Grounding| A collection of poems

Amy Ratto Parks

The University of Montana

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Grounding

A Collection of Poems
by Amy Ratto

B.A. Miami University, 1998
M.A. The University of Montana, 2004

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
The University of Montana
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Patricia Goedicke, Chair

Dean, Graduate School

5-18-04 Date
The loose hammer of laughter swings  
between us and I think  
we are building nothing.  
Fluttering talk like birds that cannot land.  
Affection and the way  
we are supposed to charm each other.  
Come closer. I will tell you everything.

-- from “What We Build”
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Section I
Arrival
For Dai, My Late Apology

A General in your country’s army, you owned things: a rice cooker, a refrigerator. And still you waded in the rice patties, picked rows of beans in your backyard; still, you gathered water from the well in dented metal buckets. Once each morning and evening you prepared the meal your sick wife could not, sometimes slicing mango as a treat, mostly for me, I assumed, since no one else would eat any. There is more you always said, though there was not, shooing me toward the yellow fruit, eat. The first days, I offered my hands to the rice, beans, and mango. You said if our guest is happy our god is happy. Saddened by all that labor, I escaped into the market to forget your long day. When the first big rain of the monsoon came I was out on a rooftop bar, drinking Fanta under a blue tarp with other Americans. We took pictures of the silk scarves and umbrellas bobbing, the people scattering to the cover of shop awnings, feet hop scotching to the few dry places in Thamel’s narrow and quickly flooding streets. I never asked is this rain too much for the beans and corn, I didn’t think of your back bent, carrying the bucket that sloshed water onto your feet through the fast gathering mud, or your shirt, dotted at first with rain that slowly spread its darkness across the width of your back. When I got home, we ate, and I thanked you, but did not pray. I had no idea how to make my gods happy.
Hungers

My plate is piled high with curried goat and rice
and Dai sliced cucumbers and mango
because I had been craving their sweet water.
He serves me first, before the family comes
because I am a guest in their home, a student
here to learn their language. Every night
I watch him bring handful after handful of rice
to my plate and I know I am a guilty guest.

I can only think of that year, the thinning year,
my skin thinning over bone, ribs and hip curve rising.
Once, I thought it chose me: (bone rising, thin skin)
an inquisition of spirit, a lesson in restraint sent
to direct the will toward something more
than food. But can I say I didn't like my thin wrists,
my collar bones risen beyond my shirt?
Can I say my will did not deceive me?

Candles at dinner and Dai's face eager,
You like? You no like.
And how could I say I am full
I don't deserve your wife is hungry
she is sick and I am from a country that refuses food.

Later, in my room, my gorged stomach presses
against the window glass and below, there is a city of open mouths.
In this country there is no lesson of the will
for the children who beg for bananas and milk.
I think of the boy who waits by the bookstore
who knows the capital of any country in the world,
ask me ask me, it's a game he calls, Columbia? Bogotá
two rupees for every right answer. He will never find pride
in his hunger. His ribs have never risen.
The station of his bones is surface
and his hollow swell of stomach like an eye, grows wider.
For Dai, The Question I Heard

In the evenings when you sliced cucumber
and tomato, I watched and you said I was silly.
We talked while you smashed the sliced vegetables
into chutne, tensing your face with each sweep
of the mortar into the pestle, every few minutes
making sure, did I want more tea in my cup?
Your name was Juddha Gurung, but you asked
me to call you Dai, father, and you called me
Rena, but I don’t know why. You told me
about your travels to England, Germany
New York and D.C., about how bland and sweet
American food is. I don’t think you believed
that I wanted to know the secret to your food,
the curried potatoes, the sweet, snowy rice
that stuck in my teeth and filled my mouth
with flavor long after the meal. When the cucumber
and tomato were finished, you reached high
onto a shelf, selected a jar of brown powder
and began spooning tiny amounts into the chutne.
What is it, I asked and you said, spices. What kind,
but you would not say. When I persisted, you mumbled
something, and turned your head, looked at me
as if to say, you are American, why would you start now,
asking the names of things?
Flight

Near Dai’s house, past the temple hidden by trees
there is butcher bench, though I have never seen a butcher there.
Walking toward the taxi for town each morning
I see his work, usually chickens
twitching above baskets of feathers, their heads
stacked neatly in the corner.
But today, there is a goat on its back, limp
and white, that covers the whole surface of the bench
where cowering dogs curl away from me.
Her blood is already collected in grocery bags,
though some still drips from the table
in viscous, heavy strings. Her stomach is opened
and her head sits separate, upright and unreal
as magician’s prop, facing her own tail.
I cannot imagine her alive.
Hovering in this pose between being killed
and being eaten, she seems graceless.
Across the path, on a shop stoop, a small girl
not more than two, lifts her dress and squats
low before releasing a thin river down
the cement steps, yellow and brown mixing.
She studies her creation quietly, then stands
and lowers her dress. Right on queue her mother
brings a bucket, sending the mess over the path
toward the table and my feet and I want
to cover that headless body. All her bare,
rubbery skin, her eyes and carry her
to the edge of the city, gutless
and blood let across my arms.
Swambunath

_Oh God is a curse word in English. I know that._

—Rahdha Gurung, 14

This is not a prayer from the dark belly of the cross
or a bent-kneed promise of goodness
not the fear of sin.
At this hillside temple at dusk
prayer wheels tilt on wobbly axes,
hand after hand passes over the bulging brass wheels
Someone could ask me to leave
and I would. I know I am too pale,
my clothes are too crisp, too new, but this hand
that has rested on pews and has held heavy hymnals
is turning the wheels, just the same.
This is not my father's God.

