, a woman may not have gloves to match her handbag, or enough fabric to drop a hem much past her knees, or she may forgo the tight-belted, perfect-bodied dress altogether for these dungarees of her husband's— there's a war, after all— but that's no reason for going out undone. Time is still a commodity she and all the surnamed neighbors of her neighborhood are spending like a ball of string no one knows how long it will take to unravel. Only, as in other, older stories, men are tethered to the far end, and no one can afford to stretch the line too taut. (Stories in the papers of tripwires, buried bombs like eyes you can't see staring back called land-mines.) This morning she lingers in the miniature trenches of the starter bed, covering seeds miniscule as gunfire seen from a long way off, keeping her day allotted to a few specific tasks and working with a composure we can only name faith. Maybe she, too, likes the clean spareness of her work, necessity making her morning in the garden almost holy, and how can she know that men and women in flat-bodied, steel-colored suits decades later maneuvering tank-sized SUVs through streets they lock doors against every morning, would kill without knowing why or how, for such a life.

9.12

Let me

just say

the ugliest
thing, let me

just

say, I am

I

am grateful

everyone I

know

I am

keeping in a pen

of exhaustion, a tenderness
that feels

like greed the muscled,

flat pads of

that man's hands, this
woman's thin wrists

I am holding up the grey-
white shape
of my life lived and finished it fits

and unlike

a mask

the eyes are

the only part left not cut

out

anyone

whose name

I know, I want

to stop and grip

by the shoulders,

tilt

my chin to aim my eyes more precisely

(stanza break)

in and ask

How are you

still here

Handwriting
For Mama Awa

I'm watching the world
erase the shadows it's spent
the whole day drawing, you
stacking sticks in strict
patterns, blowing through a conch
of fingers, coaxing smoke.
How many chores line
your grasp like a glove
of muscle? How many days
did it take to forget the pencil-
thin grip only a school-girl
knows? I pour rice in this
sift-bottom basket, comb
for mites, for grain
still dark in its husk. Lines
of laundry criss-cross
the compound, rows of onion
tufts mark the garden
you spent the dry season
watering. I'm learning
how hands train to a task,
precise beak of fingers
cocked to constant gauge, picking
a lice-sized pile. Wide clasp
of hand for driving a pestle
down in the mouth of a pounder,
coil of fingers for pulling
up rope from deep wells.
Tomorrow, when you're practicing
alphabets, when I'm watching
letters untether in a hoop
of loose fingers, pencil gyre
over lines of crabbed characters,
remind me how much of this world
is written in your sure hand.

Colony

I won't deny this hunger
to claim what I love-- to recover
the me that's razed
in the face and stark blaze
of a wonder. Is it so difficult
to believe that one silt-
scoured stone radiates its own
dark beam, attracting my attention
like a hard-edged magnet--
that connection of any sort
is willed from both sides
of the divide?

Once, I knew a body, and for the scent
of that fresh-washed skin
alone (starch on white cotton
pressed with a hot, dry iron)

I offered my heart
like a tooth-ready fruit.

Once, I claimed a silkcotton
I had no hand in planting
and only just that day laid my mat
beneath, where village women sat
resting, combing coos
in a calabash. I was reading a book
I'd brought to this
cluster of dust-hewn huts--
a book written in sickly, small-boned
shapes they knew by sight not sound--
when I read what the native name
they'd given me-- claimed
me with-- meant. Who hasn't
gathered all their discontent,
set out for shores of still-more wilderness
without any wish but to find some sense
they've lost? Who hasn't pressed
through a lens toward
pin-pricks of dust-flung
light and, needing reasons for reading
meaning in that bright clutter,
invented stories for clusters
aligned to their one small point?
Understand, I don't claim my right
from precedent; all I know is something
in my earth-bound, blind body rings--
trampled soil across a bright ravine--
chimed by something as plain

(no stanza break)

as a paring knife sliding
through tooth-resistant skin,
the center-leaded, feathered weight
of roses cupped by hands late
in a sun-heavy summer— to find
myself newly named: a raw-skinned
death from new elements, a burning
beyond any common sense
of self, of family, of nation
— Annihilation
in God— in the words of my far-flung,
print-ridden tongue.
Lying beneath the tree's
thrown-open limbs, I couldn't think
how to tell the women my finding
so it might mean anything—
just listened to the high-blown,
wind-caught chatter risen
from their few free minutes— higher, higher—
ashes on the breath of fire.

