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What We Make of This World

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WHAT WE MAKE OF THIS WORLD

by

Jennifer L. Case

A THESIS

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WHAT WE MAKE OF THIS WORLD

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Adviser: Hilda Raz

At its core, Jennifer Case's "What We Make of This World"—a collection of poetry based on her experiences working with at-risk youth—serves as an inquiry into the ethics of writing. By carefully navigating the speaker's role as an observer and participant in the lives of the subjects, the project explores the students' needs for dignity and voice and the relationship between privilege/oppression and the ability to speak.

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Introduction

All writing begins in ignorance and separation; the writer is trying to know someone else, trying to understand someone else's point of view through the act of writing.

- Natasha Sajé

In 2008, I worked for a year at an alternative high school for at-risk youth. Most of the students with whom I worked either had been expelled from the public high schools or were transitioning from juvenile detention facilities. They had emotional and behavioral problems; many had been abused as children. To say the job was challenging is an understatement; the immediacy of my students' dilemmas and the complexity of their home lives troubled me both as a human being and, more specifically to this project, as a writer. I struggled to navigate my role as an observer and a participant in the lives of the subjects—to give my students dignity and voice while still revealing the realities of the situations. Although I realized that I, as a writer, was not limited to what actually occurred in the classroom, my writing from that year was unsettling on an ethical level. So much of my job at the alternative high school was to help my students understand the ways in which their choices affected their futures—to help them claim their own agency and voice. What, then, would it mean if I, who was not raped, starved, or abandoned as a child, wrote a poem that spoke to their experiences? Wouldn't my poems merely perpetuate the relationship between privilege/oppression and the ability to speak?

When I entered the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's graduate program in the fall of 2009, I still felt silenced by these questions. I, perhaps, experienced a crisis of permission. As a graduate student, I first avoided the material, but as coursework

progressed, I began to realize that by directly addressing those ethical questions in my writing rather than evading the topics altogether, my work could grow stronger. Fady Joudah's book *Earth in the Attic* proved particularly influential in this regard. Though Joudah's book, based on his experiences with Doctors without Borders, addresses witness on a more globally complex level, I nonetheless learned much from his careful handling of others' lives. Joudah's images of poverty and oppression are sharp and startling, yet they also are compassionate. For instance, in "Pulse," a fourteen-year-old girl, told to undress in front of a man, "Stepped out / Of her body" instead of out of her clothes (8), while in "Scarecrow," a refugee's mother "weave[s] [her] new underwear from flour sacks" (45). Such details reveal the harsh realities of the subjects' situations, yet the language is so compassionate and imagistic that the subjects retain their dignity. Joudah manages to evoke subjugation without seeming voyeuristic—an accomplishment that I hoped to imitate.

I also learned much from the way Joudah handles his role as an observer. The speakers of his poems recognize the challenges of their positions as "outsiders." In fact, many of the poems treat this exact issue, often in haunting ways: "If you come, they will watch you. / You will love it, watching back" Joudah writes, at the end of the sixth section of "Pulse." The tension between subject and observer (which also applies to the tension between poem and reader) is uneasy here, as it is in life. The poem recognizes and names the eerie fascination we have with difference. Even more enlightening, however, is the very last section of this long poem, in which Joudah writes:

Or maybe another child is a poet

Who will write the two strangers

In one of his famous pieces

For who we really are...

And we would call it even. (19)

Not only do these last lines correctly assess the un-ideal in the relationship between “we” and the child, but they also give the authority back to the child. The child is no longer the subject of the poem, but an individual capable of reaction and response. The turn Joudah makes here affected me greatly when I first read it, and even now the move, which directly influenced my ending in “Carve,” awes me. By treating its subjects with such dignity and honesty, Joudah’s book gave me a template of sorts to use when approaching my own work. From his book, I realized that I had often been trying to do too much at once. I could not place all of the tensions and complexities of my work at the alternative high school within a single poem. Instead, I needed to see it as a larger project. A series of poems, perhaps. Or a thesis.

This project existed in a certain time for me. As I entered graduate school, the immediacy of the material and my own deep need for understanding were still very strong. The project was something I had to work through, and, as a writer, writing let me do just that. Even more important to my growth as a poet, however, the material gave me a need to experiment with form. As I worked on the project, I constantly looked to other poets for guidance and inspiration—whether for moves that would help me handle particular

memories, or for forms that would help me approach the subject matter from a different angle. For instance, Lawrence Raab's "Once Something Must Have Happened Here," with its lyrical evocation of the unknown and its overt references to the speaker's innocence, directly led to my own poem "Once Something Happened Here." I admired how Raab handled the slipperiness of perception when applied to someone else's trauma and found his technique appropriate for a poem I wanted to write about a student whose trauma was equally unfathomable. Similarly, Lucille Clifton's use of repetition gave me a way to write "Mr. Beauford," while Camille Dungy's discussion of the need to include joy in her otherwise emotionally heavy *Suck on the Marrow* inspired me to write "These Joys." Imitations and experiments with form and voice, then, allowed me not only to enter my material from diverse and complex angles, but also to stretch my voice—something that, I believe, is optimal for a graduate student at the Master's level.

Aside from reading widely, I and this project also benefitted from Naomi Shihab Nye's and Richard Jackson's comments on poetics. Early into the project I latched onto Naomi Shihab Nye's suggestion that the "job" of a poem is to "give us a sense of others' lives close up"—to remind us of "who we all are how we fit together" (395-396). These statements gave me authority and encouragement as I considered the "so what" of my poems. I found that my self-censorship eased when I could consider it my job to present these students' lives to my readers and, more specifically, to present how the students' lives "fit" with the speaker's and readers'. As for Richard Jackson, a section from his essay "Why Poetry Today?" suggested specific techniques I could use whenever the ethics of a poem made me uneasy. "The poem itself," he argues,

must question its own procedures and perspectives—perhaps by shifting stylistic gears, asking questions, suggesting alternatives, changing tone or course in the middle, keeping an ironic tone, understating or overstating for effect. The technique of the poem ought to call itself into question, ought to turn its own revolutionary spirit on its own vision so that it does not become static. This is especially true when the subject of a poem with political aspirations does with others, with observations, with witnessing.