A monk ahead of me steps over dogs
sleeping in the temple’s shadow, the arches
of his shoes broken. His steady pace
and his mumbled prayer, it all rises.
Watching gray clouds spread a spindly web
across the city, I too can believe
that my fingers speak when they spin those wheels,
that each turn sends Sanskrit prayers
peeling away and lifting into the wind
in golden shawls, gathering in the parade
of rising voices, colors, incense.
Here is the garden beyond the old walls.
Here is a different communion.
Boudinath

A festival crowd buys butter lamps from carts, three rupees for one small flame to place on the temple steps, where thousands line the white walls. From a low balcony I watch one man in his circuit at the base of the temple. In his silence he becomes singular. His quiet divides him from the vendors and beggars at the shop fronts, the boys climbing on statues. Even from this height, I see that he won’t stop until it’s finished, that this is a march made with more than ceremony. Palms pressed together, he crouches down, falls to his knees, lies flat, then rises to standing. Two steps, then palms together, again. His body moves, but I imagine his mind

a field of snow and snow still falling, his spine a rope of kelp, the broad leaves brushing up, down with his breath, breath a current across the water that rolls sand over sand, itself. It is raining now, but still the vendors call, umbrellas pop open above the dry wicks. This is an offering of body in prayer: his knees, palms, face given beyond the distraction of weather. He affects no one in his motion. Now, becomes the thing moved by breath. Now, he is holding the kelp in one hand, floating far below the surface, his hair raised on its short ends and waving, his eyes open, unstung by the salt and seeing the crowd on the shores above him. They swim out (is it good to be so alone?) but he sends them away, a scattered fleet of white hulls puncturing the surface above him. No one needs him to do this. When he rises, his wet clothes and hair are silhouetted by smoke from the rain snuffed wicks and the struggling light. There is still the calling crowd.
Pashtupatinath

Your elbows and ankles
poke from the pyre’s straw lit flame
and your sons scurry to fan the fire.
Across the river, life continues as it does,
in all of its dirty necessity. Shop doors open,
mothers slosh water over dishes
or children, monkeys leap the mossy walls.
They say that the dead can hover
above their bodies until every inch
is black ash and if I could see you there
studying yourself, I might call out to you, stranger,
to ask what you saw behind your eyes
in that slow dim of death. No film reel of memories,
no brilliant tunnel, no face of God.
Are they your own plain hands that welcome you?
I look without expecting your face in the smoke,
nor the glint of an eye for an answer.
Carrying

We got there when there was nothing yet to see -- nothing to disrupt the day, to draw them from the warmth of their stick fires. Two women in yellow head scarves hunched over a steaming carcass, collected blood in bags.

Bleating goats scattered chickens and children, dirty from monsoon mud, from the wood smoke rising. There was nothing yet to see, but the cobbled path was crowded: men gathered, girls with bony sisters on their hips looked out over a field of young corn, a small clearing, one tree, a calf straining against its rope.

The chunky sputtering of a helicopter grew across the valley floor and a boy lunged toward the calf, drew her in as the corn bent beneath the weight of wind and the tree curled humbly toward earth while the fevered were hurried (cheeks flushed pink) through thunder and exhaust, blond hair, grass, spinning. It lifted with pregnant difficulty, left the village with silence and a wind torn crop.

***

We are late because of watching the rescue and the trail darkens into lush canopy. Sherpas bring lights to find us, hold our hands point the beam where they think we’ll step, then to where leeches rise from the wet rocks, one mouth anchoring the narrow body, the other stretching blindly toward warm skin. Later, one of them will find a boy’s wrist, soak his bed in his own let blood. Later, too, a Sherpa will slip on the orange mud. His scream will freeze my steps sear the mossy forest

He is not ours, they’ll say, we can’t stop. We’ll leave him below the slick, basket shattered, hands ringing torn skin. His chin will raise to a group of men, neck bared in pain.
His fingers will creep toward the wound,
leap from the clean white bone.
Where I Hid

Our dinner that night was to be a surprise
but when a porter walked two goats into camp
we no longer wondered.
They began circling the goats but were warned
loudly of the delicacy of the American sensibility:
They don't want to see it get killed.
My husband followed them over the rise to the river
to watch it if he were going to eat it, he said.
I stayed in my room nursing blisters
and sore knees while he followed
from river to kitchen to watch them
become something to spread over rice.
Only later, by days, did I hear that the first
goat went gracefully with a slip of the knife
to his neck, but the second went differently.
Instead of beneath, they brought it
from above, onto the bone of his neck
in a single, heaving chop. The boy looked
as surprised as the goat, he said, when the head
did not fall off, and lifted the knife again
and again until the boy at the horns and the boy
at the feet fell away from each other.
They were laughing, he said, in embarrassment,
or humor he couldn’t tell. Play or not,
I won’t ever know. Even this, I know
second hand. Years later and it stays with me,
my shying away, my inability to call it something,
that image of sudden recognition,
the boy and goat both wide eyed next to the river.
outside mike's american restaurant

dog running at us on three legs (but he has four) comes over dung cobbled road here is a dirt brown dog ducking blue red rickshaws skirting sandal traffic and sari silk, cab wheels coming kamikaze along palace walls (moss covered, crumbling) on three legs and that fourth coming too that half-split paw pops up through pigeon wings a rising metronome of broken bone toward the dumpster toward the day's drop of jelly biscuit and burger that paw like a bored finger flicks up then up against the air
News in Dourali

It came over a crackle-voiced line from the other side of the world. The shopkeeper leaned across the counter, his face near yours, timing the call on a stop watch. Through the doorway I could see mist settling into the village with dusk, and porters passing quickly, bent under towers of shop goods, their heads pressed against the basket strap, a strip of rice bag, tied. Along the road we passed two friends running toward rumors of hot showers. “His grandmother died,” I said. In our room above the village, you cried and on the other bed, I sat holding my own hands, not knowing how to fill that space. You left to hang prayer flags for her and I watched you from the window, your blue hood bobbed through the mist, passed through roosters, goats, children, until it was taken by the hillside’s deep green and the flutter of prayer flags. I tried to mourn her death with you, thinking of her husband and family fanning themselves against dusty, west Texas heat, cars pulling in and out of the driveway, pans of yellow cake on the counter. But instead I was anchored here, in the hovering monsoon season, straining to see you through the black smoke rising from soot-plaqued roofs. Long after families had gathered for dinner, you returned, and we sat together reading. The room’s single bulb waxed and waned, then fell dim but neither of us reached to pull the chain.
Leaving Kathmandu

Napping as a child I’d lie awake
next to my mother watching the shade billow out,
then sigh back against the windows, light pouring
from its edges. The ceiling fan limped above me
and my mother’s hand, resting on my stomach.

