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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
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Ways of Counting

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in English

by

Justine Jiayun Li Yan

Thesis Committee:
Professor Amy Gerstler, Chair
Professor Michael Ryan
Sarah Shun-lien Bynum

2020

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And I do not know how to begin to thank my family—my popo, gongong, yeye, nainai, my sister, my mother and father—for all that they have given me and that I continue to receive.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Ways of Counting

By

Justine Jiayun Li Yan

Master of Fine Arts of English

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Amy Gerstler, Chair

Many of these poems are concerned with counting. Most take place between California and China. The collection takes on counting as an action that can prolong or clarify, reduce or obfuscate—it doesn't have an apparent end. For the speaker, it may become a way of living through, with, and without. The poems also document a process of investigating the tensions between romantic love and filial love, motion and stasis. They have allowed the poet to gather evidence, to begin again and again, attempting to construct new knowledge out of old feelings and thoughts. In the temporality and logic of these poems, nothing passes, but is only gathered. Nothing is lost that cannot be retrieved.

Grievances

A biochemical shift has occurred in my body,
signaling the near-end of my tender years.
My appetite has reduced by a quarter of a portion.
I am less inclined to unclip my hair and smell it,
to finger a strand until it twists like a faucet stream.

I know my abiding disadvantage, my most unfortunate trait,
is to think I could possibly hide my flaws,
the sturdy imitations of women in videos—stiff angling
to flatten the stomach, tucking away the callused feet.

My mother has been trying for weeks to reach me,
leaving messages long and short.
She should know that she has arrived
as my peeled lip, my sour breath.

Mainland Scenic

Imagination emptied, I make
demands upon myself and my self
tries to deliver. In the end
it is tourism: I want to go to your village.
I find someone at random
trying to be urbane and undress them
as if pointing in a public place
in a private way.

Leaving the stations near the scenic villages,
there is always a child crying and a man
who might have once been military
shouting in dialect into his cell phone,
which is large and has a metal hook
on the back for his finger.

Now the endless heavy shellacking of interiors
to seal all crevices and porous surfaces,
the holes that come from haste and time.
Even this is skill based work.
Underneath you hear the oscillating
clearwater melodies of the south
or the shouting into the wind of the north.

Looking at my married friend
in the light of the train window,
I take my hair down and she takes her hair down too.
Talking, I am in a grove
of concrete columns, each a word
that is not quite right, running through
this constructed shade.

She shakes her hair down too,
as if poverty were a pair of pants you could take off.

Men leave their fingernails long
to peel and puncture, to prick and pry.

Modern Methods for Peking Duck

There is the microwave method.
8 seconds and rotate, 8 more
in intervals. The skin

stays crisp and evenly heated,
thin slices brought out to applause,

flavor preserved with inter-
generational recipe.

The sign above the door says 'Traditional style
108 years old brand
Peking local flavour. The ducks hung on hooks for show.

It does not of course rise
to the level of crime. Deception,
false advertising to the good Chinese consumer, yes.

Though this time it is also
unpatriotic, which does verge on the criminal.
The restaurant has been duly slammed
in the online forums.

I think of the difference between poultry
and a bird.
Perhaps, though I haven't checked,

the restaurant is now shuttered,
the boss (fourth generation
Imperial chef) has been blacklisted.

Auspicious number
at the funeral center, there was a Hall #8
(the one my grandmother was in)
and perhaps, though I did not see,
a Hall #88, a Hall #888.
And there was no Hall #4.

That was fine, since my relatives
did not notice, and I do not know
if it is true after all.

Before the members of my family left the lobby,

men began to remove the paper
characters of her name, hung below the 8. After us, a Zhao.

The difference between poultry and a bird
is for one, an afterlife
of microwaves, numerous
new things occurring that could not have been imagined—

an electric flavor, a story, litigation on the internet—
and for the other, it just stops flying.

On the Fourth Day of the Year of the Rat

I find the temple has closed
as a precaution and settle for walking
down the street that carries its resources
southward. A face reader moves to me
retrieving his hands from his sleeves.
Gesturing, he does not say *Maskless*
I am accurate. Already old sounds
sound new. Before dawn women sweep
with bundles of twigs, thin and dry
as the ends of hair. The backs of my books
are polished with grease. Even the faces
of my family become strange. Never
an underbite. Two front teeth close the gate.
Inside, we all prosper. Two dogs
and a monkey, dragon, rabbit, rat.
I look at the complex face of the building
and I see a white, clean swan.
Not right—only a bare pipe moving across
one opening to another. An expression,
a trait. A mosquito drifts by, I follow
with the stream of a shower head.
The higher it goes, the harder the water bends.
I lift my hand all the way to the ceiling.

Economics

With difficulty, we woke again
and became strong with the prospect of money.

Confidence was waning,
we no longer believed that something would work out.

Instead, we had another kind of wealth:
too many teeth in the mouth.

There was always a finite amount of something.
Always, something to deplete.

It helped to be reminded of this daily.
It made us, over and over.

*

When I am chewing it's not just me chewing.
In the odd years I am like my father,
in the even, more like my mother.

There is still something very possible
about everything we started.
I could still become a dancer, a scientist.

*

Our features gradually became large and imprecise,
because our days were long and uneventful.

We also gained a love for gold.
Children are like crows.

To eat and to sleep, adequately,
that is what could allow us to forget about the world.

Any less, and we are connected.
Ideally, we would wake with hunger.

*

I envy the salesman, the vendor, the broker.
He has something I don't, a plain awareness of the self.

I immediately sense that he is my boss.
He is everybody's boss.
He is always telling me no, or if I can have something,
what I can have.

'That is a price I cannot accept / 'That is a deal I cannot make / Sorry, I can't do that for you. / Sure, I
can do that for you. / We're out of that, we don't have that today. / 'That would bankrupt me. / You
are trying to rob me.

