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The Book of Bodies

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Gregory Allyn Emilio

June 2013

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The Thesis of Gregory Allyn Emilio is approved:

Committee Chairperson

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Thanks to my professors and to my peers for all their invaluable support and advice.

This book is dedicated to my family and to Leila Abdelghani.

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Prologue

Of Orange & Life

After Frank O'Hara

But if I was a painter it'd be so much easier
to riffle the feathers of that smoke-blue scrub jay
bobbing below the birds of paradise,
to abrade the rhythm of a passing
woman's blood or a neighbor's blue collar stubble —
less exhausting to render the buried light inside
every supposing thing.

Because a bona fide artist
can make an orange

drop

from the canvas,

ply into a palm:

rind like dimpled leather,

the intimate peeling.

A word is the sunset-

colored ember

of a cigarette;

yet the words

lovely cinders

signify so much less

than any sunset.

If I could paint,

then we'd actually see

the scrub jay & orange

instead of pretending. Look,

I just want

to measure

this weariness —

that lost inch of

light,

yes, and sometimes,

this terrible life.

I. Broken Bread

The Story My Lover Can't Hear

The blind couple sidles with graceful half-steps
into *The Press*, an alert German Shepherd in stride.
July twilight descending into the restaurant
hides the milky strands of their irises; I nearly say,
Hey, you can't bring a dog in here.
Perhaps the man hears my held breath,
feels its contrail against his face, when he says,
"Table for two, please."

I hook under his lead arm, and with his free hand linked
to the woman's elbow, and with her free hand on the leash,
we daisy-chain toward the tables. Patrons eye
above their grass-fed filets; their lips pause mid-sip in martinis.
Can the couple sense this stillness, this radius of silence?
Bats make sounds to retrieve distance: the woman asks me
if the heat has been keeping customers away.
"Only till dark," I say.

They sit without a slip and he orders a Pomona Queen,
knowing that amber ale
must taste like sunset against skin,
gentle wind in a field of foxtails.
She grasps his wrist across the table,
orders an Irish whiskey, neat, then raises fingertips to her nose
to smell his cologne. He beams a freshly shaven face;
she thanks me, and I for once, stare openly.

They stay past midnight,
drumming knuckles, feet, humming in time
to the jazz band, tipsy and kissing and slipping the dog
battered hunks of bread. The woman tells me
they met at the park just down the street,
sharing the same bench,
both of them reading. "No joke," she says,
"ten years ago today."

It's a thick night and the sweat never dries
along my neck. The band's finishing their set,
so I step outside to smoke a cigarette.
Through the window, without a goodbye,
I watch them walk out the backdoor,
the Shepherd licking their heels.

They leave two large bills under the salt shaker.

* * *

Lying in bed later that night I tell
my lover about the blind couple. I tell her
what they drank, the precision with which
they kissed. Their dog. I re-tell the park-bench Braille story
and tell her, “they were sharper than bats.”
She simply looks at me, reading the word from my lips
because my sign language is poor. There is a shard
of pigment, moonlit, in the white of her eye.

To Make An Old Fashioned

Night after night,

We wait for the rind of sunlight to muddle the windows,
For that bright bitter dash across the marble countertop,
To send us, like writhing children, to our beds.

We rest blue hammocks under our eyes,
Pitch after-hour tents to commemorate coolness,
To shrug when someone writes *anal me* on the tip line.

Night after night,

We macerate countless cubes of sugar,
Then drift into sleep with granules eroding enamel,
With bits of pith locked between our teeth.

We close our doors to daylight, draw the drapes
To sustain darkness like the drink's velveteen finale:
The indigo maraschino cherry, the melting cubes of ice.

Night after night. . . .

White Islands

Joe upends the salt shaker
over his bowl of Cioppino:
the tinny lid splashes into the stew
and a white, fine-grained isle rises
from its depths.

He splays his palms against the tablecloth
and the café table wobbles. “Excuse me, sir,”
he says to the waiter passing by
who continues to pass by.

Joe sighs, blue eyed, embarrassed by the size
of the table. He leaves cash and tip under the shaker,
screws the lid one-quarter of a turn,
then drives two blocks to his empty
suburban home.

Bon Appetite

Most nights,
the moon just swings
along its upward arc, wind shifts
in faceless, purple folds. I cook alone,
listening to branches rattle
the windows.