I’d flatten myself beneath it, inch to the side and escape
into the empty house, into the dusty quiet, half-opened
cabinets and dishes drying in her wake.
Every step in that stillness would return.
Once I came back through the door
and saw her eyes expressionless as my father’s
looking up from the casket, jaw slack, cheeks
pulled tight. I crept close before her breath.
After that I imagined being buried
under the baseball diamond up the street,
watching the traffic and people going on.
There were the boys on base, dirt on white pants
and red stripes. Parents waving, grabbing
little brothers on the sidelines. There were the factory
workers in and out of rusting car doors, women
in square dresses, brown skirts. Weather
slid gray over me under the grass barrier,
sometimes sun. From there, it was safe to see.

And now, below me in the plane the landscape of clouds
breaks into muffled greens, crooked brown stitches
of rivers. Here are the countries from history
classes and magazines, countries of rice, bicycles, war.
Under the world. Perhaps a woman wrings a dress to hang
and notices her own rough knuckles. I can’t know.
I close my eyes and imagine her. The dress is yellow,
her hands pruned from long water,
a strand of dark hair falls across her face.
Section II
Grounding
Retreating

On the trail above the coast, ferns spring from mossy tree branches, spill over themselves in clumps on the forest floor. I learn their names: *sierra wood fern, common lady fern, licorice fern.*

but no matter—

they are still only
the plants my sister danced beneath
on my grandmother’s porch.

Then a break in the trees, open sky and waves clawing the black sand, drawing it back into the rolling cauldron of the fog settled Pacific. Each surge leaves a lacy veil of foam streaking the sand, sewn white and sewn again.

Below, on the beach myself, I slip in the coin slush of rocks shining still from receding waves that climbed the pebbly incline
to fall back in echo of applause thick and distant. Listening for it, I was struck by the words: lace for water, coins for rocks, and here, absorbed by the sea’s sounds, imagining thousands of hands clapping, converting it all to the smaller language of the city.

Lace on a veil, on the edge of a girl’s pink dress, the wealth of a bastion of coins so thick I can walk upon it. The more I try, the more that language is eclipsed by a life of places so far from here.

Is true distance only measured from our own beginnings? Walking back between ferns, I say their names, bend fronds back, count pollen gathered there. They are dripping with old rain, their roots confident in the forest floor.
Fire Lesson

Their wet bark peels back easily, but they snap, crisp as raw beans, breaking into kindling for the stove. It is slow work, this small communion of bringing the outside in, a fire contained to heat a room. You mother each flame, nurse it with paper, nearly beg the reward of lit wood, that wash of heat and lifting sound, fast as a brooding wing.

But sincerity will fuel no fire and you handle it too roughly. Nervously, you open the door and the swift air floods the young light. Instead, learn to leave the red coals to smolder, have faith in their heat.

On your knees before the stove, you hold cold hands to the warmth, open at first, then rubbing together, shuffling calluses back and forth like rough prayer. Look from there through the small hole in the door, see the orange flame leap, then slowly stall to crawl along the seething branches. Watch how it burns as though it chooses to.
Introduction

A week in this cabin and I haven’t seen a footprint
in the sand at the swimming hole, no deer
wandering between trees.
At dawn, a fine rain began and grew into a steady curtain,
the kind that flooded the creek to begin with.
All morning I watched it from the window, my legs curled
under a flannel blanket, a mug of sweet tea
in my hand, warmed by the lingering heat
from a night left fire, the coals sending less and less
until, at last, I put on my boots and rain jacket,
the stiff hood standing like blinders beside my face,
and went out in search of kindling
for the hungry stove, my anchor in all this openness.
Basket on my arm, on a narrow trail,
the rain was clattering on my hood,
but soft as static on my nose and cheeks,
when I heard quiet chirping, anonymous at first, then
finches, tiny ones, no larger than my palm
leaping from branch to branch across the path,
from grass to horsetail reeds
and then none. Not staying long enough
to eat, not picking the moss or bark,
but offering me a primer for the forest all the same,
the sounds of some older alphabet
left me as one mapless,
swallowed by foreign conversation.
Waking In a Borrowed Place

I came to it empty from sleep,  
without even water on my tongue,  
only the dry musk of night still lingering there.  
Morning was coming, a shy stranger, thin,  
milky blue, no orange illusions of glory.  
All night I woke and woke, dreaming of a woman,  
hair dark and silver streaked, driving a car.  
She was beautiful with age. A baby was crying out of sight  
and she kept looking at me, scornful, as if  
I should say something. So I said  
too much, the words falling against her,  
rude and unexpected as hail.  
Still she was staring.  
Now, nothing will commit.  
The room's shadows are hesitant, murky  
without the confident black edge of afternoon.  
In the flirting light, grass and fern are reclaiming greens,  
bark is resuming brown and I envy her obstinate silence,  
the weight of her eyes,  
knowing there is more to collect than to leave.  
How many times will I forget  
that the world exhales without care or fear?  
Yet I am here, against the watery glass of morning,  
witness to only the plainest rising,  
still sure that the names of things will surface with enough light.
Cartography, or In Answer

My instinct was to say, 20 miles from the Oregon coast, the moss wraps the birch branches and the air condenses, running down the windows. But who wants to know about these trees, skinny as foal’s legs and leaning in over the creek like swords at a soldier’s wedding?
What would you know if I said that the rain swollen creek is receding?
I am tired of mapping things for you, saying this is where and that was where.
I can’t give you the nondescript town corners, the swing sets, the maps of cracked concrete that chart a memory of place. After all, I think of eating cereal and hard boiled eggs on autumn Saturdays and call it home.
If you still want something, take this: I build a fire every morning, touch a match to the paper twig tower and wait for the orange to catch, quick as fish against the knobby bark. It spreads to the edges of the soot black stove, the orange going red as wood splits into coals square as horse’s teeth. When I leave, the heat is seething and rippled as water’s reflection. If it’s warm when I return, then I am lucky.
The Olympic Coast

Rain shoulders leaden clouds above us
anvil ready the smells of fish rotting
between rocks and black algae sends
the sand to bronze. Tide draws then wind
to shore. We are the fish spine rotting
our steps press damp halos
on the sand and we smell it coming
quick in the iron of armor, the long sting
of salt drying white sketches on a fence.