Revision

Let's begin again:

the man and woman lived
in a forest.

Oh, but that

isn't right--
the trees like spears

aimed against sky--

Surely the garden
is important:

light glutting

their upturned faces,
the trunks of their bodies

towering

above the frilled
heads of the flowers.

An open meadow, then.

Without a set of overhead
branches, let their stature go

unchallenged. But no,

the single tree is important--
the *opportunity* for shade

from such face-flushing light.

If it's dark you want
then let it be night, sometimes.

But you see, the time

has to pass
uncalibrated-- otherwise

the story

moves beyond simply
beginning.

The animals, then.

Let them have names and live
with the couple

as equals. No, no-- we went over this

with the flowers: it's important
that the man and woman were playing

at gods; it helps to relieve

any future guilt. And don't even think
of altering the flowers--

the separate, fenced-in beds,

the breathing leaves tacked
to delicate stems,

(no stanza break)

and individual
zest of scent and color--
I don't know why
they're right, but they're right.

First Excuse

I remember the world
was new but also
unyielding: every plant
and animal poised at the point
of its own opening— petals
folded like mouse-ears
downy and thinly fleshed,
fruit hard with un-used juices,
every animals' eyes shallow
with un-narrowed light.

I started performing
minor surgeries, testing
how my teeth broke skin,
how my finger slid inside
the hasp of a pea's green seam,
unclasping one by one
its tender contents.

Is it any wonder I wanted something
to bear more than the name
I gave it, why I entered her
body new as unbruised fruit
that never gathered enough weight
to fall.

First Defense

Suddenly everything
 had a word. Each day
he led a new
 beast by the scruff
or muzzle each name
 blossomed my throat
like scented air. *Tortoise,*
 mouse, horse, hare.
He'd found a way
 of living with
absence— a sound
 to summon the beast
when the beast wasn't
 there. How long,
with the sun only
 flickering skin
and breath without
 a word hard
to swallow, could I
 last without something
similar to give? I only
 wanted him to know
distance and emptiness
 answered, to show
how every word consumed
 hollows wider
at the core so soon
 the only thing you
have to spare
 is hunger.

Neruda's Living Room

Their skin scabbed
with paint, their skirts
hitched and dusted
in creases where light
seems to settle, the hands
of stone and wooden
women hold a window
frame in place, listening
with tilted heads
to different tones
of breaking waves
below. One woman
angles forward all on one
diagonal, cape caught
by a permanent wind,
shape of a ghost
rushing up a staircase.
One turns, shoulder
lifted coyly, as if
to accept a kiss
she knew was coming.
Another lifts her chin
in arrogance or a more
acute need to ascend.
Even the floor
is stone-- the only gloss
from glass cases, sails
of miniature ships inside
lifted and filled,
each rigging held up
equally the way a body
is freed from the challenge
of balancing in a body
of water. Bodies crumbling,
cracking along invisible seams,
the women suffer
from too much exposure,
traveling wind
and water, carrying
in their bellies
all a man's greed, knowing
the more angles
and plains a body breaks
the closer it gets
to living.