We are open, we are closed.

What is an economy?
I have something that you want.

*

At various points in the day, the question occurs to me:
Is someone paying for this? I stop.

And for this, will I be compensated amply?
Will it be fair?

I do nothing naturally. If I do something naturally,
I look around to see if anyone saw.

*

Amid dreams of buying and selling,
little questions occur to us:

Is it fast, or slow,
red, green or yellow,
or blue?

*

My father's secret gift of cash is in a white envelope,
which I use to buy birth control, or a birthday dinner.

I fall asleep calculating costs and benefits.
In my dreams I alternate as buyer and seller.

The buying becomes a kind of distribution.

And there was still nothing you could do to save it

A house near the ocean
The edges of the earth glow blue
And you can hardly feel its presence

In the fog, everything is blurred into it
It blurs into everything else
The sky is unevenly burnished

All shades of dirt and everything
Rubbed into it by grubby hands
This is almost peaceful

Almost a still life
But the walls are torn like a sheet of paper
And the mouth is a gaping mouth

Something is not right
I am waiting for the slide
The collapse

*

I want to come back to a ruined house
Washed up, heaved onshore like a found boat
It could still sail away

*

A cavernous home
Grandparents about to die
Grandparents have died

And the children are all relieved
Wiping the dust off picture frames
It's not just another one

Of those *Fancy big old homes*
It is not worth much, no glorious second life
But something rare about the decay

*

Violence, some memory ripped from the center of it
And the witnesses are faceless
Why is it ruined? Nobody knows

Guilt
As if they had killed someone
Wondering what to do with the body

Grief
And this is the scene

US POLO ASSN

I still read: “us polo *assassin*.” Big red fleeces from Chinatown with half zips that always broke, snagged my hair. An extra layer in the trunk for when we drove to San Francisco, where it was always ten degrees colder. My father would rip my zipper up securely, like buckling a seat belt for me, and sometimes it would clip my chin. Because this had happened once, it could happen every time.

Fremont is warmer. In the afternoon, a Chinese woman sits in her Lexus digging into her mouth with a toothpick. Undercover in her visor and sunglasses and sun sleeves, like extruded scrunchies. Waiting for what? For whom? I get out of our car and wait while my mother browses the medicine shop: Made in USA ginseng, planted in Wisconsin. Planted? I always thought ginseng was found.

The distortions of a Chinese-American childhood. No one knew who you were, and you had a hard time finding the words to describe it. My sister and I thought the Lipton tea packets at the bakery were free. At first, we speak what our mothers speak. After, we learn to speak against our mothers. Maybe this poem should be titled: “Some Certain Chinese in America.” Maybe that would make it more true. Though, yes, it would still not be disciplined enough.

In a similar plaza across the street, there is a Vietnamese restaurant I’ve been to called iPho, with an apple as the O. This is not Chinatown. In high school I was very aware of this. Out here you can see the train pass with its containers, you can see self-storage units and office spaces for lease. In the non-vacant spaces are Indian restaurants and Chinese acupuncture clinics and travel agencies.

Chinese are everywhere, my mother advises. Or my father, he is more likely to say something like this. So if you learn about Chinese you learn about human nature. The bearded guy at REI, when I go to return my Texas, asks me where I’ve been this summer. I say China. He says, Oh cool, you just visiting or teaching English? Sometimes I think my life is well-timed, like a sitcom. It lacks the lag of reality TV, the slow forward thrust. Shame is a pre-emptive tactic. Guilt comes after. It is the one-two punch of Chinese mothers. A two-pronged offensive. Is this the language of sports? Is this the language of war? Instead, it is the language of our love.

By the time our family stayed at the motel on historic route 395,
the entire range of California feeling slept in between

More than my mother, I mourn the young part of motherhood,
how she sent me off as an errand girl in the dry tinsel mornings
to get the ice from the ice machine, continental orange juice, plumeria
growing by the retaining wall, not looking at the barefoot
woman carrying boxes to her van or the sleepy man walking
back and forth in loose white socks. Then to knock
on the door with a cube jutting from the mouth, chin wet,
fingers glistening with melt. We no longer visit in the style
of trying to live, though far from home my skin goes thin and tight,
as to be pulled from my face slowly and with upward motion.
I think of the heater at night, the sound of murmuring, moans,
people needing agreement with one another before sleep,
the voices and strange smells of others, who would never
know us and so could never mean us harm or good.
That bright hunger in the mornings, thirst, nothing ours.

Revision

After Jean-Baptiste Lamarck

It was far more natural than we thought—the creature who strained his neck
could pass it on—higher and higher on the tree—we would not have to start over
each time—it was a memory or a rush of blood to the same joints—movement in a
sheath of skin—subtle fluid—unfolding limb—tendons pulled apart so the air
entered in—what was it—a loosening of the will—cartilage opened—there was
a sense that your head could leave your body one small tear at a time—then
your knees went weak—they often do—hair no longer brushing the shoulders—
brushing them again—we still have dreams of reaching it to wake up longer—
irritable and resisting—disappointment transferred—no abnormality
other than a hunger that would not end—until we teach the frame to fall—
all the way down to the softest science

a grandmother is a traveling sister

in memory of 婆婆

maybe all lessons are learned between
the grandmother and the granddaughter the mother
gets skipped over because the mother is too difficult

*

you hear about a place worth visiting and in your mind there
forms a picture, a crop of emotions, something like love
waiting for you at the frozen lake, the small village
it never rises above the language that is a totalizing
language *it was the most beautiful place, you must go*

whereas rain sounds worse in language, to hear it like a body
in beaded costume lying down on the ground in the parking lot
go to the screen door and feel the tops of your toes turn cold
that is a transformation you would not have talked about
or recommended to anybody

*

when you book your ticket to China, your mother asks Why
Why are you going there again?