We are the snapping bull kelp
crisp under foot and yellow calm folding
onto itself, building heavy against
the coast and it comes
slaps the deck raucous as hot grease, as
applause. We are all the smells of rubber soles squealing
across a deck, of mussels, oysters boiling
in a cabin below, we are stethoscoped and sending
hands to ears too loud and a rope tails
whipping cursed through pink cold hands,
and the hollow cough of scratched canvas
above us, the bow, wind-skewed and somehow
it stops

hangs, a mid-air netting, fine as static
across our faces. We are the carpet of moss, the stretch
up after the release of our own weight. Now we are exchanged
for smells of wet leather, fern fronds
curled under glassy beads, still as ice. In the green
cover's bright smell, like wood, rotted and supple,
rain gathers on broad leaves,

slides down creased, green tongues.
At the Blackfoot

My mother should have spent her whole life
in a place like this. The river has receded leaving
the stones piled dry, their colors muted
by fine dust or pine duff, some drawn
brilliant by an eddy’s rush. Before me,
a tree with a yawning gape, an almond
shaped opening tall as my face and staring
open as a paused mouth, full of amber thick sap.
Lower, the milky yellow brittles to wax,
_masks the bark in the mess of the accidental, the spilled.

Her wilderness is the two city blocks
where she’s lived her life. Daisies and corn flowers
open pale blue along the sidewalk and she’s learned
to find blackberries growing in the factory’s shadow,
honeysuckle under the thunder of the railroad.
Trading brick house for brick house, childhood
for children, there were always the nesting robins,
the beetles to be carried back outside.
You can smell the rain coming, she’d say,
paus - ing with arms of groceries. Along the highway
to St. Louis, she’d leave us in the blue Pontiac
while she picked wild flowers for the ride.

Hollow in places, the sap shatters at my touch, higher though,
it hangs translucent, frozen in that moment. But then,
it is less a mouth and more, a woman in her month,
heat fevering through the bark, pushing.
The glazed smear strings out like honey,
collects dirt on my finger and there is its smell,
still, the birth of pine, the unsplit breath
of wind twisted bark, receding water, bird rush.
So I pick one for her, one perfect cone of violet
buds, some opened enough for orange
stamens to spider out. It smells clean as celery
and peppered musk. I touch the stem
to a bubble of sap and the tiny bloom is balanced
by that smell the size of a grove.

She is drinking tea on the porch as night begins,
shingles peel above her, paint flakes under her feet
as she pushes the swing and I toss the flower into the deepest
flow. All that smell and color catches quickly under, 
dips, rises and recovers, an echo of purple 
being swallowed by deep green and us, too, plunging 
into places vast, and familiar textures bending 
to currents. A robin darts from beneath the bridge 
soars edgewise and up, steals my vision to the tree tops: 
the sun crowning the hillside, the last burst of blue sending nightfall.
So Are These Thoughts of You

As a dog pushes with its nose
to cover a bone in cool soil.
As cool soil. As seedling, as rock,
as trowel broken root
under the tomatoes’ willowy stalks.
As fish rise. As a frozen lake
cracks under the invisible
weight of wind. As sun shot
through the veil of forest
scatters across leaf and bough and
duff. As first the corners of brick crumble.
As lime in tonic, as plastic
drawn tight across window panes.
The tiny sweet discovery of honeysuckle.
The untraceable source of sound
when an old chair rocks
on an old floor.
As kudzu as satin as bruise
as garlic cloves in their centers
sprout green, as the sound of hour
in my mouth takes nothing
of tongue and teeth, can ride
breath toward my lips and be gone.
As a fly buzzing, then gone.
Or a woman’s face
after she’s run across a road to take
the arm of a man she thought she knew.

-- for my father
Knotting

Bent beneath the moss
these trees send their branches
in angles away from the sky.
Some arch over the rain soaked
leaves and twigs, the ferns, and some
skew northeast, southwest, south,
like pipe cleaners bent by a child.
They are knotted and turned
as my grandmother’s hands
eating a sandwich, white bread
cut into two triangles, ham and cheese.
Holding it in a tentative web of fingers,
thin veins cresting over, burrowing
under the tendons, she raised it
to her teeth, each fingertip aiming
away from her mouth, all the knuckles
and skin and bread ticking in the sun,
rocking with the gentle palsy of age.
What gravity bends us this way? Turns
our knuckles and swells them, leans
backs forward, curls shoulders around
in a frail, dugout cave, angles us frozen
as branches beside a flooded creek
tumbling over itself and rushing past.
Letter to Sara

I sat down to write simply, to tell you
about the new house, the wide windows
the day round sun on the hills. I was set
to talk about a life I have finally found enviable.
October here is different. The turned leaves
still gather red against the mailbox, the sky falls
slate to blue, gathering,

but I can’t sleep. It’s not the kids
across the street or the neighbor’s dog, not the railroad.
I want to tell them our stories. Did you know I was always
homesick? Lying in the bottom bunk, staring up
at the wood grain, I’d strain to hear the television
downstairs or put my pillow in the window sill,
smell the rotting wood, the iron screen and watch
the phone booth below, waiting for desperate teenaged
couples to tumble in.

The cross light flashed don’t walk
13 times before holding orange. Or I’d imagine taking
the path to our house across town, past the Catholic
church, past the playing card company, the bridge
over the highway. Always slow, there was the rusted Pontiac
to think of, the highway wind from the bridge.
And you came, too, walking through the night
along the tree shadowed sidewalks and lamp lit
curbs, then up the driveway into the house.
We’d go room to room in the dark, looking at photos,
touching the static of the TV screen, standing still
in the echoed quiet. Up the stairs and standing
confident as ghosts beside the beds we’d watch
our family breathe, then turn to our room, crawl
under the covers and try again to sleep. It was as if one place
couldn’t be home without the other.

Here, all the clouds
are blowing east. Their steely grey moves massive
over the house, like the black barrel of a train passing
a car and because I am still, I feel I am moving backward.
There should be nothing new about place. These hands,
these eyes have not changed. Isn’t this the same wind?
bringing winter against us? There are no handrails here
above the space, no buildings to block the vertigo
of even this quiet room and the old tricks are old.
Who can linger in the details of thousands of miles
of highway?