Moving In

Hornets in the porch
light, fenced lawn
gone to straw, feral cats
roving and living
off of wind-
fallen apples. Doors
open. We come home
to find a breeze, we hope,
has pushed through
screens, buffeting
ajar the front entry.
A window cracks--
my rocking chair leans back
too far. We start
locking, it's not enough
to latch-- your stereo,
my lap-top, each other's
sudden world-
worn bodies in five
o'clock, six, ten,
twelve o'clock
light. You call,
you're running
late, but want to hear
I'm home, the lights
are on, nothing's gone
wrong. I lie,
later, half on top
of you awake and find
I can take your pulse
from anywhere-- temple,
elbow, upper lip. Male
voices-- not yours, the next-
door neighbor's truck
gunning, and girls
shrieking, rattle the walls
and keep me
from sleeping. Someone
tells you rumors of past
parties held at this
address, *you know*,
you call from
the kitchen, *I bet*
Carver
has been in here, and I
look up from where

(no stanza break)

a finger of sunlight
holds down my page.

Shade

Fingernails under wallpaper
scratching sound like palpable
air or scatter-pattern of hands
behind your headboard; the face
you're sure— a third floor
window, the peripheral whisked
looking in— what don't you
believe? A boy the color
of a lightbulb cowering
in the corner of an old
hotel or rounding a wind-licked
house in full flee. Not eyes,
not corpuscles or corpses. The stain
of shape. The sand-scrubbed
rubbed-thin trace of veinery
pressed into stone. A violence
so shattering, his body not bulwark
or ballast enough, the spirit
jerks loose and imprints itself,
releasing his huddled, focused fear
like dust from a hung rug.
Skin icing over nerve, you want
to believe feeling evaporates, leaves
nothing, not even
a wet mark. Emotion a scrim
like early morning mist or just
morning touching bodies
in their beds.

Physics

Shannon beside me and the light streamers of wet, white crepe fluttering as the car flashes between trees. I'm aiming tires across glossed tarmac and Shannon, silent, wearing the necklace she likens to light— double shapes for double nature— the curve, the wave, the dot, particle— carved silver pendant and a bead dangling. Tell me, I say, anything— a story some something so I unremember why we're together, where. The airport and arrival we're pointed towards. Try particles, she says. Try two, and how they mimic in separate spheres. Across vast gaps call it passion-at-a-distance. Call it valence we cannot locate in skin, the interior veil of feeling. Call it bullet, recoil that ripples outward and returns bringing the body not asleep at cruising altitude her seat-belt fastened, to the body. Not asleep.

**Instructions After the Interment
for Katy**

Begin, you tell yourself, with something she
can feel— these arms like jacket flaps to wrap
around her hanging, wet-sack skin, to weigh
her body down against the helium
of grief. Then, give her somewhere she can sit
and stare— this room, these picture windows pressed
with pallid light like cataracts against
an iris. Give her food to try and taste,
a plate to scratch with knife and empty tines,
then fill the room with breath for her to breathe
or any word except the name you're not
supposed to say. As if your words could give
a body to air to keep a body alive.

Wisteria
for Gypsy 1976-2000

*After a great pain, a formal feeling comes--
--Emily Dickinson*

Somehow stark
 and mysterious--as the names
 lark,
starling,
 linnet,
 swift
limn so little
 of the wheel,
 dip and tilted
drift, but twine
 bright skeins
 of air between
the plumped and heated,
 beating breast and their
 idea. Days
you savor this
 newness, walking around
 bone-hollow-- quiet
as an egg, small
 trapped tide rocking
 against the chitin;
now tangible
 as an emptied
 dish, now unknown,
airy-- so far
 inside you it seems to sever
 galaxies
with its beam.
 All I know is, it wasn't
 the faint music
of a curlew or any air
 I have a name for
 that cast me
outside this evening
 to stand by the hedge, my still
 new and brazen
life
 deepening into darkness or away
 from light.

Testament

You're learning patterns
to tell your children: close
to the sowing and lapping
salt blue the weather's warmer;
the earth only shakes
on certain edges
of a continent long ago
cut adrift by shifting centers.
You are learning
backwards. There's hardly time.
Building houses closer
to mountains, tunneling deeper
through to new light,
you love all things
you've come closest to
owning, name
with the same thousand
sounds: the leaf you find
trembles like your own
aspen hand, the sky
remains bluer than any breath
you can't imagine.
Losing ways of speaking,
turning all tongues
to one won't bring you
nearer to hearing. The trees
are breathing. The ground
is opening its mouths.