(Jackson 399)

Though I did not consult Jackson's list each time I wanted a poem to question itself, I did implement many of these strategies in the thesis. "Record," "In the Afternoon I Play Chess with the Students," "Mistakes and Mistaken," and "Oil Soaks through Paper Plates" all, to some degree, "turn" their spirits and perspectives in on themselves so that the doubt and self-censorship that initiated the project also become a part of the poems.

Because the ethics of writing has proven so central to my project, I was pleased to read Natasha Sajé's article "Poetry and Ethics: Writing about Others" in the December 2009 issue of *The Writer's Chronicle*. The article was published at a particularly opportune time for me, just as I was beginning to order these poems and think about them as a cohesive project. As a result, the article helped me consider not only how my poems answered—or at least responded to—the ethical questions that framed its inception, but also how the project as a whole works within this very contemporary discussion about ethics.

In her article, Sajé argues for a responsible representation of people. Although she recognizes that writing often “begins in ignorance and separation,” as a writer tries “to understand someone else’s point of view” (something that was certainly true in the case of this project) she also warns against a “superficial” treatment of others’ lives (15). Poets, she says, “must know their subjects better than their best readers;” they should not “[make] art of others’ suffering without any risk or consequence” to themselves (16). As I consider my project as a whole, I hope (and believe) that my thesis largely holds to Sajé’s criteria. My purpose was never merely to present the students with whom I worked. Rather, I strove throughout to implicate the speaker, whether implicitly or explicitly, in the project’s ethical tensions. Thus, in poems such as “Once Something Happened Here,” the speaker questions her right to appropriate the subject’s stories, while the tonal shift at the end of “In the Afternoon I Play Chess with the Students” forces readers (and writer) to reconsider the speaker’s perceptions. I never, as a poet, felt I could handle ethics merely by changing students’ names or altering details that could reveal the identities of the individuals that inspired some of these pieces. Instead, I worked to make that ethically tumultuous relationship between speaker and student the core of the project.

Thematically, then, the project is as much about writing as it is about my experiences at the alternative high school. The project searches for holiness and sacredness amidst neglect, but it also searches for voice and meaning within silence. In order to accentuate these themes, I have ordered the poems in a way that replicates that search for permission. The first third of the thesis provides the context for the rest of the project. These poems introduce the students and the tensions, increasing the difficulty of

that speaker/observer relationship little by little until “Passing.” Here, the thesis shifts, and the thematic treatment of “silence” becomes more pervasive. This middle section of the project departs from the alternative high school itself to explore the states of mind that one moves through when attempting to rediscover or reclaim one’s voice. These poems are largely tonal in nature and reflect the emotional weight of that ethical inquiry. As I see it, the middle section, cumulating in “In Mid-May I Ache with All that Goes Unnoticed,” gives the speaker permission for the third section, the most important in my mind. Here, the poems address and overtly complicate the ethical questions that have arisen throughout. The speaker’s voice often shifts in order to question itself; the poems acknowledge the imperfections and dangers of interpretation. In particular, “Record,” the most significant poem of the project in terms of those ethical questions, addresses the flaws of perception but also that need to make sense of experience. This is a necessary move—both for me as a writer and for the manuscript as a whole. The project does not provide definite, firm answers to the questions that silenced me when I first began it. I don’t believe it, or I, *can* answer those questions. But it raises them, and it raises them in ways that perhaps do justice not only to the experiences and students who inspired the project, but also to the writing act.

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What We Make of This World

*On the paper
we make of our lives,
what shall we write?*

- Peggy Shumaker

I.

Carve

After lunch we drive the kids
to the pumpkin patch.
They bury themselves in sweatshirts,
headphones; complain of the cold.
All exoskeleton and anger, they refuse
to leave the vans just
to pick over someone else's
leftover produce.

But they do, with coaxing.
They slide feet through the door,
pull the cuffs of their sleeves
over the scars on their wrists.
At first, shoulders slump
and they circle wooden tables.
They don't expect much
and why would they,
these kids that hate holidays,
some because they aren't
going home, some because they are.

Wet leaves stick
to the bottoms of their shoes.
Now breath escapes in thin smoke.
They cross their arms, meander,
ignore the chickens that cluck
in pens near the back, the sheep
at the side of the yard.

Some have felonies.
Most can hotwire cars.
They begin to walk quicker.
Fingers uncurl, deposits flake off:
children seek what they can
of perfection. No bruises, no bumps
or warts. No pale ring of green
where skin pressed against dirt.
Here, for them, only things
that are round, unmottled.
The search for a hollow thump
they can claim.

(Stanza Break)

Later, they will hold the globes
in their laps and tell us to slow
on the curves. They will spread
newspaper over cafeteria tables
etched with profanities.
They will wet paper towels
and wipe orange faces,
draw crooked mouths and angry eyes
with black marker. At some point,
they will pause, not yet ready
to reach in and touch the wet seeds,
to scrape flesh from inside.
But then they will smile.
Lips will part over teeth
that have never worn braces.

And we will give them knives.

Routine

Six at a table and he asks to read out loud.
Seconds slow to syllables, minutes to a word.

The girl with buzzed hair struggles
with *certain* and *curtain*.
Sound it out, you say.
Good. Good, you repeat.

Later she'll give you a mint
and say thank you.
Then she'll say she had an abortion.
She'll steal credit cards
from a stranger's purse.

At Dairy Queen a friend purples
and spills tears in her blizzard.
At lunch the kids ask for seconds.
Sneak third cartons of milk
from the fridge.

One tries to strangle herself
with a shoelace. Pink ring
around her neck. Brick wall
painted white.

Fridays, coworkers drink
Blue Moon at the bar. They chuckle
at stories, suck on slices of orange.

Students slump over desks, sleeping.
They trudge through hallways.
Mouths split with seeds.

You drop them off at their homes
in the winter. Let them choose
the station, play with the bass.