Give me a pub in some faceless town.
You’ll rush in after I’m seated, a thick, orange scarf
stacked to your chin, your cheeks flushed and smiling.
We’ll have a tall booth. There will be sweet potato fries
and beer on an old, slanted table. It will be poorly
lit, the service slow and I don’t care if we talk
about our jobs, our family, our art – I want your perfect
short teeth, dark lashes, your widow’s peak. The welling up
of Autumns. What gesture of warmth comes in that opening
history when even this window, these hills, these dark
bellows of clouds fold into me, begin me again without you.
The Yellow Farmhouse

When we get to the corner where the old tavern and the rusting corner of fence for the pasture meet, we’ll turn in along the dirt road. We’ll find the bridge over the creek and behind it all, the same fields of corn and soy beans lining the horizon, the bristling sway of green leaves all summer. We’ll pass the oak that shades the front room and the small lawn that fades into the fields. But it isn’t our place, not anymore, and we’ll stay at the dusty windows. *It’s so dirty and small*, we’ll say, though it always was. The bedroom there was tiny, the window small and covered in shining silverfish paused on the sun drenched sills. Those long mornings and evenings filled with coffee or wine, legs tangled in sheets, cooling on either side of the day’s heat. I remember we were always leaving, always locking the doors and being glad to get away from the slim Ohio hills surrounding us. Driving south or west toward mountains, divining camps in any blank place. What did we find along those roads that wasn’t here, what kind of selves were we hunting? From here, I love even the crumbs on those sheets, the cobwebs above the door. Our selves in my memory melt into the bare feet and the fan ticking back on itself.
The Bitterroot, Early

The boat’s bending stern arches up
and back like a landed fish while the muddy swirl
of April water moves past, pillows over
rocks, then naked willow limbs, storm-broken
and straining the river. There are ribs, a spine,
the leg of a deer in the shallow sand being washed
in the water’s quick edges, its thin fur
lapping open, closed against the bone.
Below, trout are bracing against the winter
water’s old intrusion, the snow melt
sent along the channel’s wide birth.
They float in the milky shadow of root cover,
not rising for midges or sun. Anchored, we hover,
caught between the seasons and crossing over.
Section III
Shift
Vertigo

on my birthday

The kitchen’s tilted table leans away from me
and the surface of my tea sinks toward the black rim,
close to dripping. If I don’t look
I won’t feel that I’m floating above the mug,
the daily paper, the bits of toast and crumbs.
I won’t feel as though magic hands on the tablecloth
could whip it all from under.

The years I knew my father shrink from this height
and his face in my mind is fading,
the memory aging into blurry features, accepting them
too well, almost gloating in the growing anonymity.
This year, he’s been gone longer than I knew him.

Once, my mother told me about being a child
in the country, the string of kids stretched
by their hands like paper dolls
sprawling away from an electric fence.
There was always a new kid on the end,
the sucker who didn’t know better than to be there.
He’s the one that felt the shock
fired from the fence and sent across the arms
and chests, painless, until it reached him,
whipping into his hand.

From my chair by the table I can see birds lined on the wires
sweeping down to the mountain ash
for the rest of its orange fruit, their feet
clutching a branch against the spinning snow.
A horizonless sky coated in low stratus lingers
and since I am here I know something is holding me,
a hand I don’t recognize. Maybe it isn’t fair
to be angry at a man who was so betrayed by his body,
but he left something open in me
that will never close.
What if he had been here all this time?
Would I be here in this shopworn dress,
ragged at the knees at the end of a line?
Hands out, I know what will come.
The calloused skin of my free palm faces the sky.
Thesmophoria
Ceremony for pure harvest

"Being purified and pure, offer sacrifices to the immortal gods." Hesiod.

Day 1: Katodos and Anodos (down-going and uprising)

They say this body an anchor
to leave, always down its draw
and asking *more*. It is water and bread-bent,
begging and weak against love’s offer.
Nine days
empty but water,

  she under the sun, walks beyond
  shadow in the stone-walled
  chasm. Under her arm

a suckling pig She is good
they say, empty
of home and husband

  warm in her hand, but not fit
  (none of them) for skin, the bars
  of teeth or pupils buckled
against rude light, not ready to be round from want.
She presses a knife against its throat -
*Make space*, they say for food of light
or wind or voice, a harvest
of something other —
and blood runs across rocks.

  *Open*, they say and she digs
  — to purge the village — to find
  the old bones, one year left,
to gather them aside the pit and replace
new bones still flesh wrapped, dripping.
The path to home is evening where other
women meet. Their hands cradle
tiny remains, the weight of a turning season.

Day 2: Nesteia (fasting)

Ten days empty and here
an altar, where elbow to elbow
cloth opens to rough bent frames
fetally curled, joints a gauze
of tendons dried and set.
Her thumb across an ear's
darker shadow, pressed against
the dirty skull, she thinks of new
pink skin buried, impervious (for now)
but weakening to dry soil. She thinks
of red veins inside his ear, his hot ear
soft and flopping over. He is still.

And here, another one still but humbled
in his body's loss. She squats before
the altar, offering herself a new way.

*Open your body,* they say. She is open
to what ever god may rise to her,
bringing his barreling seed.

*Day 3: Kalligeneia (fair-born or fair-birth)*

The body the anchor
    the still here pig thins
under sun, and she is breaking
the tiny bones, the cleaned memory
of form. The heart
    fig, the liver prune, sliced
    and sun dried, her fingers
mix them - her fingers clean of any
other, of man or bread, of water.
She is fit for this breeding
    of flesh and seed for fertility for them
    for her for the more elusive
seeds of man and cow and wheat stalk.
The path to the shorn field is gathering
women, elbowed baskets for sowing,
for hand scattering a pure harvest
to look onto blank fields. Open,
they know they are rising.
Prayer for Fasting

First for the body the pores on forearms,
elusive roots nesting to give one thin hair,
their giving back of water in slow surface rise.

For blood descending
across the backs of hands, behind lips.
For the pumped-through removal of outside,
for knees that bend
to walk and the brilliant exchange of breath.

But then, leave the thought of blood or bone.
The bread and water body knows only
the smell of fire, the sight of wheat
grown tall from rain, the suffered urge
of love and touch and talk and it is weak.