Well Water

Water, *jio, ndiem,*
ndox for boiling water
for steaming water
for dampening coos
after sifting. Water for loosening
creases of clothing, water
for soap soaking suds
through old thread.
Water for rinsing and
rinsing and, hanging, dripping
on chickens drinking in
puddles, sudden in sun.

Water for sprinkling
on thresholds of houses,
for holding dirt down
against sweeping or wind.
Water for wetting ears eyes
and mouth, for burnishing skin
for preparing like slaughter the body
for prayer. Water for fasting.
Water for thirsting and so, for sealing
the soul against sickness
or sin. Water for spitting--
even the lips must be wiped of all

water for drinking, for drawing
up buckets swimming with insects
and half of a lizard's
bird-severed sprig. Water
where someone's been
missing a twin and finds her
a bobbing, time-bloated bag. Water
for coffins and often for villages'
storage of stories, water like blood
feeding rivers of living
where we harvest each day
from down a dark throat.

List of First Lines

when the winter sits as if

when a wrist gives

when you pour two saucers-full for

when the sifter sticks

when the window

when drifts

when fenced-in, staked-down, full of forgetting, bent and kissed

when, if, then

when

when spoons tarnish

when the moon removes

when, whose

when wither isn't it-- more drift, almost ash,

when a clock's hands have wiped its whitened face

when half the calving's risked for fuller hands

when kindling's stacked, a packed pyramid--first fourteen, then thirteen inside

when itching rends a loose stitch, a stray

when the wash creaks in a cold key on the line

when to burn

when to cut what won't brown, tie two ends, haul and hold

when water seals stone to sediment, stem to picture turns

when the kettle seethes a stream on warming hands

when the birds

(stanza break)

when rooms split light like a bent tin

when the cabinet's stacked, still damp or dripping, isn't it evening

when seed scatters, buckshot-strewn, through, or threw with, this

when shadows, parceled out from edge to edge

when by the bed the loose green is gotten

when skin

when burns raw red instead of, still

when lying quiet

when told to turn

when sighing through a reed of barbed trees, try

Wintering

This season isn't generous. Our neighbor's field stands in yellow tatters even the faintest eddy of air would stir, bent scepters of sunflowers gather snow in small crowns. All things resist the specific, find an even cleanness in cliché. The night is wondrous where detail means a reader might not recognize the scene, the lovers come from anywhere and keep living in anytime. It's nothing personal— it's just that soda cans and rusted bicycles have no place in this landscape. Or cherry branches like cracks in a concrete sky. In the afternoon thaw, the prints of strays that stalk the feeder widen to the size of paper weights. On the side porch they sleep beneath, one clothespin lies half erased by snow. I want to feel welcome, but there is little out there I recognize for what it is. The sparrows explode tidily to the ground.