*

you visit your sister on base over Thanksgiving, a week
before her twenty-fourth birthday you don't like Georgia
you argue inside of her car

you are driving or she is driving

when you are driving the arguments don't go as far
you are less focused

you grab at things inside of each other
it doesn't hurt so much as it is a necessary expulsion
a scraping out of interiors, punctuation
looking out at the green winter rural land home-land

*

people have said to you
I have never left this country
they might as well have said I have
never left *my* country

you were always leaving your country
from the time you had one you were leaving
you imagine a tiny passport though of course it was
probably normal sized

to make the causal clear this is why
you consider planes to be uterine spaces
somnambulant places
rocking your way to the bathroom
between the knees of strangers
your head rolling onto static shoulder

*

婆婆

What is the best way to anglicize what you have called her all your life?
In order to write her in English, in your childhood diaries you wrote *popo*,
but in America the association is authoritarian. What about the homey *panpan*,
throw in a hyphen, *pan-pan*, which sounds midwestern and wholesome?
No, your grandmother was—is—skinny. *Pohpoh*: dense and aspirated,
the 'h' gives a breath to the non-native speaker, *a necessary signifier of breath*

*

perhaps your sister needs to think she is moral
it is important for her to believe that her work is moral
and meanwhile you think your poetry might be useful

already you have left the terms that your mother has set
that your younger sister has begun a useful life and that you are immoral
but when you argue you argue over what is *normal*

*

over the weeks they discover more problems
there is water in her brain now there is water
in her lungs too
it is like they want you to give up the slow breaking
of the hopefully straight back
alternating this news with the better mornings
that might be the improvement starting
woken up and the morning chill not steamed off yet

*

Is this lived experience valuable? Does it generate useful information? Your sister says it doesn't matter now, since you are American. She has never felt so American and will continue to feel more American. So why are you having such a hard time?

*

Stories,
you always wanted to hear stories. Say a story,
you said in bed next to your mother, grandmother.
And they swore they had no stories to tell. No stories.

Sometimes there were songs, mother's warped English lullabies:
twinkle twinkle little star, how I want you what you are
Other times your grandmother read you books of facts
Up and Down Five Thousand Years... was one
and it was about all of Chinese history in a few paperback volumes
Ten Thousand Why's... another was called
and it was a popular book on science for children at the time

*

you do not understand distance
the way it warps you

maybe you know it as a linear thing
not as a substance that refracts

you are the only one here to receive yourself
and to mourn when you land

*

you do not know when the moon is roundest
only that it changes each year like the date of your grandmother's birthday
but you know the moon is biggest early in the morning
before the sun rises when you are driving toward or away from your sister

a man who drives you to the airport tells you he is happiest
at this time when the highways are clear like a stallion
every now and then his car needs to extend its legs into a full gallop
Off! Away! he charges us into the narrowly illuminated dark

Summer

In the morning, in the room,
air conditioning choked,
I untuck the mosquito net
from beneath the sleeping mat,
printed skin of my legs,
straw colored and woven,
and twist it (slow dusty
tornado) around and up
over its own canopy—
the way I had once been taught
as a child by another child
to make an elegant French hairstyle.

/

Construction has turned this street into a night market:
narrow lit channel, funnel energy.

What I see tonight: a short-haired woman
doing pull ups on the iron scaffolding.

The rain starts and stops all afternoon,
so we wait for our chance: an opening.

/

I sleep poorly in the summer,
humidity like an animal on me.

In this room that is patiently
replicating a refrigerator,

I remember a brown New England lake,
pairs of tattooed women wading into the water
with beers and cigarettes, old mare grace.
Travel, in itself, is not valuable.

I take in what I lack,
a clear bone broth.

/

The moment you stop
they bite you,
but then they bite you
and you stop scratching.

From inside her dementia
my grandmother comes out
to ask a question:
Do you have a boyfriend yet?

/

To provide, on my own body, the hook
by which I will be caught—

a fish, dead in my own sauce.
When I do not like what they are saying,

I find in the back of their eyes a hook
that is my own small reflection
to pull me back.

Guangzhou Transfer

I.

A holiday and a Friday: *too many people*,
black heads funneling toward the exit.
There is a man in the crowd yelling *whatthafuck!*
And at the same station another man, prayer hand out,
muttering, inexplicably, his Amitabhas.

I look hard at each body that enters
through the sliding doors:
Outskirts boys with bleached bowl-cuts,
sharpened fingernails, shirts spelled
SUAPREM, who return my serrated stares,
emanate heat like soft wet towels.

You can hear the rain coming from a distance,
from all the way in the countryside,
like a heavy chain being laid slowly across
the ground—

Listen, sleeping in this position,
have you only gained a partial understanding?
Blood flown to one half of the brain,
as when you can hear only one side
of a phone call in the living room.

II.

I have turned this city into my sickbed,
that whorey pitch of laughter reserved
for immortal women in the period dramas of late afternoon.

Like all families, we have dealt in guilt.
The summer is sticking to our skin—
We smell unlike ourselves, like buses that have passed us
like lottery numbers on the street.

Every bottle of iced water is made
by taking the heat out of it
and depositing it somewhere else.

In this constant construction,
we must increase the volume of our voices—
it's not that we want to be loud.

Young service workers flirting,
girls slapping the forearms of guys.

You cannot be too curious or open to things.
Your eyes might land on a welding spark.
A drop of water reminds you of the part in your hair.

My misused brain.
Thunder cracks in the sky:
a noble sound.

In the Morning

In the morning, nainai
pats my thigh, her cold hand
raining. Yes! singing
It is good. Young granddaughter
in our bed.

It supports itself, it holds.

In the morning, while the body is still
firm, murmuring
I slide off the straw mat, hard
slab of bed,
flesh rolling, as if joined
with bone,
a ring that I cannot get off my finger.