So pray for everything before and after it,
beyond the slim dependence of eyes and ears.
Pray for the things not spoken, the things not trailed
across the sky or carved in desert stone, not offered
by any pulsing hand. Be empty

of outside, of bread and water of voice and want.
Want out in order to get in.
(In Media Res) Look,
I know you think wing oil cleft
the nimble gourd seed, rising.
That pockets fill shiver
and bone button enters the lip in secret.
But it's only insipient tacking.
Landsplit and waxing there is always granite
smeared with toebend, bristled.
But you're candle thrashing, dear. Blurring
egg/nail/ eye whites
into diatoms and sockless banter.
I'm sorry but October Bachs
every yellow tenor, every
pointillistic entering goes back.
A different gravity crepes
the insides.
Pieces.
The bone?
Oh my goodness.
Oh.
Going In

“Stillness is like a perfectly centered top, spinning so fast it appears motionless. It appears this way not because it isn’t moving, but because it’s spinning at full speed.” Erich Schiffman in *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Stillness.*

So long a summer night and creeping heat,
a vine around her wrists. She is awake
below fan rattle, below rain-wet sills and screens,
and is tired of wanting in. There are no banners there
in the endless parade of boots
and umbrellas, only voices pulling every string:
arm up, arm down, so fastened to this world.
She’d rather bury it all some place deep
and senseless. Is that so strange?
No one enjoys this storm.

Before a window and wide, dark lawn
she finds she is tired of waiting for the same hands
to offer her the same things.
She who still hasn’t mapped her own body,
is tired of the claim to know her.
It is not *inside* where bread steams on a sunlit table.
Not love or praise or welcome. Not
a road-wearied yes. (Can’t we be broader?)

She wants an opening that is not a door,
but is seedy and rock-ridden, wood grown thin
as a moth wing, so old
it doesn’t bang its own frame in the wind.
There is no brassy knob, no way
to posses its opening.
She only knows that *there* is not some distant place,
hilly and obsolete. It is the irascible now
of a whole life.

And so it begins
quiet as a cell dividing, this question
that has saddled her.
She labors in its strickening, in the swell
of self to reconcile: the persistent red
cape-swooped and gusted.
Its black map swallows the ground
behind it, rides deep against her bolted dam
of bones, threatens every vein
and takes her air,
draws and bends onto itself
until its own fire edges meet
and it goes gray, retreats
under a slender mask of steam.

The shy green must be lured.
It comes slow as a wet, feathered wing,
obsequious with tilted chin,
and furrows (tiny behind her ribs)
waits for her wash of breath:
it sloshes in, the green deepens
goes waxy in her chest,
unfurls in leafy shadows,
lifts and falls in each tidal sweep, slow
as hair spread on water's surface.
Its comfort old as gill-breathing.

Beyond the window, something rubs against itself
in the wind and there is the sound of teeth grinding.
She feels the echo of bone to bone in her,
a song to lean into: So perfect
it could be any one's teeth, so clean
the bone beyond its dressing.
So she reckons what she cannot see,
draws in through her nose and holds,
lets it drum her chest and temples,
send her cheeks to flush. Just now
she can touch the timbre
of that sound and be done.
Then out of her mouth, hard,
it tumbles over itself, under
the roof of her mouth past her dry lips.
Just now, she is not the humid night
the weight of bones beneath her.
She is surfacing in breath that braids her.
She is surfacing, gauzy and distilled.
She draws in. Still swinging but still.
Love Poem I

I want to slice from the soft of my chin
straight down to the end of that flesh.
I want to open my bones
arch my ribs onto their hinges
until I can pull every inside out --
until there is a place for you
until you see this nest of straw
and twine I have made.

I'd lure you in and close myself
with messy stitches
gaping holes in the rubber of my skin.
And my hips would begin to swing
the way yours do when you wear cowboy boots.
Your rough smell would seep from the holes in my chest
from my nose, my mouth, consuming.
Your voice would rise and curl across my lips.

Perhaps I would regret your fleshy nest
your need to flex your elbows and knees
to open your palms wide.
I'd scissor a stitch with my teeth
watch you climb out, straighten your back,
one eye turned to the mess
I made of myself.
Love Poem II

You are a pebble
    under my tongue

in that place no one ever touches
with fingers. It is a small space

by design, tumultuous
    but only mine.

    There, where my laughter
washes over your curved back,

and the jaw-grip of random sadness
squeezes you between soft layers

that never see the sun. There, I can touch you
when I wish: on the bus, in the bar,

if I choose. You are a bulb
of promise there, a shallow swell

    of water held for later thirst, nacreous
and luminary

    in that small perch,
where you sense my words before

they cross my lips, where you navigate
the shadowy channels I can’t see.

And I am selfish, bringing you with me this way,
    slave to the tastes

remaining there: tart apple, the meat
of an almond, chocolate.

    But Love,
I want you here.
I’ll do my best to give you
    what is sour and what is sweet.
Love Poem III

I can’t get out of place.
You would never know this
so I have to say it. The history of love poets
broke things differently. They left place
where it was, made mind and body landscape,
sat with their backs against those jawed hinges
to hold them open. My body

is a dented drum that goes red, that goes
without me, I know.
It likes the alley fires,
the orange lit walls of brick.
Your taps echo but you don’t hear so I have to say
gentle, please, my hands are not so useful.
I can’t clean a rabbit, or make raspberry crepes.
And the dishes always pile.

I used to pray to fill my father’s shoes,
to carry leathery comfort through doorways.
Later it was delicate disinterest.
I wanted the glossy shell of boredom
with things. To be just the flower’s floating white bloom.
Those girls got sodas and drums of glass,
impervious. I slid the dead bolt

hid the bikes, skipped town and found you.
Now we are tied by ribbons at the wrist.
You stand on gravel made of melted bottles while I balloon
above car tops and lettuce heads in the gardens,
bee hives, knitting needles on a porch. I am denting
against tree branches and power lines. My ankles

float up behind me, your breath rushes past like a school
of tiny fish. Sometimes my weight raises your arm
and the ribbon cinches, cuts the blood to your finger tips.
There is an ant, you call, climbing one blade to the next,
and I believe you. Your hand waves white against the sky.
Early Season

for Russell

This morning we walked through the open market, between tables of rain-wet radishes, the foxtail lilies bristling their tall pocked cones. A quiet morning there: no corner guitarists, no children with violins bumping through scales. No bible callers. Later, we paced the rows of a nursery, winding through skinny willows, Russian olives in the rain, chilly for June, and the baby inside making me sleepy.

Now, my powdered hands have been washed of the dirt dug and piled to plant the new trees, the raspberry vines for the neighbor’s fence.