Response to the Call

For she is the day's alpha and omega:
pounding coos for breakfast while the world brightens,
walking the baby sick with *siburu* while the world darkens.
For she tells time by chores instead of sun:
five o'clock. No wind. From here, ruffled roof-edge
of corrugate, mud walls scabbed with an arm's-breadth
worth of white-wash, last dab of what was left.
Corrugate doors propped shut with thick sticks.
Fenced-in circle of dirt where every body that's left
has left its mark-- hatch-marks of claw, shuffle of thin flip-flop,
heavy hoof and pulled tire tread. Turned over bowl
rubbed through white enamel to black metal,
the artery of color. If darkness is beginning,
then never empty. If emptiness is absence
then after ending. Most days I sit-- if ending, beginning.
If beginning, the long speaking, the long throat
for warming. If violet, the finest lining finding
light and swallowing, skin against the inside,
the calm warming of all color. Whether the sky feathers
with light or whether indigo the airing, the cooling
into blue view, the wide expanse, the breathing
into tops of lungs. Lines of laundry hanging, darker,
dampened sand pocked with drippings,
tattered T-shirts, shorts faded, permanently stained,
clipped in place with pink, baby-blue, sea-green,
plastic clothespins. Puddles of soap-soured ground,
handled green and purple headpans
tilted on the stoop, I am poured out like water.
For washing takes the better part of the morning
and must be finished by the dead hours.
For in the dead hours she closes her door for rest.
For I do not think she rests. For firstly she draws water.
For secondly, for thirdly, she returns to the well.
For I tire of counting but still she goes on working,
and no cosmological constant can undo movement--
Andromeda rolling towards us at 30 miles per second
or hauling one half minute the length of her long arms,
elbows locked, arms levered high above her head
and swaying her hips in time. For she is Awa, Sereer
for Eve. For when she looks up her eyes are inscrutable.
For sometimes I see her look sideways at the sun
going down in a purple and orange sky.
For whether the sky is slate for three weeks,
whether the stream speaks its gold-pebbled,
glitter-clipped babble, glassy lantern, true cage
for sudden rush to breaking, light's reliquary--

(no stanza break)

her Sereer is quick and bright as river water
 after rains, and like river water her Sereer carries
 bodies and earth, and obscures them all from my sight.
 Most days I sit— a cheap battery's laminated paper casing,
 popped off plastic cap, charcoal-colored powder insides
 seeping out. What are you doing? You want everyone
 to feel sorry for you? You want everyone to stop
 and feel sorry for you? Stick a child dragged and dropped,
 I may tell all my bones. Were bodies just your way of staving
 off questions? I want to know— how long did you think
 we wouldn't notice? For her rice is sweet and not too dry.
 For she borrows *neverdie* and cooks the sauce she knows I like.
 For she shuffles and slaps her flip-flops to announce her arrival,
 hands the bowl of hot food in and will not take thanks
 or money for the labors of Allah's will.
 Most days I sit. For Allah provides. For Allah provides
 seldomly and at great cost. Shard of brown egg imported
 from Holland, one roughly round wheel cut from a flip-flop
 imported from Taiwan, pierced by half a stick axle.
 Scrap of a Swedish phonebook Bjorne Bjornestad
 Bjornestad, or newspaper Yaya Jammeh Begins Good Will
 greased from half a buttered loaf of bread.
 Yellow and red wrapper, Jumbo— *nexxna torop!*— twenty-five
 bututs of beef bouillon seasoning, locust beans, dried fish
 tossed in today's *mbahaal*. For food is brown or white
 and brown, or brown and orange. If color
 then from all colors one— in two kinds of quiet,
 I sit, watching and waiting for something to pray for:
 air of bread, flint of grain, fruit
 like liquid light all fit inside fine as idea,
 and I might miss the emptiness altogether.
 Do you want to know when I first guessed?
 I don't know. I don't have your knack for binding
 mind and light. But what you did to the women—
 (for she gets down on both knees to greet her elders)
 woman with tattooed indigo
 chin forget woman with bow-shaped
 scar where two hooks bit in
 forget woman with earlobes
 stretched for more gold girl
 who stains gums as her mother's
 done with leftover lantern ash
 forget girl with hatch-marks
 etched in each temple, if she'd ever
 left the village she'd read
eleven, or *equal to* turned
 on its side, and in this new
 naming forget women