Driving back, the sun sets into trees.
You stop at coffee shops, listen for laughter,
lean forward, warm your nose in the steam.

Zeda

After skipping school for two weeks
she returns with a new hair color,
a hickey, and a furtive glare.

All day, she recedes into her desk,
her back a cramped “c” cloaking
McDonald’s dollar menus, stepdads,
half sisters and Victoria Secret
underwear stored in three different trailers.

She writes the four block letters of her name
across loose-leaf, redrawing the lines
until the ink bleeds through. When she speaks,
her voice is a chapstick cap, clicking shut.

But in the evening, after detention,
when I am driving her home
and it is only us in the burgundy van
over the raised veins of the road,
something emerges in the seat behind me
to sing to the songs on the radio.

Clear, self-contained, somehow separate
from the unswept porch of the trailer
where the pink carton of a perfume box
is used as an ashtray, her voice unfurls—

embryonic tip of a fiddlehead fern,
an old music box, two keys broken,
the hollowed inside of a gourd.

I stare at the road and pretend not to listen
as she, a gypsy moth in this refuge
on the almost-empty highway, flits
into the darkness the window reflects.

Oil Soaks through Paper Plates

Because he wants to be a cook
we let him make chicken—
we drive him to the store for flour, saltines.
In the bag that he swings
as he comes through the door,
blood dribbles through creases
of plastic-wrapped meat.

A mistake, we'll say later—
no more privileges before court—
but what can you do when pans
spit grease and he spits fire?
I'm getting out of this place.
None of you can have my chicken.
In restaurants, cooks don't do the dishes
so you bastards do mine.

A rolling pin shoots through air
and thuds against cornmeal.
There's flour on jeans that near sag
to the floor. I hover near the oven
while he rips fat from a breast,
and does it matter that later
the fried chicken will glisten?
An offering of wings
to certain students, certain staff?

Once he urinated in the soap dispenser
of the boy's dingy bathroom.
Once he asked about a job interview,
his head like a moon in his hands.

Crisis Prevention Intervention
A Found Poem

I. The Anxiety Level

a non-directed
expenditure
of energy
marked
by pacing,
finger
drumming,
wringing
of the hands,
or staring.
Listen
empathetically.

II. The Defensive Level

A highly volatile
state that usually includes
verbal belligerence
and hostility.
Give choices; set limits;
allow the client to vent.
Remember:
Irrationality breeds
irrationality.
Do not become
a precipitating factor.

III. The Acting-Out Person

When presented
with a client's
total loss
of control, utilize
a team control
position. A kick
block. A two-hand
wrist grab release.
A one-hand hair
pull release.

A front or back
choke release.
Increase your
psychological
advantage
by using a verbal
distraction or
an element
of surprise.
Avoid
restraint-related
positional asphyxia.
Do not use
your body in ways
that restrict
the restrained
person's ability
to breathe.

IV. Tension Reduction

Ask yourself: What
are you feeling?
Reestablish
therapeutic rapport.
Remember: losing
control of one's behavior
is unpleasant
and frightening—
even more
to the individual
than to the staff.
Have the client
take deep breaths.
A total expenditure
of energy cannot
last forever.

I Will Miss the Sound of the Train

My father's feet press on the floorboards. The stairs mutter
and make room for his descent. When he twists the knob on the television,
volume crackles across the hallway, a fizz through vents.

Here there is darkness—the Nordic Trek's whirring
of wooden blades and black belts. The kick and slide. Kick and slide.
The tickle of water in the cracks beneath doors.

In my bed, back pressed to the wall, I hold my breath
to hold off the heaving of shadows, the draft of cool air. I know
I must go far away. If they want to, the walls can reach inward.
Odd creatures have grown where there is no light.

The Hazards of Hortense

The fifty-sixth time the students ask
for my name I don't say *Ms.* like I'm supposed to
but *Gertrude, Mildred, Thelma*. Nouns like rusted keys,
dripping with mud. Or the singed pages
of a coloring book a house fire touched.

In August, I was warned not to share
the names of my husband, my parents. I was warned
not to reveal the model and make of my car. But this?
This is play. This is hands whipping free,
fingers and sounds like pebbles in air,

and we are laughing, laughing. *No, really?*
Really? Lorna? Nah. As if Phyllis
were something fishy, the skin slipping
off. And Beulah: swollen udders,
bursting bubbles of gas. So of course

I share it: *The Hazards of Hortense*,
my favorite silent film spoof. A name I claim
with the pride of a sixteen-year-old's license.
The first syllable's punch-in-the-gut exhalation.
The sipping in, cutting off of a leak in the last.

Dissection

A student, pants belted
mid-thigh, asks how big
the sun will look
before it explodes.
He says he'll stand
in the potholed streets
of the housing projects
with a lit cigarette and laugh
at the thunderhead-sized orb—
laugh because the world
is ending, because he has no
regrets. I think of his court date—
all their court dates—
truancy, auto theft, assault—
and remember my own meditations
on the end, on the forever
and ever and everness
of it all, heaven empty
and unknowable
as the oncoming stars
in the credits of Star Trek.
Those thin pricks of light,
the static on the screen.
These musings are as impersonal
as the headless rabbit
the dog licked yesterday
when we returned to the driveway—
no blood, no crimson stain
near the snow—only the still legs,
the warm fur, the absence
above the neck, and this,
the crux of our infatuation:
I used to have a cat
who would leave the bodies
of birds beneath my window.
I used to have a rabbit foot
that smelled of Play-Doh,
salty and dyed.

Ronald's Shoes

Every day after juvie he wears
a new pair of shoes. Picks from the boxes
in his closet, opens the thick cardboard lids.

Eggshell white with red tongues, the laces loose
tails on floor. Or black with blue
soles, squeak of foam.

Others tease him. I smile.
Ronald's shoes, oversized.
Never worn enough to scuff, never smudge

of dust along the rim. "How many shoes
do you have?" I ask, and his pride
could be a yellow balloon brushing upwards.