There is the flapping of slippers
against the heel, steam of market

rising off the street, faces
of apartment buildings

fenestrating and refenestrating,
sliding variations of glass, screen,

curtain.
A dizziness clearing out the rooms.

Birthday (Patrilineal)

In a room getting hot,

the sun slants in like a piece of copier paper.

I draw a curtain of vertical blinds,
its sheets ticking like rain.

Years ago, my father said

if you eat more fish, you will swim faster.

And if you eat more chicken,
you will grow muscle.

In our house we lived a life of homophones

likenesses that were real, not as if.

Jirou was your bicep.
Jirou was chicken-meat.

I never wanted to use force, he says

years later at an upholstered restaurant in Poland
where he wouldn't take off his baseball cap.

The ice tray wouldn't release the ice

and so I had to slam it onto the edge
of the sink.

Many of us have neck problems

in our family, the chord that yokes,
the bone that bolts us to our bodies.

Poem in which my mother is not the woman

1.

It is not useful to count the difference—
how much a child costs.

And if
I spend a long time feeding you,
where do I get the time back?

I was never taught
to not have skills,
to close my mouth and hum.

Instead I have been becoming
gently bruised, like a plum
left at the bottom of the pile,
in Chinatown
in October.

2.

When my mother brought out her old violin
and played it,
the bow's hair was wild with waiting—
Where is that violin? Here
my mother was not a woman, the violin
was the woman, which relieved her of that.

3.

Someone teach me how
to take things out of this world
instead of putting things in,
give it some relief.

Plano

acorns, first there were acorns, then
bark and the collision dream, my protruding
front teeth—

shallow holes, stones as gifts
hallways flattened on approach

laughter when touched, sharply

something in the eye, rub of metal,

fingers locked into gentle curl
legs reaching to ceiling seam, cool suction of wall

there was a long strip of tape on the carpet that I was asked to walk on

a wood-water park
and squatting down for chives

light of basketball

—sudden purple

of riding a bike—

lassoed down the dry hill

we start with gathering, and we end up gathering

I will be different
when you are back.

Counting

I want to tell you
how I feel at the park. Chinese

grandma, bundle of floral
fabric, grandpa bouncing
on his trainers, small child

bending the air between them.
The graduate students
get together in the dormitories

to make huo guo, wide pot
of fish and vegetables, skin of oil at the top—
their napes exposed at the noodle shop.

Steam rises to pink faces.
Crooked,
as if broken,

they have an extra plate in their spine,
heads hanging from a hinge,

chicken bone structure,
the extra knuckle—

slightly sticky to touch.

Birthday (Matrilineal)

Somehow I walked home—
(When I was on the balcony, I could never have imagined being home, and now,
at home, I can hardly believe the walk.)

What if
in the middle of the night,
I wanted to make fish sticks?
(Moving far away from my mother, to replicate her in other kitchens.)

I said
my tooth hurt, she asked
if I would like a piece of gum.
(No, it's just that I have been grinding my teeth at night.)

The fear of losing.
To hear neighbors laughing
over the sound of crickets chirping.

There is no correct way to do anything.
There is no correct way to be wrong.

I prayed that I would not have to say goodbye to anything yet,
eating a peach over the sink.

The way I moved away
was like when you move the plate
and the flies linger a few seconds longer
before they drift vaguely toward the window.

After dinner, I sit
satiated, for hours.

October 14

How rare, this day,

the day of my father's
first colonoscopy,

and the first rain of the season.

It has been dry,
so dry his hands were cracking.

Also a power outage,
the first in a long time.

Before the sky closes
very slowly, I go for a walk

in the neighborhood,
plaster bones and skulls lying all about

the wet lawns, big pumpkins on the driveway.
How my mother feels

on Halloween, hiding from the children
in the dark.

I touch the slick leaves on the trees,
shivering, I clack my boots.

From house to house,
peering in:

A white circle ranges over the
living room for something solid to land on.

A fat blue face chews dinner,
IV bag dangling by the head.

I feel I must be getting home.

Inside, I sit for a while,
thinking, watching the candle

flicker like a decision.

But soon the lights come on all at once.

I hope it rains all week.

But of course in California,
the flowers won't die completely, they never do

before they are supposed to start again.

House Sitting

1.

Mother gone,
and I
expanding to fill her house,

like one of those pigs put
in boxes to grow
up all roundly square,

or was that watermelons?
Summer and the mountains
satiny yellow, I am driving

steady around the bends,
hand floating just off the wheel.
A silver Mercedes

in my rearview mirror,
and I am reminded
of how important I am.

I am not letting you down, sir.
The peak gets blunter the closer you get

up to it, from this angle it hardly
looks more than a little mound.

2.

Do you want to live in California?
So do I.

But first, are you ready to wake up
to the daily massacre of ants?

Ants everywhere,
flying ants.

My mother's heart is yellow,
like a bright grippable lemon.

Clarity inducing, squeezing a little
into a glass of water in the morning.

Cleansing,
touching my dark insides.

She keeps the rinds in a little pile
outside the sliding screen door.

She said, the computer screen,
its light sticks on your face.

At night you have to wash it off
before you go to bed.

Oh, I can hear
another one just dropped from the tree.

3.