The wonton wrappers are cool on my fingers and soft like eye lids or ear lobes. Connected at opposite edges, they are a papery Jacob’s ladder, each pulling each by a corner. I separate one and pass it from hand to hand powdering my fingertips and palms. One by one you add pumpkin and squash, wet and press the edges, drop the raw pockets into boiling water. Lately, you have been humming in your sleep, turning to draw the sheet across my legs, slide your hand under to find my stomach swollen and fallen to the side with new weight.

What grows here is not green, won’t bloom red or yellow in the spring. This little curved fish stretches its legs and I think you are happy. That even though the tomatoes are still spindly and fruitless, though the lawn is half brown, you are able to see so much color outside our windows and I trust you. Bent over the steaming pot of wontons, watching the seams and hoping, you take the long wooden spoon and sweep one to the side,
draining the water. You taste from a corner, before turning to me. They are tender, you say, and ready.
Grounding

Already mid-summer and you
have been gone too long,
untethered, spinning in a fever
to gather twigs and twine,
spin a warm place to set a winter baby.
You are potting plants, making banana bread.
Somehow these things have become urgent.

But listen, this child is not a house guest
it is not a bent-kneed soldier, waiting
for ambush, nor a light-bound answer
to anything. It has no intention.
It blooms without consent, so stand

still, let gravity do its work. You can’t hear
through its ears. You can’t see
the lurching of blood and skin.
It grows without fever,
cannot see its own fingers fanning out,
does not know this as its beginning.
Come away from that moment,

the stretching skin and hot bellowing
red, then new and slipping like a plum
from ripe skin. Come back
to sounds in the kitchen below, dry toast
sliding across a plate, water on, off,
the neighbor’s dog, the trains
braking in the rail yard.

Come back to the strange brightness
of your own weather. Map it again,
as you have one hundred times before
and claim it, simply. Find your feet touching the ground.
They are beautiful for touching the ground.
Flutter

Even before you I felt inhabited by something,
a stir of nerves, the buzzing of anxious breath
rising and falling like cicada chants in my chest.
At dinner they’d say I was overreacting.
I heard them. Drama Queen.
And now your feet a constant flutter,
your knees and nose and who knows what
bumping around, sometimes soft as a tongue
against a cheek, or a bubble shifting
in some internal orbit. So far, you are nothing
but a carbonated crawl along the lining,
a washboard rumble under my ribs.
But suddenly I am my mother.
(What did she wish to keep from me?)
And now I can’t keep them from you - the fistful
of bees, the flurry of something excited
for itself. Beyond me or you inside me even,
in that tiny cave where you are safe from everything but me.
Perhaps you’ll be your father’s child
but all the same I’ll tell you now, when you find
a place with a good door, turn the lock.
No one’s ever followed me but I lock the door just the same.
You’ll find there is only so much we can keep out.
Where We Meet

The midwife’s apprentice is shy.  
She sits on her heels as the midwife talks  
and holds a pen, folder on her lap.  
Beneath her glasses she wears a clean white patch  
and beneath that there is nothing. I imagine a red web  
a sinewy gathering of old scars  
but I know there is only smooth skin  
that has been drawn like a sheet  
over the hole by a surgeon’s slow fingers.  
She leans over me when the midwife motions  
and pauses before touching the tight, round skin,  
her hands pressing down to find a back or head.  
Awakened, it moves against her hands,  
my skin rising in thick, slow waves.  
The midwife leans in, points to an elbow, a foot,  
and the head, she says, that faces us  
from behind the thick bridge of bone it will pass through.  
I think of that day coming soon,  
the opening muscles, the baby bending  
its shoulders, arching back to cross  
out of this space where it slept.  
So much will happen to us.  
The apprentice draws the stethoscope  
toward her and away, searching for the elusive heartbeat.  
*It keeps shifting* she says.  
The midwife is patient.  
We can all see it move below the surface.
Arriving

Missoula, Montana

In the kitchen they'd gathered things:
a white porcelain bowl
baking sheets for heating towels
teas with lemon grass, ginger root, red raspberry leaf.

They'd run errands, watched a Spanish movie,
and gone to bed before she was sure it was time.

Then there were hours, open, heavy
and neither of them said anything.

That long night was lit by tiny white Christmas lights
tacked to the windows, warm as candles.
She sat on the couch surrounded by pillows,
holding her hands,
then putting a hand on each knee,
open hands open arms open body.
Please open, body.

She was aware of her breathing,
listening to the depth of air coming in.
She was sending it down to her
as she waited the long wait for first air.

Shift

Then there was her surprise
at its strength.

Shift

this is your body moving without you
bring water please you need a hand to hold
it is hard to hear those sounds you make
without embarrassment
there is sleep between the waves
and how much you wonder
    where is your mother now, your sisters
all asleep
across the country

you are calling out to God
    in the most real sense
you call and
    each time it comes
then a wash of warm water on your skin
drawing hips forward to push
you have never known this place
    the center of everything
push in and down
there is nothing else    in and down

there are    those sounds

you think of a lioness
    she is reclined
    opening her mouth wide to roar
that regal, deep sound
    she says    open your mouth wide and

you think
no one survives this whole

Shift

she has never been so small,
    so taken by her own muscles,
the waves of her own body    She has never struggled so hard
for surrender    surrender    she says let go, but it is so

She has never been so big:
these are her muscles    that gather together,
    that send tremors
these are her bones opening
her tailbone straightening
that last tiny gate
to slide    through    this is her skin
stretching thin and hot    this is not

47
a metaphor
this is one body opening to another

Shift

And her husband saw a woman
bending beneath a weight he could not share.

And the midwife saw a woman
stunned by the strength of a body doing its job.

And the woman was not there.
The woman hung in the corner of the ceiling.

Shift

It was not fruit ripened, not a flower blooming.
It was a little girl’s head there
pink from the pressure
with dark hair swirled and stuck together
by the clean water she has lived in.
She is dressed in fingernails and eyebrows
the knowledge to navigate across the stomach
to her mother’s breast, mouth open for food.
She is dressed in the red yellow purple of her birth
but she is here and eating and her eyes are pressed closed,
hers lips wide, sealed against the pale skin.
It is morning and she is eating.

And the house saw everything, but it keeps its secret well:
the carpets are clean
and the kitchen counter does not say,
someone leaned here
on her folded arms and cried out.
The couch does not say someone was born here.

Shift

They say that sometimes
weeks can pass in days
instead of weeks.