(no stanza break)

whose bodies are a spell
against change take my forgetting
from me forget me—
fooling them with the milk
of men, the planet yet to find its own
dark orbit, internal turning—
only the men were fooled, raging
like death was something they could craft
from their raft of washed-up flesh,
as if the dark could penetrate
every cell. For she sits in the dark to shell groundnuts,
cracks with a quick flick of the wrist and a twist of the fingers.
For I can neither experience nor describe the form
which meets me but only body it forth.
For I can sometimes make her laugh and she laughs like a small girl.
For she has a small girl who lives in another village.
For she has two other children buried before her.
For she hauls her son up by the arm and carries his limp body to bed.
For she is the last by the fire, pours water
over embers to make coal for tomorrow's ironing,
to make orange, the ripened rind of red-
shift, how quickly galaxies from a fixed point
recede, the risen hissing, the turning under tongue.
Maybe you'd had enough of voices
blurring with your one unwavering silence.
For often she says nothing. Knowledge?
That's just the print-setter's term for having
sense, and we preferred to be sense-less— after the sunsets
and dooryards and the sprinkled streets, knowing
the world more ways than through the five
limitations of our bodies, naming and renaming.
When our catalog was exhaustive— for water
is *water*, also *jio*, also *ndox*, also *ndiem*,
also an odorless, tasteless, very slightly compressible
liquid oxide of hydrogen H₂O which appears
bluish in thick layers, freezes at 0°C and boils
at 100°C, is a poor conductor of electricity and a good solvent,
descends from the clouds as rain, forms streams,
lakes and seas, a major constituent
of all living matter— we thought
we'd have reached you. But here is no water
but only rock, rock and no water
and the sandy road, the road winding drip drop
drip drop drop drop drop but there is
no water and we haven't crafted an ocean
with our small collection of sounds, words
just divisions rooting us deeper in dirt,
roads that fade or deepen depending on the season, (no stanza break)

depending on how many feet trample to, or past,
the fallow fields. The air breathes upon us here
most sweetly, as if it had lungs and rotten ones.
We want the brimming nothing back you tricked us from,
and we don't care how many worlds we have to destroy:
you who pushed through hips of hill dust
you who rose through mouth bloom of dust
you who blew apart far from the hole
How were your dust-veins slickened to blood
When were your dust-lungs caged against air
Why were your dust-teeth sharpened to stone
What will your dust-dreams make of your waking
with two feet for tracking the hollow down
with two nostrils for finding the hollow ground
with two ears for ringing against hollow ground
with two eyes for watering the hallowed ground
with two hands for smoothing the hollow down
when the hollow is found.
There— listen. Are you near
enough to hear this breath of sense,
this garbled trilling of body
mimicking reed? We were mixed
in gas and granite with you
in the beginning, and beyond this
recognition and rush towards more
forced air, detritus of helium,
deuterium by which we measure
quasars and cosmic background radiation
variations the seeds from which galaxies grow,
enough undetectable dark matter to bring
us to the border between expanding
emptiness and slowing slowly towards reverse,
the air's the sound of stopping, the world a force
pressing harder in the deeper you sink.

Notes

In "Definition", lines in italics are quoted from Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary.

In "Cityscape", lines in italics are quoted from the Microsoft Encarta article "Honeybee Dances".

In "Wisteria", the phrase "faint music" is borrowed from the title of a Robert Hass poem.

In "Well Water" and "Response to the Call", the words *jio*, *ndiem*, and *ndox* are the Fula, Mandinka and Wolof words for "water".

In "Response to the Call", "Sereer" represents a West African language and ethnic group; "Yaya Jammeh" is the current president of The Republic of The Gambia.

In "Response to the Call" the following lines are borrowed from other sources:

"I may tell all my bones" and "I am poured out like water" from The Song of Songs.

"For I can neither experience nor describe the form which meets me but only body it forth" from Buber's essay "I and Thou".

"after the sunsets and dooryards and sprinkled streets" from Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

"an odorless, tasteless, very slightly compressible... a major constituent of all living matter" from Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary.

"Here is no water but only rock... but there is no water" from Eliot's "The Wasteland".

"The air breathes upon us here most sweetly, as if it had lungs and rotten ones" from Shakespeare's The Tempest.

"Response to the Call" borrows stylistically in part from Smart's "Jubilate Agno".