He does not know, but he wants more,
laughs at my own worn clogs—
not fit for a "gansta" like him,

everyday strutting to Soulja Boy,
rapping out loud, too engrossed
with what cracks and rolls

to care about pick-up basketball,
homework left with an aunt, or his girlfriend,
drunk, throwing up on the floor.

Touching, really, everyone's clean-slate
favorite, until Court, when his mother says
she'll never want him

at home and he comes back, spits
in my face, breaks three knuckles punching
through wall, wrist so swollen the cops

can't close the cuff. I know what to do.
Blank brow, silent clench of teeth. *It's not me,*
It's not me. It's not me. It's not me.

Red Eyes

My teacher, she's *so* white. And with her red eyes you *know* she must be high. Yeah, she *says* something about "contacts" and "dry air" but who believes that? These people, they only say what they want to—"good morning" and "have a good day" and all that shit. As if a word makes the day good. As if a smile makes me want to be here. I hate it, this place. All these people, always watching. *Her* always watching, those red eyes that twitch, looking over shoulders as if she has a *right* to read our notes. Who does she think she is? And that whole "you're drawing a lot of attention to yourself" line. Yeah right!

She'll ask about the weekend and we'll say something about the party, or Ronald will yell "nigger" to his cousin through the door, and it's all "school appropriate!" or other dumb rules. She wouldn't last a day in my hood, white like that—even if she *does* make us erase "Happy Birthday 4/20!" from the board (those eyes—yeah, you *know* she was high).

Stupid, really, the way she gets all excited when we hate that story—some jumping frog and a long-named county. No point, no purpose—the junk in these books. We yell, "It's not even a story—no real ending." And she says we're right. Her dumb eyes all big and red and high. "Exactly!" she says, "exactly." Yeah right.

Ronald tells her he'd never date a girl with such thin hips. He prefers big women, black women, all padding and thigh. You guessed it—the "inappropriate" line in that high-tiny voice. But you know we've got her. Ms. Red and Dry Eyes. So easy to get on her. Just say "cameltoe's" in Missouri and she'll look at the map. Tell her Mark's ran to the other room and she'll peek under tables. Doesn't even realize he's gone through the door.

And that day Sherry explodes. All "fuck this" "fuck that" "you scrawny assed bitch." She doesn't smile. Doesn't even frown. Just calls more staff as Sherry shreds paper. And out in the hallway they've called the cops, some other student punching the walls. Tony begs to use the restroom, but she won't let him, so he unzips his pants and pees in the trash.

Yeah, those wide, red eyes. I bet one of these days we'll make her go home and cry.

Passing

I.

Return first to February.

Black ice on the highway
and always the snow.

Inevitable. You lose
control. Vertebrae stretch

and compress with a crack.
Crust. Shiver. Smell of gas.

Upside-down slide
through the median.

Broken glass.

Semi's here?
Brightness. Blink.

II.

March: you eat food
without feeling nauseous.

You once again finally
sleep through the night.

A man with a room of books
says you could have died.

Shape emerges from shadow.
The ground bangs against doors.

Turn your head.
The condensation you wipe
from the face of the mirror
drips from your hand.

Never enough boxes for closets.
Never something to burn.

His word: a knife
 still warm from dishwater,
 handle-first to a child.

III.
 Now drive.

All day, a student considers
 suicide. In notebooks with pencils
the noose will make me free.

Watch the buckle. Don't
 let her throw herself through the door.

As if it's that easy—static here,
 your heart beating enough
 for both of you.

Paths cross in some cosmic corridor.
 Exit. Enter. Do not disturb.

Touch not enough and again that one word.
 If you could you would plead:

*Pinch a wick with wet fingers,
 tell me the difference between
 darkness and life.*

IV.
 You enclose yourself.
 A room of wax paper you know
 not to kick.

Keira: a stone in your shoe.
 Hollows and old sweatshirts.
 Emily Dickinson read in the hall.

You merge into chair.
 A soggy bag of tea.

What cannot be carried
 you rinse and repeat.

Softer now. Still
insistent. Dreams

where teeth fall out.
You wake up, shiver and sweat.
Suck and touch your tongue to the gum.

After

There is only this odd sort of silence—this odd
sort of watching—these trees and their branches,
the clicks as they shift. Where slender limbs bend
beneath squirrels in an arc of weight and inaction:
heaviness like stones encased in frozen mud.
See how thighs pinken beneath the stiff weave
of jeans? See how clouds condense on the tips
of eyelashes? We walk because we need to.
Because the clank of the train tastes of zinc,
and the worn soles of shoes resemble
pencil-smudged paper. Somewhere a meteorite
shimmers to nothingness, immolation perceived
in the pit of the gut. Elsewhere packed suitcases,
open, unzipped, wait for what won't fit inside.

The Question We Ask Ourselves Now

*How have we lost a belief
in our inner goodness?*
The question in the book of prayers
assumes too much—

As if we have lost faith.
Or rather, as if it could be found,
a calcium deposit in the crevice between two ribs,
a penny dropped and left on the sidewalk,
or a dust spore suspended above an imperceptible current.

Sometimes the yellowed pages of books depress me—
all these words no one is reading.
A man who once taught life skills to prisoners
asks what I did this weekend
and I tell him I read poetry.
He says, “That’s one thing
I can honestly say I’ve never done.”

You will think I am doubting myself,
doubting humanity, but I am not.
If a small boy prays to be kind
to the classmate who smells,
doesn’t he already care?

From this wooden chair, by this drafty window,
I see a butterfly and think it is a leaf,
billowing upward.

Chimes

The clinks the tink
 of last night's ice
 jostle
 in sheets with a slide and a glitter.
 A mosaic of nuggets frothing, cresting,
 tinkles and tocks
 of dry air through dried brush;
 and a child sifts through gravel,
 all he can make
 of a whistle, a ring.
 Flutter of breath on a paper pinwheel,
 string of a kite, cutting
 through clouds.
 Canon in D, over and over,
 the one song
 he knows how to play.
 The ping of pebbles tossed
 into gutters, cat's tongue the catch
 and the pull.
 His hands open a book.
 His fingers turn the page.
 Chimes and chimes and sighs
 and sighs
 from the silent ones
 who no longer can pray.