Well-meaning pleasant
White ladies like my high school
Government teacher
Learning facts about me

At some barbecue party
That I was afraid to be at
And afraid to not be at
Don't know how to use the grill

Oh you don't observe this tradition
Then what tradition do you observe
Never happy with the answer
I don't think we have a tradition

Except for getting to the airport
Three hours early
Fourteen-hour flights
And usually no gifts

We keep the Christmas tree up all year
In California there are not so many
Unincorporated towns
Just smallish cities getting bigger

We have a White family-owned furniture store
That is always closing for years and years
Black and Mexican boys are hired to stand
Motionless behind the sign not even dancing

I just thought that each of these closing sales
Have been so successful that the store is saved
Again and again from closing
The light is gold-charged here

Full of generosity
The touch of it seems unfair

Lion Market

All we do not understand
should not be called ambivalence.
Not the daughters gripping their elbows
in the frozen foods aisle. One with her mother
and a look of appraisal, a jar held and the others
not selected. For sleeping, tonight
I pull an old t-shirt from the pile in my
mother's closet like a folder from
the file cabinet. Through the sliding doors,
mothers stumble from the light
with their visors, peal of empty carts
rolling over a low threshold. If you
could see or feel how tough the flesh
is wrought in the forearms, like overcooked
meat. Grandmas worrying over fruit
test the tension of a plastic sheet
that must open to hold. What
is called strength isn't meant by
this, the way it stiffens the body.

Thyroidism

If I look for the symptoms
I can find them easily everywhere.

I like to be wild
and satiated.
I go to the lunch buffet and
have quite a bit of everything.

While we were having sex, or after,
we heard the pipes banging
and I said,
It must be the heat coming on now.

My laundry always strongly smells of me,
it owes nothing to him,
and he doesn't love me.
Anyway, what does it even mean to drive into Vermont,
What to even do there.

I never wanted to be alone.
I could never be alone.
Or poor,
like my mother.

I need to talk about guilt here, because I was born with it. What else was I born with? I cannot say what is mine and what is inherited from my mother, or what is in spite of my mother, or in what ways by being in spite of her I have become more like her. But I can say there is guilt like a muscle inside of me that I cannot cut out or use.

In the morning, she is washing last night's dishes.
So many dirty dishes, like so much dirty underwear.
Disbelief that it all came from us, that it exists.

I cannot shake the fact that
I am wasting this autumn
as I have wasted all other autumns before this.

Before she had me, she had a tumor. But for a while we were in there together. I came out first and then the tumor. Now I am always outside of her, and my departures are getting quieter and quicker.

It is strange how hormones work.
Her threats are threats for the future, never now.
I just want you to have a family for longer.
Your body is your most important thing.

It is very cold in our house,
we move through it like patients.
If I sleep with my hair wet,
I would get headaches.

On the bed, I accused him of plotting against me. I said, You are a conniving asshole, you wanted this from the beginning. He said, You want to believe this because it's sexy, but it's not true.

Hearing my name on the TV,
Hey Justine,
Justine, you are going to win this.
Justine, I love you.

I cross my legs when I'm sitting because I need the weight of one leg on top of another,
I need the reminder.

Because I think you're pretty, he said.
Oh, I said, cooing. You're pretty too.

On the TV,
I watch a female detective talking to a real asshole:
Do you have any enemies?
Anyone you can think of that would wanna kill you?

Wisconsin

1.

I spend Thanksgiving with a friend,
whom I am reconsidering.

In the waiting room,
while my friend opens her legs for the gynecologist,
I watch TV like a foreign person does,
mouth wide open, giggling.

Her parents, divorced, live ten minutes apart.
Her father, anticipating the arrival of a much younger woman.
Her mother, alone in a condo full of new furniture, bitter.

2.

I was in Wisconsin but it was
as if I were not there.

No one would let me be here,
car doors slamming shut.

In the afternoon, a nosebleed,
small white napkin, splotches of red spaced evenly all over it—

As if I'd pricked my finger,
hunting.

We are going to spend the afternoon a few hours north of here.

I am sitting in the car with my friend's dad, who is saying,
It's too bad we're between seasons. All the shops will be closed.

Turning up the heat in his car,
this kind of hospitality.

The ways in which this is dissatisfying to me.

3.

I watch the cattails and the corn fields,
the quiet barns with their silos.

High school boys watch videos in their bedrooms.
Working people hate the winters here,
and the winters never get better, or easier.

4.

The trees are neutral, they try to help.

The trees grow bare
so the hunters can better see
the deer between branches.

I know why they do it,
go into the woods, serious task
to hold that warm thing in their hands.

To seek a new kind of oppression—

To walk out onto the frozen pond.
To scrape my cheek against the bark.

6.

We are driving home late
after Thanksgiving at another family's house,
past rows of darkened homes

she says were built to face
the river, so we are really only seeing
the backs of them.

Through the windows, the Christmas trees,
their pricks of light, muted glow of ornaments.

This means the children have gone to bed,
which is when you might pull your husband close.

7.

We are looking for a good place to stop.

Always driving past it;
standing still in a snow-covered back yard.

Pre-Love

When we used to cut the onion
to make us cry and
to laugh in embarrassment—

That was one instance of this.
I could no better tell you why than how.

Old photographs of
my mother as a young woman
crouching in the flowers,
her head framed by an open window.
My mother standing next to trees.

*

They always fought after dinner
about what was proper to do on a full stomach, walk or sit.
Dad said we must walk to help with digestion, Mom said sit.
So we stood and looked at ourselves in the floor-length mirror.
Or we would finally sit and watch him pace.

In the small house,
they call us separately:
Your father has been throwing things lately
Your father wants you to call him.

We could not do this before.
Now we carry our phones with us
and we talk to each other while walking.
My sister tells me about her first kiss
while I pace on a dark balcony.

*

Time, and need, and shame.
He knows I can behave in love,
then seeks me out. And what else?

I sit down to write letters but I don't think
who I am writing to.

I think I could choose him
just because of this or that:
His is the safest face to rest my eyes on
He holds me like I hold myself

*

I only ever wanted to see what it would be like.
I never wanted to have you.

I stretch and stick my toes into the grooves of the radiator.
You watch me do this.

*

There is no end to this, there is no after.
This was never that.

What is the beginning? Where is the beginning?

On Moving to Southern California

A. “The Western Canyon”

A heat wave in October, I smell
the chemicals of campus landscaping.