Shift

Now, enough of this crying.
It is not too hard or too heavy,
this weight of a baby.
Unfold into all of it, the torn skin, healing,
the new body, deflated and vulnerable,
weak you say to yourself
but it is not. See, you have entered
a parade of women.
See, you have not been stranded.

I am unfolding against the blue sky and March wind
and my feet lift off the ground.
I am unfolding before my red-haired daughter
who cries to eat. I am unfolding my soft belly,
my curved hips, and I sway in the grocery store.
I sway above my husband at night.
I am unfolding these nerves that extend beyond my body
like great wet tentacles. I am unfolding without fear
of exposure, without false calm, opening in a place
I never knew existed, a place
that is teaching me not to close under this weight,
not to clamp my jaw against how hard it is.
See how the open hand can slide sideways through water.
See how the bird opens itself to fly.
I’ve been thinking about those weeks in Oregon -
the long days of looking out into the rainy forest,
of walking on the dreary, ethereal coast,
Of course you remember.
We’ve joked that it was magic, the way we could talk all day,
then stay up half the night.
It was easy to talk about politics, artistic responsibility,
life and mean everything we said.
It was easy to not know the answers
because no one was asking but us.

Still, there must have been some weight we feared
because the one night we left we weren’t shy
about calling it *escape*.
We drove the mountain road in a blare of trumpets
and voices, our shoulders brushing the car door
then each other in each downhill swerve.
It was a plain night, really,
cheap fish from the bay and a lame bar
where it took us an hour to play one game of pool.
It was a plain night, one no different than the countless others
at home when we laughed so hard at people
we said we were buying our tickets to hell.
But it was different, wasn’t it?

Now we’re on different sides of the country
and the country is at war with the world.
I think of you driving back and forth between campuses
worried sick and frustrated by your students
who are too poor to care much about school
but smart enough to know they need a degree.
They want you to open a door you cannot open for them.
And you want to open that door.
You don’t want that to be all there is for you or them.
You don’t want to ask *what does poetry have to do with this?*

I am here with a new daughter who laughed yesterday
for the first time. Her eyes follow me around the room
as I mop the floor, fold laundry, scrape potatoes from a pan.
I nurse her on the couch watching sand-blasted soldiers
do interviews for the evening news and realize
that I am not thinking of the soldiers or her,
but of the garbage bags waiting by the door,
the dog whining to go out. And I too, resist
that same question what does poetry have to do with this?

I don’t have an answer but I have a story.
When I was in Nepal I saw something I have never forgotten:
a dog, dying in the middle of a road.
I was riding in a 1976 orange Mustang driven by a monk.
We were thundering through the dusty neighborhood
when I saw it ahead of us, indistinguishable at first.
As we neared I saw the unnatural curve
in his spine, the table-flat back of his head
bare of fur and flesh and framing bone’s white radiance.
We slalomed past him, barely slowing
but in an instant I saw what I can only call grace.
He was lying on his stomach, his paws out before him
as if he were sunbathing, his head upright, a gallantry
mocking the gruesome beauty of his body.
His eyes blinked slowly as if he was just waking up.

I have always wondered what he was seeing
and, I know it was a dog, but I wanted to know
how he had found such contentment in his death.
When I got to the monk’s house I met a young man
another monk, in training, who spoke little English.
We had been sitting quietly while my friend prepared dinner
when the young man suddenly said, You are American?
Yes, I answered. He nodded. Do you believe in an afterlife?
I was stunned and I don’t remember what I said to him.
I only remember thinking, poetry, and knowing I couldn’t explain
how that was an answer to his question.
And maybe it wasn’t.
But maybe believing something
is more important than answering questions.
Maybe our lives are too small no matter how big they are.

And I think, now, that all the laughing
in Oregon is what made it safe
to ask ourselves the important questions.
I miss you, friend, I miss the way your voice gets higher
when you say something you know should be true.
I don’t pretend that the answers would come
if you were here, but somehow it helps to know that somewhere
those same questions are boiling up, rising into the details of your day.
Somehow, that communion matters.
What We Build

The loose hammer of laughter swings between us and I think
we are building nothing.
Fluttering talk like birds that cannot land.
Affection and the way
we are supposed to charm each other.
Come closer. I will tell you everything:
Conversation is an act of faith.

Shift
The carpenter holds the wood firm below the saw's spinning edge.
Blade into wood and then woodchips and sawdust so fine there is nothing untouched by the building.

We are covered in something we cannot remove.
The fine dust burrows becomes us.

I want the faith of the carpenter whose hands measure and cut to make solid things, square things one can live in.

Shift
You believe in words the way you believe in tables and chairs, the strength of walls and the symbols of door, of threshold, of window. But even the bird's bones are hollow.

The bird an invisible print, a gesture of offer, welcoming the step across, the unbutton or peel back. The getting through.

The bird a horse braying, a breath, a bone house built small with one red stripe.

Shift
Place yes and no in a drawer. Close it. Walk away and feel clean.
Shift
Every word is permanent twilight
is permanent pre-dawn.
Each blurry determined arrow falls, blunt-edged
from it’s target.
    In a shiver of leaves and wings
    grounded birds rise  scatter.

The bird without pain of departure
left for dead, unseasoned or skinny.
The bird a mania  a black axis.

Shift
This table rocks on its own ill legs.
When I am least ready, it shifts.
I am the least ready.       I shift.

The bird, an orchid, wind broken, open.
The bird a buoyant thistle.

I breathe in the curled filings of conversation.
I cough the tiny feet of made things.
On Continuing

No one will accuse you of debutant smiles.
You were stranded on a nation’s back
and told to carry the weight of their dead,
and the earth did not swallow you.
This is not about decorum or grace.
It is their echo that pries you open

leaves a space for too many voices:
the moon lies fair along the straits,
or, you must change your life.
But this is not turning one’s head
to see a sudden yes, or a bright dawn of answer.
It is not endowed or granted, no hand
through the mesh of doubt says now you know.

We have believed we must be chosen,
that this is not an act of faith.
We have heard no, not you
come from beneath every door
and we could not find the voice to disagree.
We look into the mirror to say
I am not afraid but we are terrified.

We want to ask where is the wisdom in this?
Don’t common saints grow in rough soil?
We don’t just want yes
- it is not enough to live on -
but something must be done
to send these slow bodies to flight.
We want that question,
a dark harbinger of brilliant heat,
and the power of motion -
the mystery of feet moving forward.