II.

Apple Blossom Scenic Drive

No frayed edges like yarn in pockets, just water seeping into backwater, lapping at trees, and the bluffs like something sleeping—green in the summer fading to gray with white trim. Always we'd drive,

Grandma and I, in the winter, and pull to the sides of highways to take pictures of ice—the swashes stuck to cut faces of rock, the streams that shimmered as semis rushed past. Icicles the size of legs or torsos

stood stationary in their silence, turning gray from highway grit, but still magnificent to me, then, as if the clouds had lowered themselves overnight and left fingerprints. In the shadowy valleys,

amid the mounds I had learned to name for their humps, trains shook narrow houses and blew their horns three times into darkness to sing in their way to the branches of trees, the black river, the barges—

everything linked it its ecology, following the rules. Which is why I remember so much, and so little: my grandmother in her living room, light through the blinds lifting hair, her hands

unclasped, waiting, as if aware of the sadness she has yet to give or the sadness I have yet to know. Though maybe I did sense it, even then, when I took the pictures: her in the living room, not ready to move

from her chair; the trees in the orchards that lined the bluffs like small lights. Those afternoons, she'd drive and we'd stop and sometimes she'd come out but more often she'd stay in the car, give me

the quietness—the worn posts near the overlooks, blackened with tar, the line of the wire. I'd hold the camera in chapped hands and watch the river below work its way through silt and sludge.

The grasses raised their stalks as if opening
themselves to winter, and because I was twelve
I opened myself, too—let the whistle of the train echo
the beat of my heart, let leaves swallow me in yellow.

My grandma would move again, and then again, but still
I store these pictures in drawers, return to press my forehead
against passenger windows, crane my neck to see the tops
of the bluffs, as if I could become small and somehow holy.

Catechism

She knows of expectations placed upon the self.
 Coffee in cream mugs, kitchen tables,
 and the hands of a woman who no longer feels thread.
 She knows, when the woman whispers, *Gosh darn it,*
you have your whole life ahead of you. All I have is past.
 that language can crack like dried spaghetti.
 There is always uneaten oatmeal, a half-peeled orange.
 Leaden light reflecting from forks:
 her guilt in being young.

How can she think about questions?
 In the sink, a film on the dishwasher thickens.
 What wants to come together but won't
 slips into corners, dispersing through vents.
 Rosemary. The undertones of hymns.
 Or the eyes of the women selling herbs
 near the churches. Their hair all sweat and garlic;
 their irises like votives just after the flame has died out.

Once, she taught the woman to fold origami,
 their fingers on paper, pressing the crease.
 Now, too many words to herd into hands spill
 like armfuls of socks, and she knows—she has learned—
 only cranes in cardboard boxes never fly away.

It will rain soon. Aluminum cans scrape against ground.
 She touches the brown bracelet unwrapped on the counter.
 If only to ask.

Is this good?

Is this?

Submersions

I.

On the drive toward the shore my father
 sheds stress like snakeskin. A rub against
 the seat, a push on the pedal of the car.
 Arrived, we spread peanut butter on tortilla,
 squeeze honey. Mud scuffs my calves, cakes
 my socks. When he was young, he filleted
 fish for tourists; all day he wiped scales
 and mucus on crusted, greasy jeans. Now
 we eat oatmeal in mugs rinsed with coffee.
 We hike up hills, stumble down thin, winding trails.
 When I slow, he urges me forward, reminds me
 to pause at the tops of the rocks. *Look,*
 he says. *The glimmer on the horizon.*
 I come to expect it like a god.

II.

Twelve years old, I slide the still-stiffening
 body of my chameleon into a plastic bag.
 It curves in the corner, a weight of dimes
 that I carry to the backyard, behind the shed.
 I dig two inches with a trowel, pat and press
 with my foot, then dream of excavation:
 two years and perhaps a femur stripped
 to matchsticks, vertebrae shining like small
 teeth in my hand. Later, I will hesitate
 in front of etymology exhibits, strain to touch
 the iridescent wings of the dragonflies.
 I will think of Styrofoam and sterile pins,
 the need to know structure. I will remember
 the ziplock bag I left for others to find.

III.

I plant the seeds because I require an end
 to the waiting—to the silhouette of limbs
 and the darkening ground. I need concavity,

the press of soaked seeds into peat, the heat
of germination an incense for the ice.
In the upstairs window, the crooks of their necks
nudge against earth; heads shed the husk of the shell.
So necessary, that newness. The unfurl
of translucent leaf. The stretch toward light
streaming through glass. And so awful, the opposite:
green shoots grown too quickly, now wilting and weak.
The dwindle and spindle of life in my palm.
That tray of earth, the damp desiccation
to brown, while outside, still, the frost.

IV.

We are two girls, bobbing bare-breasted,
the soap slick in our hands. We scissor lake
with thin legs; our toes graze seaweed,
knees bent and suspended in the dark gush
and swirl. Somewhere a loon, the catch
of the breath. Somewhere trees and their
shadows, moths thick like the stars. We float;
the lake laps in our ears. Our giggles
are pebbles under the convex arc of a bat.
We lather hair, trail braids through the water.
Behind us, suds stream as if beads strung
from fingers. All exhale, inhale, movement
of consciousness inward. When we step
out and drip, we pull the cold close.

Before the Storm, You Consider

What else to say about silence.
Soon the window will shutter
but now clouds shift beneath sun.

You hold the moment in a bowl,
curled edges of paper like soft folds
in a quilt. You wish the wind outside

would breathe through the room
and rustle the ruffled bed.
Your fingers, in this light, are blue,

and it is not instants, but lifetimes—
split-second before you swallow,
the frozen cold of a gulp in the throat.

You will act soon. You will step
from the chair and wash a spoon
or jangle keys from a chain.

But before that are shadows—
motionless lines down your chest.
So you wait for the light to change.