First I moved east,
then further east.

Then I moved west,
and somehow the west

was even more old-fashioned.

I basically need a full day
to recover from the day before.

In class, I hear
a simple declaration,
meant to mean a lot:

It works.

Reminds me of something I think
someone in the Home Depot must believe:

*The greatest satisfaction
a man could ever know
is a tool, working.*

B. “Sun setting, Blvd.”

Homeless, woman.
She switches

from Spanish to English
and I think of a child

with her homeroom teacher.

*Will you buy me a burrito?
Can I use your phone?*

I hear the man next to me say:
I'm sorry.

Though to make it more valid:
I'm late to my haircut appointment.

Can I have some water?
May I use your bathroom?

In the natural world, she would not be thirsty
if I were not also thirsty.

We are not in the natural world.
Palm trees notwithstanding.

And I, guiltily, hastily,
finish my burrito before her eyes.

I put on my sunglasses.
I check my teeth.
I walk down the street.

C. "Inland Emperor"

First the Indians, then the prospectors,
then the settlers, then the US Marines.
How A Place Becomes America:

You can change the order, but the logic stays the same.

Junk collectors, antiquers,
people who are nostalgic about a life lived
a decade or two ago, when everything was simpler.

And you weren't surprised by an oriental woman
driving into the parking lot by herself
and ordering a drink at the bar.

D. "Plan Development"

I have gone to the far reaches,
where family breaks against community.

I am following my great uncle

on the freeway.

He is staying in the right lane.
I could give him a little tap on the bumper
if I wanted to.

Meanwhile, I read billboards that
cut straight to the heart of the problem:

*Stop giving your heart away
too easily.*

There is real evidence for God.

We are living a good planned life,
life as planned.

I am being brought into my family, or a family.
I am invited to my cousin Addison's soccer game
in the San Bernardino sun.

Smell of hot plastic as we watch her run
back and forth.

My uncle's arms are tanned from driving his Lexus,
ants and fruit roll-ups in the back seat.

We had a shot at universality, once,
still do. The long arc of self-discovery
carries you even further away from your family.
You don't remember, but you accept it.

Also, it's important to have a personality
(as opposed to a culture).

I lie in their guest room,
freshly showered,
listening to them shout *Home run! Home run!*
from their living room.

It seems odd that they should be performing for me
in their own house.

Speaking English to my great uncle,
my grandmother's brother,
I have lots of questions for him but not in this language.

How many generations does it take
to have a loser son,
and not worry whether he will survive?

Here, I see plenty of Asian mailmen.

A minority finds a community, a stable civic life,
a way to keep their assets safe...

Give it some time, sooner or later,
they, too, will become conservative.

Somebody else planned it, anyway.
We are the type of people who follow the rules,
who play the game right.

My Uncle, old Angelino—
his sons are cops.

*They always crying, says Uncle,
anytime you take the benefit from them,*

when he talks about those other types of people.

E. “Un-tiled”

Why do I think this way?
Why do I erase my argument when it
has just been made?

It's because
When my mother loved me most,
She told me I was wrong.

Something (here) about the past,
Something (here) about the future.

F.

Whenever a group of Asians appear together,
they look like tourists.

This is an interesting phenomenon

and a relatively new one,
because previously they could have been
a village, a very large family—

more accurate, perhaps,
to say a group of relatives.

G.

You want to do hard things, you have to be graceful.

Lately I've been feeling like a real cowgirl,
I wear the same pair of jeans all week.

At night when I go to bed I take my clothes off,
and I lean them across my chair.

You see? I do anything I want.
I sit crossed-legged in my bed, and I eat a bowl of ramen.

Nobody ever challenged me.
If you have the words, then you must say them.

Love Poems

1.

Love poems and love:
timing and not saying
the thing you should not say
before it is time to say it.

Here is a Love poem with the word Heart in it.
For my mother and father, who met near thirty,

There was much more striving before the romance,
youth still ripening on the tree.

What I mean is:
for them, there was an even
longer period of loveless striving.

2.

I
 is an empty referent,
I
 has no real childhood.

(I
 cannot remember it.)

What happened?

3.

In the future,
I will remember a time when
each new thing was still also the best thing.
(The dearth of experience behind me.)

I won't tell you about the three times
I went to the library to find you.
And after walking past all the aisles
on the fourth floor, I could confirm you weren't there.

And then I sat down,
and I tried to read.

4.

If:
I am forever foreign,
And:
you are familiar to me now,

Then:
you are foreign for a while,
Until:
you become unfamiliar to me.

5.

I also understand that it is possible
for things to get quite boring.

If I call you each evening to ask how your day was,
and then we meet, for dinner or a drink.

I will say in the future:
those were nights when
I thought every streetlight was the moon.
(Looking up for confirmation, a stupid mistake.)

6.

If I try hard,
I remember.

Concentrated bursts of activity:

Staring very hard at a doll's face,
intently rubbing the plastic legs
of a plastic horse.

7.

Intimate

a word, which has now been rendered meaningless:
theoretical, political; distant, virtual;

twisted, structural; economic, societal;
mediated, trans-national, genealogical.

8.

So, my orgasm

becomes a global problem.
I open my legs and I smell a city

I have visited, and cities I have not yet visited but
may some day visit, and cities I should never visit.

You know, I thought intimate was less
international. Latitude and longitude and time.

9.

Also, romantic love is what tragically
supplants filial love. Of course,
the first thing we do in bed is
we talk about our parents.

In the corner of my blurred vision,
a crisp image: your jaw rippling,
like light on the surface of a pool.
The warm panic of a Sunday,

Not far from campus. Sometimes,
I feel like an underutilized university building,
a janitor cleaning my concrete stairwell at night.
After hours, I come to the fully lit lobby

And I hear the sound of staff rolling
all the roller chairs out of the classrooms
and down the hall.

Why do you think they are doing it?

Tell me, was this a good love poem?

Notes from a High Altitude

Make of your mind a floating case
of jewelry, bone-sharp and hollow,

or the frail tools on display
in the museum,

old human
embellishment and trace,

part or whole, almost nothing
pinned in place,

faint shadows
cast on the wall like halos.

Matter without matter,
pane of air and breath, oil print of fingers.

The great value is untouchable,
but *touched*, once. As troubled

as mute evenings of love,

when you will still want to push a brown hand
through his hair, something so fine.

*

What you learn in galleries
of pearl, silver, stain

is all forms give way
to few functions:

each a version of knife or cup,
needle or vessel.

For an example (Americans need
examples), look out the window

onto bright street,
begging man.

Today, as always, he is the knife
and everyone else is the cup:

a crowd hollowing itself around him
as he cuts toward them.

*

One hand held, the other hand pointing.
There are days to go to the museum alone

in the city center, or to the outskirts of the city,
together. Out the window:

one stray dog trotting along dirt road,
soldier of its own survival. (Compare

to the dogs that must be pulled back
by their owners when we meet on the sidewalk.)

What kind of soldier is that? The ones who stand
nameless in the square of this small town

known as the inland ocean of pools.
In the heat you could not stand up to,

you thought you saw your lover walking
naked up the white stairs,

while you were down by the water
which is where you're meant to be.

All over town the mannequins
have breasts and butts at right angles,

a man sits on a step and draws women
with big diamond eyes and feathery hair.

You were so embarrassed of your skin
and your stomach, you would not stand up from the water.

*

Do you taste your own breath?
Push your tongue against the roof

of your mouth, press your lips shut.
Permit only air through the nose.

*

You go to bed with your love,
fingers smelling of garlic.

But only you dream of men
congregated in half-shut garages,

one man dropping from the curb
to cross in front of a red bus.

Someone thinks to turn on the music
and it comes pulsing through the room.

The men start dancing quietly.
Dignity in resignation.

Did they tell you,
are there any other animals with a light

turned on inside of them,
a blinking light?

Canton

Homeland rushes toward you and you
are suffused with homeland, where your skin seems
to hold the air. Everywhere else, arrival is arid,
a new place made familiar by how it depletes you,
makes your hands hurt in the hotel room.

But I remind you that dryness does not move,
it does not take, like coldness is only the absence of warmth.
Heat is what moves, and moisture too. This is the departure
that makes your skin crack— not just your elbows,
but also your ankles, calves, thighs, the wash of grey across your hips.

This reminds me of my aunties, who travel north
or to developed countries and always remark upon
their return that it had been so dry, so unlike this place.
And they will run their fingers down their arms
with distaste, imagining or remembering a cleaner life.

Driving Together in a Big Circle

I felt certain this was unprecedented in my own life.
I knew I could do it, but I still had to do it. By the end of the trip,
there would be small wounds all over my hands:
I thought I could put them anywhere, remove them quickly.

We were on a slight incline for hundreds of miles
onto the plateau. At first, it was raining, then dry. We went on
one long hike and a few smaller ones. Without words,
it was hard to see what we were seeing. I wanted to learn something,

I read placards that told me: this is what is called
an *entrenched meander*. Tilting modestly toward the steering wheel,
leaning back on one leg at the edge of the canyon.
Even as it was beginning, I imagined it ending.

But there would be ground beneath the ground,
I love yous underneath the I love yous. This was for sure.
And to think I may never have learned this
if my parents had not moved to America.

San Leandro Purple Dimsum Banquet Hall

A dead fish swirling around in the tank.
I ask her what kind of fish it is,
she doesn't even know if it was from a river or a sea.

That was the problem, my mother
could never tell me the names of things
in English or Chinese, and I was very lonely for that.

Culture is competing, she says. Pointing
our chopsticks at the shrimp, the pork,
never at each other.

I look around the glimmering banquet hall
at the women my mother is not, ah-yi's
with their perms and pocketbooks.

Passing around their phones to look at photos
of daughters' graduations or vacations
or the houses they have recently bought.

The server peers over my head as he pours my tea,
wanting to be somewhere else.
Now that he's in America, he wants to be somewhere else.

I see what he sees. There is no space for anyone
to be just what you want to be.
Americans in China, Chinese in America.

Culture is in the body—you were the seed
and you have grown with different sun,
different water, in other soil.

Culture is outside the body, I thought
I could keep them apart.
But now, the Chinese lunchgoers wait eagerly

at the edge of the banquet hall, eyeing the tables,
the tinny carts loaded with bamboo
cages of steamed meat, sticky rice.

There is no way to keep them apart.
It is the noise of eating and talking about
our lives, no different than in China.

We leave the big purple banquet hall with the crystal chandeliers.
We are outside again, in the hot parking lot,
in the glint of a thousand cars.

The sky is big and the air is dry.
We find our car,
and we get back onto the freeway.

Spring in the West

Washing the car with your socks rolled down
That is the kind of thing in California
That never gets talked about, but is always being replicated
Every Friday afternoon on the driveway

At home we can never stop eating oranges
Or pouring tall glasses full of water
When we are bored, we hold each other tightly
And laugh loud, fake laughs until we are happy to be together

Sometimes I trap my sister in a corner
And kiss her until it isn't funny anymore
Before she finds a razor she pinches the hair on her arms
Making little peaks on the skin, from wrist to elbow

We make many drawings of the same thing and tape them to the wall
We send letters to organizations that host children's competitions
And they send back certificates and coupons
With our names on it, and once they even send back five dollars

Mom says it matters, where the freckles on your face are located
All three of us have one under our eyes, near our noses
So there will be sad things for us to cry about
Grandma had one too, but she got hers surgically removed