Thaw

Morning slits through the blinds
like a laser, burning thin strips of my legs.
I am back, it says. *I am back and melting snow.*
Socks thaw by soggy cigarette butts.
Old newspapers cling to the fence.
Spring, returned to reveal debris
from autumn's flood, to see
what we have done in depression.

There is an unsteady jubilation in the air—
the white string of a helium balloon cut
by steel scissors. Yellow latex,
propelled up and up, doesn't look back
at those who would chase it.

At work a student cries because no one
wants her. Another calls me a bitch.
If the grass were warm and dry I would lie there.
I would close my eyes and see the colors
no one has time to notice. Painful
as thistle. Immutable as these clouds.

First Morning of Thunder

I awake to thunder—
to the gauzy gasp of rain,
to the lightning that strikes
the tops of apartment buildings.
Across the street,
chains on the empty swings shift
beneath the white lines of clouds.
How can it be?
This rain and no rainbows,
this static on my arms.
This slash of a single car,
whizz of a bicycle,
morning, stretched thin and trembling—
a sheet of tinfoil struck by a fork.
Who knows what's exchanged
in the paths of the charged ions?
In the still-warm sheets
of the bed, I sit up, watching,
as the upside-down husk
of a moth on the windowsill
begins to move.

Third Morning of Thunder

It is the way the thunder has come again,
mist and spittle through the open window.

The way puddles have formed from the cracks
in the sidewalks. The wet bark.

This rain, this thunder—restful.
Even the leaves hang their heads.

The single cars on the road
only the shadows of sleepwalkers,

waking to hymns we can't remember—
can't name. Slick grass. Grays and grays

and lighter grays. Some frequency in the air
that traps this hazy dream phase.

Reduplicates it, rides beneath us like waves
on the river we swam in as children,

the current warm, then cold,
you baptizing me, me baptizing you,

and the sky an endless plane of echoes.

In the Library

There's a whisper as if from God
but it's only a student in a gray sweatshirt
talking to his girlfriend.

Everywhere there are chairs
and people with their books. The people heat
the chairs, and leave, and others come again,
not expecting the seats to be warm. Not realizing
the seats will always be warm, then cold, then warm.

If I rubbed my fingers against the newspapers
the print would turn gray. I would smear the words
and they would lose their meaning, and later
my thumbprint would tell you all you need to know.
To know the world, you would touch my fingers.

He is speaking, the student. He is whispering.
I am listening but I cannot hear the words.
(I do not want to know the words. They should always
be whispers. They should always be stones
as they're buried in sand).

On the wall: an ink drawing of a boat—
a sail-less mast and a sky as white as the inside
of an eggshell. Here and now, I want to be
that eggshell. I want to be a whisper
slick on the inside of that eggshell.

If I closed my eyes, I could part through murmurs
and find a stranger's love letter
amidst the pages of a book.

The Birds Do Not Care and Neither Should You

They unlatch their wings, take off, swoop around the sun.
The trees bend their backs, touch branches to dirt and stand again.

Even the squirrels are part of the motion. Which is why it doesn't
matter
if you notice or not—on your walk to school, your lunchbag thudding soft on your back.

Everywhere, cracks you must jump over and leaves somersaulting in sky.
There: the man, asking for quarters. There: the lawn and its gossiping grass.

You blink when exhaust rises into lightposts. And again
when the stoplights turn from purple to orange.

Everything normal as ever.

By Mid-May I Ache with All That Goes Unnoticed

Small isopod working its way
through humus, red lip-print

on a cigarette butt. A man with a cane
and a plaid golf cap stoops

to pick up a nickel. He spits,
rubs metal between warm palms.

Why would he care that I'm watching?
That I'm sitting here, empty,

my shoulders falling into ribcage,
my head into neck. The trees

have only begun to bud—
knobs of pale green protrude

to lick the air—to taste
the season and sense if it's right.

I could blow on each one, dust
off the strand of a spider's web, say

"Come out now. It's all right."
And perhaps they would listen.

Cells anxious to create energy from light
would pause and then pulse

through translucent veins, as if
we all, in our own way, ask

what we can make of this world.

III.

Mr. Beauford

What else can he do to get out
from under these high school students
swearing, spitting, crack of knuckle
through wall—but stand and expand
in the doorway, arms heavy, legs heavy,
stomach rising and round,
not one to crawl under tables—
always the one to hold
the kids down—one hand
on a shoulder, one encircling
a wrist, eyes shut to the words
they hurl with pointed elbows,
his force restrained in flesh,
his nails cut close, waiting—
close-mouthed and waiting,
palms open, empty, fingers sloped
down and waiting—
his head turned away,

for after, after, in the silence
of empty classrooms,
carpet tucked into corners
with pencil shaving dust,
when he can open the browser and offer,
face slick with the offering—
face thick, and smooth, and full
with the offering—
two poems, dedicated to his wife:
one about butterflies
tickling the insides
of bodies, the next
about stones, coming
together, coming together
in the click of a kiss.

Mistakes and Mistaken

I.

In May the streets flag their garage sales and Julia wants to go to them all. *Oh! You can drop me off here!* I laugh, light-hearted. It's Friday, and we are heading to the park. The boys will throw the football, Julia will sit on the swing, Zeda will text in the tube slide until I ask for her phone—and even then, her eyes pointing like elbows, I won't care. There will be puddles and mud in the vans heading back. Everyone's ribs will expand at 3:30.

Oh! That one! Drop me off at that one! I laugh again. Who knows why we say the things we do—why we reach into drawers for words, without looking. “I think you're addicted to garage sales,” I tell her, still smiling.

No, she answers, a box closing up. *I've been addicted before. This isn't like that.*

II.

In the hallway Sherry asks Marcus about Court. It's her first appearance, and all day she's sashayed in hallways, guffawed at the others, kicked shins with a glare. Now, an hour before the appointment, she clutches a pen. *What should I say?* she asks, chewing the tip of what once was the cap.

Marcus beams, proud of his own expertise. *Well...* he begins, about to get started—something about judges and what they most want to hear.

But I interrupt. The answer is simple, right? One little phrase? *Just tell the truth.*

Yes, stupid. Only one moment equals it: me, in seventh grade, telling the class I diagrammed sentences for fun.

Sherry opens her mouth as if to vomit. Marcus looks like he's ready to step on a bug. *You know nothing about truth*, he spits. Words that are nailed into windows, not doors.

What This Poem Aims to Revive

The poem guides thoughts
in little waves like leaves on a lake,

a spider flitting up the bark of a tree.
A single acorn falls, soft thud,

and it shares that sound—
candy wrappers and fuzz

tumbling on sidewalks. Stretch
of the lungs content in their work.

Or lilac in open windows,
fleece jackets in the spring,

chirp of birds and the pilled
elbows of sweaters.

Clump of mud under shoes,
the print of sole on cement—

nothing more simple, until
the simple's not enough.

What then can the poem
do to sustain us?

It pats a bony shoulder, whispers
a worn story, and dreams

of a space in living room forts
made of clothespins and bedsheets

where middle school girls
give each other backrubs,

their fingers like pennies
pressed against shoulder blades,

the air trembling only
from laughter.

These Joys

This house with the dogs by the field
 where she chases her brothers,
 hair slips from ponytail, wet string
 on her neck, where her feet

pummel corn stalks, all root
 and near fall, the brothers running,
 the girl running, the sky a storm
 in her lungs, so cold she coughs

and gives thanks for the coughing,
 the scratch of a laugh at the back
 of the throat—and later the catch
 of the two red-faced brothers,

these hands held to cheeks,
 this encircle of squirms.

*

These video games in the basement,
 black fabric nailed on the window.
 This darkness, green glow of the screen.

The volume so loud it drones out
 the others. This reduction of room
 to fingers and wrists.

This hunch of shoulders, drape of cord
 across knees. This jerk and echo
 of blast in the sheetrock.

This flick of the tongue with each touch
 of the trigger—ready
 for the reap and the taking.

*

This reach beneath sink,
 this faint trace of lilac.
 This click of the lock,

cool tile beneath knees.

These hair binders, barrettes,
pink bottles of shampoo.
The light rasp
of the tampon box lid.

This row of thin tubes,
slim and unused.
These plastic wrappings
that rip in clean lines.

This dangle and flush
until the septic system shrugs
and the bowl brims
with the joy of water.

*

This shadowy space beneath
the stand at the racetrack.
This tread of strangers and hobby car buzz.

These peanut shells,
sunflower shells, thick smell of beer.
This drip of oil and funnel cake sugar.

And this teenager with the cigarette
who leans against metal,
his impatient kick at the dirt.

This vigil for the jean-skirted girl
in line for the bathroom
who soon might walk over to him.

In the Afternoon I Play Chess with the Students

They abandon the skateboard
magazines they've stuffed
under desks, forget

the confiscated iPods, the fake
dew rags, and instead finger
their hair and whisper hints,

transforming from angry teenagers
who've seen too much into boys
who pump fists when they win.

Boys who skip down the hall,
lift arms to touch walls
and the tops of doorways,

which is moving and distressing
and painful, really—that fleeting spark
of fingers and yellow-tinged tooth—

which is why I want to keep them here,
forever, this thirty minute period
when even the students

that sneak out school doors fold their feet
under thighs to sit on their ankles,
lean forward to pinch

the white and black pieces—
no hard muscles on the arms, no scars—
just boys who play chess and scratch

at their scalps. Boys who sacrifice
pawns to protect their queens, boys
who balance my fallen rook

on the tips of their noses.
Though maybe I have it all wrong.
They win and we all become human.

Why Write of The Students?

Those afternoons I stared
at the map on the wall,
pressed on the corners
where the paper had begun to curl,
and traced routes to different cities:
blue and red lines to Laramie,
Lincoln, Lafayette. All while
my students were writing, or not
writing, or pretending not to write
notes they would latter hurl
against the wall or stuff
into pockets.

And it wasn't even *they*,
but *one* student flinging notes,
another picking scabs from a chin.
It was their looping lines, the bubbles
above the *i*'s, words so wilted
they were impossible to read.
And it was me walking home
on cracked sidewalks, thinking
of papers to grade, of frozen
butternut soup.

At the corner daycare
kids with koolaid-stained teeth
jumped on the trampoline.
Their hair lifted with each bob
above the fence and I wanted
to become them: span of arms
like the swell of a jellyfish,
a parachute, or a sheet on a line—
my fists clothes-pinned
as the body billowed.

Sudden Absence of Pressure

The train has come and its tread shakes the bed—
a heart murmur, off beat, adamant
as the green shoot on the onion, breaking through softened skin.

I want to be on that train, or the penny pressed
between the track and the wheel,
to grow warm and flat and smooth and to vibrate like the plastic pick
that has just strummed the guitar string.

This is why I am talking so much. This is why I am talking.
A stone is tumbling down the bluff
and no one pushed it.

Lorentzian Geometry

We will speak about identity
 but first, separation.
 Pop tabs unearthed in a gutter,
 pink print of lipstick on a stranger's cigarette.
 I sit in one apartment, you in another,
 and above me someone watches cartoons.
 I do not know his name but he sings
 in the shower and the floorboards compress
 as he paces—bedsprings near the bathroom,
 vibrations in the evenings from his electric guitar.
 I listen and pick at my heel, a red blister, amazed
 at how quickly skin desiccates and flakes:
 shards of a shell, slivers of wood, cracked
 grains of rice. Anything but cells
 that once held water, imperfect barrier
 between body and air.

You and I are two
 parallel lines that on certain planes can cross.
 We are the straight routes on a sphere
 forever caught in the circle.
 Yes, on some grander scale we may sense
 the order, but how does that help us here?
 I am forever leaving parts behind:
 DNA that circulates after a sneeze,
 brown hair built into nests or caught
 in the vacuum. The head of a tick
 I once found in my thigh. Everywhere
 debris and between us this distance—
 partitions and rifts no microscope can see.
 Tell me about particles traveling unaccelerated
 in spacetime, how they sometimes lack
 an infinite past. Tell me about Johann von Neumann,
 how in mathematics the trick is
 to get used to what you don't understand.
 I may still reject the logic, just this once,
 become a body shot forth like an arrow.
 I will land at the roadside rest stop, crash
 through the glass that covers the map and split
 the red dot I search for: this signal
 of where I am, this trumpeter: *you are here*.