Mom says it is not good to drink tea after noon
But still we drink it, and we are able to fall asleep
We like the sound that the crickets make, in the yard
And the smell of the air at night

International House of Pancakes, 2002

I was never ready when the waitress asked. My father only wanted to go to restaurants when my mother cried, or my father only took us to restaurants to make my mother cry. I am looking for mystery here or an example that fits. We threw ourselves on top of her blankets, pinned her down with *please*. I never said I wanted to be happy, or a golden retriever. I never said I wanted a flat house with no upstairs and no fogged up rooms. We said, *at least please come with us*, but still we left, we could not be her daughters every single time, it wasn't fair, she never helped us be simple. It was either that we couldn't decide it was right to leave her, or we already had. Driving there we felt guilty and a little worried about what she would do alone, but we came home and she was still there. We thought of her hands and how she wouldn't have to wash dishes with them tonight and, yes, we were sad but we were happy, happy, happy

Day Torn Out of Early Spring

What you saw as my potential
was my inability to fully understand
speech. Now I have learned
I am no longer promising.

I want to tell my mother about
a green place between apartments, this
very patch of grass, the crooked trees
that form a ring, plastic chairs left out
in rain to wash and dry.

Scattered toys everywhere, so far apart
as not to belong to a single child—

this reminds me of us
before words. More than my mother,
I mourn the young part of motherhood,

wincing for chives in the regular grass,
the leaves darker, rounder

and hollow, I lift my chin
covetously to the balconies of others.
Walking, walking no dog, angling away
from kitchen windows,

open patio doors,
pupils dilated to dusk. Every dangling thing
still dripping
down as far as it will go.

In the shade between buildings,
some kind of ficus full of birds
unseen and shaking above me.

In the End of Summer

the whole air is one husk
to be pried or cracked off without incident. July,
I've not been working, I've been setting the table.
But I want to get out of my seat, adjust my posture
and fill my small glass with water.
On the phone with my dad, I want to hear—
I do hear all good news. He speaks with a post-
or pre-gym kind of velocity. Money wrung
out of his body, he promises all kinds of safety
in my adulthood. A house, a car and other comforts.
You have so many things going for you, and he lists
my schools, *As well as your figure. Let's say,*
let's say I'm pursuing your mother...
Now I hear another hoarse sound, it's someone
skateboarding into the night. This morning,
just the droning of passing planes
and a high frequency twisting, like a wire
in the ear. In the evening, I am told to close my eyes
and breathe deeper than I ever have before, to break
the membrane on my breath. And at the end
of it, in the back of near bursting darkness,
there is not a door or an opening but an uvular
flap of nausea. The workout instructor should not
have told me of her diet. I am no longer in her class
but look in on her occasionally to see her
same girth, flexing and bowing from side to side.
In California the flowers culminate more than once.
Never-ending season, campus irrigation
prevents depletion. In case of bloom fatigue,
there is always relief: one sip of sky.

The Hill

How different from the mound
it once was, green and damp

like a pet, body risen
rounded to touch.

Today I saw it and it was so unlike
a real hill, more like a towel left

too long in the sun,
singed planet,

exception of sky over condos.
Yes, how unlike a real hill.

I might have driven all this way
to the parking lot, only to feel like staying

a bit longer in the car,
listening to a story on the radio.

Meanwhile, the children of the neighborhood
are helping to tear the bark off eucalyptus,

lilting voices full of protagonist valor,

beating crooked sticks
against aluminum bench.

Do you often feel the design of another?

Someone made this window,
cut it out of the wall at waist height,

and someone put that tree
there, to improve the view.

Inventory

After our phone call, I go for a walk
in the university's ecological preserve
(how many syllabled footholds), where
the student naturalists come to practice
marking and sampling hard things,
batched bits of matter, measuring
by counting with steps the spaces
left between, where more invasive
things will grow, how large the lobes
and how wide the stems, where
beetles have left deposits, what spiders
and birds have touched. A few pliant
needles of the cactus, the perennial
and the light-footed, loose-rooted things,
the dangling known. Abundant invasives—
signs of wetness, now dry—dry holes
once plugged with wet.

Further along the path a clearing
made by many hands patting down
grasses, rocks with mottled faces
for occasional sitting while this sweat work
of grid-making in a grid-less and uneven terrain.

Futility of wooden stakes
like splinters in the dirt, small white flags historically
red and in areas still pink.

It is a young noticing, fast-aged,
to have a sprig of sage, a jar of dirt
a new experience, fresh confirmation
of known fact. You wouldn't know
it until you saw it—*Well in fact I do*—
this is the new claim that can be made
out of old dirt.

Who realizes? I realize
an attempt to make intervals
out of silence, how orderly
and disorderly this ecology that is not
ours, but we encourage its doing,
(whatever its doing) or becoming
in spite of us, because we want to learn.

Us is me and ecology is myself
today—
because the students aren't out.

Memory

(33.64, -117.83)

A week after her death, I went to the balcony
Of my grad student apartment, looked west in that long way
Which means east, and got on my knees to pray.

It was a long time since I'd done it, and this time
It was worship. The screen door slid to welcome me out,
I opened the compass on my phone and implored it

To tell me where her body was, where it might be coming from.
I placed a cushion beneath me, like I already knew how.
As the sun was setting, and before my roommate was home,

I put my forehead to the ground. Again and again,
Each touch something stored, perhaps something registered.
What was the rest of that day like? And the days around it.

What I miss is not what happened, but knowing the day.
Knowing firmly the day because I was still in it.

Would Want

I moved quickly and heavily
like a person who does not hike
but would want to see herself
on a meadow in tall grass,
sometimes visible, sometimes not.

I tried so hard to open
the jar against my chest
it found my heart, thumped
and still did not open.

Something is dislodged.
I want it to lodge again,
I need it there.

It was keeping more than itself
where it was.

Meanwhile, spring
shrill outside my window.