Memory: Spring Storm, Driving

This one comes softly,
an ease under door.

A boy asked about storm sewers
and the names

of certain clouds.
Followed by quietness—

a lull as metal
muffled the rain.

The vents made their hum.
The wipers their flutter.

The seatbelts stayed secure
in their clasps.

Perhaps we forgot
who we were.

He opened a book
and turned the thin pages.

I held my hands to the wheel,
felt that faint heat.

Sherry, 14

Motive? The worms suckling the pavement.
The tree limbs that moan and unthaw.
Her sisters, greasy fingers on glass—
cheeks to the one window facing the road.
Or the pink tricycle stuck in the mud,
the teenage sister with the baby gone for the day.
The creak to the door, the rust stain on the screen.
The way crap on the counter falls from the back of her hand.
She digs through debris of too-many-people-living-in-one-trailer
for her stepdad's sweat-stained undershirt to use as a rag.
She wipes the counters until they shine like wet stone.
She sweeps cereal crumbs and bread crumbs and hair from the floor—
says *what the fuck* to whatever rots in the corner.
And when sunlight streams through dust and her sisters follow
with sticky thumbs, she makes mac-and-cheese, washes the dishes,
folds the underwear—bruised in the crotch.
When someone throws pebbles at windows, she waves.
When headlights flash in the driveway, she waits.
She hates spring evenings, she'll tell you, later.
Dirt under a toenail. A set to her jaw.

Once Something Happened Here

Mornings, she kicked clumps
of frozen grass and counted cows
in the neighbor's field. Sometimes
she moved a child's truck with her foot
and perhaps she was jealous. She slept in vans
on the way to school and drew pictures of dogs
in the back of her notebooks. At night,
she said she read books thick with pages,
the flashlight glowing beneath the thin sheets.
When her foster mom told her to go to bed,
she didn't. We knew she couldn't read.

What happened there, to the girl
with the half-zipped backpack—the girl
who cried near the mailbox and gave me a mint?
What happened at the house with the long drive
and small doorbell, the three-legged dog
barking by the step? Later, when she slips
in and out of our lips, I will want
to imagine clouds, moving without shadows.
The near-silent breathing in the back of the barn.

And then I'll feel guilty. I who know nothing
of the memories she carried—the stones she kept
in tin cans beneath beds. So I sit
in this chair at the kitchen table and wait
for her to correct me: No, the snow
did not fall over grass like a globe, but yes,
the crows dropped like acorns from trees.

Recognition

It won't be transparent, translucent.
 No *thanks*, no *you're welcome*,
 no clink of ice in a clear glass.
 No cat's head against my shin,
 no your hand, shaking mine.
 No pride in our eyes.

One of us may have children.
 One of us may not.
 But we won't share stories—
 no *how's your husband?*
 or *how's your dad? Is he still in prison?*
Do you remember when we saw him behind the wall?
 We will not meet at a coffee house,
 nor a restaurant with candles.
 Perhaps not even a gas station—
 all I can think of now.
 I will not ask if you're still living
 in the trailer and you will not ask
 where all I've been.
 You will not look the same—
 neither will I.
 The waistband of your sweatpants
 no longer rolled twice—and me,
 well, perhaps still in jeans,
 but without the gray coat.

And I still have your note—
 the one you wrote in pencil
 and handed off, head-down in the hall.
 But this is not reconciliation,
 only two people passing,
 sometime, somewhere (some aisle in Wal-Mart?
 Black scuff of soles on the floor?)
 This not-acknowledgement. This pause
 at the revolving door.
 My nod, your blush.
 The blank-faced stare.

Record

It's habit—the way I flip through police records,
looking for clues to the youth that aren't named:

Sixteen-year-old arrested for possession of marijuana.
Fourteen-year-old questioned for the recent rape of a girl.

I'll never know but they could be: the kid who sat in the back of the van and refused
to buckle, or the boy who plucked hair from his chin during lunch.

So much to say about memory. What I'll remember. What others may not.
Smells like gum and spit in a drain. Sparking sockets, blackened walls.

Two states away and I click computer keys, rest elbows
on a desk filled with notepads and paper.

Yes, Ronald and his boxes of shoes, now in prison.
Zeda, pregnant, in that house with her aunt. How easy to assume.

While somewhere, two girls stand on a street corner.
They don't wear gloves though cold chaps their skin.

They share earphones—one bud in the left ear of the girl with glasses,
one bud in the right of the girl with the scar by her eye.

That simple. Just the houses, the corner,
the two pairs of lips offering words to the dark.

And me, shrinking to all that I am:
The single acorn. The small stone.

Stone

 This solidity,
this austerity of brows—

hardened, inner part
 of sun slab and shadow.

Along thin paths,
 three tiers of ancient markers,

stone rings around fire

and flick of the match.

 This solemn space,
these roots rerouted,

crag dipping toes
 in the edges of lakes.

This drip of water
 from crystal, cave

with the coolness of hail—
 every pebble the splinter

of tundra, tectonic plate.

 Or sandstone, brushed

against sidewalks, scratch

 of a fingernail
on the underside of a canoe.

Handprints in cement later placed
 between hosta,

 psalms preserved
in the tide's twist and purl.

This granite, chiseled
into faces.

This mountain: silver lacquer
over pits and seeds.

The weight of words
kissed through lipstick,
periods, ellipsis...

Never stoned,
though some say so.

Never thrown.

But sifting for agates
and bases for altars

where perhaps even Isaac
would have laid down his head.

This fossilized fern,
these abandoned buildings
that crumble.

All that we've carved
into bedrock
saved in tin cans beneath beds.