I sit on the porch,
with any kind of smoke,
tracing that pearl ladle in the sky,
the one I can mistake
for any mesh of stars.

Often, I overcook
and have to start again.
Sometimes I set off smoke alarms,
scald a palm, or grate my knuckles,
and just quit.

But I cook because
the moon is indifferent;
stars don't even let us know
when their bodies of light
have burned out.

Like a pack of pre-teens,
wind only raps on the front door,
laughs in the branches,
then flees.

Most nights,
the curl of sautéing sweet onions
riles the gristle in my wrist,
the tensile writing hand,
saving me from myself.

Recipe For Ambrosia

Shucking the tomatoes' seeds,
gutting them like smaller human hearts,
I think about summer. The stage is set:
front door, back door open—
a thoroughfare for dusk wind—
the oven humming a steady
two hundred & fifty degrees. . .

I drown the tomato halves in oil,
sprinkle sugar, sea salt, and dried oregano.
I slide the glass baking dish into the oven.
Heat licks my face, beads my brow.

The oven's not so different from the heart.
All that heat; otherwise, a cool, quiet cavity:
an emptiness.

The tomatoes caramelize for hours
in their golden pool studded
with garlic cloves & basil,
walled within their aching metal heart,
and the whole house warms
with the scent of sweet oil.

I open the oven:
translucent skins bubble deep rouge
so it must be time. In a bowl, I layer
the tomatoes, fresh parsley, more garlic;
the stratum swims in the near-divine oil. . .

But you know this can't just be about
roasting tomatoes, those lovely hearts
we trap to make the maudlin world,
to ease the oven's ceaseless chuffing.

Theology of Meat

Go ahead, buy the 18 oz.
ribeye steaks you can't
afford—the ones veined
with fat like the marble
steps of some cathedral
in Rome. The threads
ash-blue & riven.

Go ahead, cash your
paycheck and eat it.
Worth its weight
with sea salt & rosemary
butter, the low spring
dusk and a cigarette
to make your mouth
water. Forget wine.

God ahead, behind:
the blue-black marbling
of the sky, seasoning
of stars. The meat
hisses in a language
you can't speak.
Forget about rent.

You're worth your weight
in manual labor. Or,
go make metaphors,
see how easy that is.

Wine Country

Santa Ynez, CA

Feed me the dark juice,
The grape's distilled child.
Show me, scattered among
The slow green hills of trellised vines,
The sacraments of biodynamic ritual:
Cow horns filled with deer-bone ashes,
Yarrow flowers buried in a stag's bladder.
Allow some coherence, some agreement
Between the moon & the dark earth—
From topsoil to loam and down the pliant clay.
Coax this country like a child to behave:
Offer us one of a thousand
Answers to our nameless ache.

Meeting La Matriarca
Glendora, CA

Like a rotten habañero,
Leila's right big toe weeps in the rust-violet light.
In an unfamiliar home, in the hills above Route 66,
I blot puss still oozing from her drunken, bare-footed
misstep the night before. She straddles the kitchen sink
and I taste apple in her ankle.

Her mother swings
through the backdoor with flank steak, white onions,
tomatoes & green bell peppers for *Ropa Vieja*:
old clothes. Before we even shake hands,
she reduces sugar in water for the flan,
tells me I'm too skinny.

Leila decants Tempranillo
into a clay jug. We steal glances at the bloody bandaged toe,
though Sra. Grau never asks her daughter
Why, or How.

I imagine Leila fifteen years ago,
a child sneaking stray ropes of meat between her teeth.
Her mother burns the sugar: *mierda*. Kneeling twilight
sets motes of dust in amber about us.

This woman
who named her daughter after darkness eyes me
suspect: I'm suspended in the lengths of her silence.
I want to say that a face passes down
like dusk over foothills, that the meat is so tender
it tastes of someone else's childhood.

Senora Grau,
once a child in Havana who fainted awaiting rations
of chocolate, explains that most nights now she's too tired
to cook, that it's just as well since memory can ruin
a recipe as easy as flan.

When we finish eating,
easing in the wine & meat scents of the kitchen,
she tilts her glass in the lamp-light, angling her eyes:
"More old clothes, *flaco*?"

We also have apples."

Eating Phở While Felix Jumps From Space

Steam peels off the tops of porcelain bowls
brought out on trays by silent waitresses.
It lingers at eye level, marking
its passage, a spectral trajectory,
like a comet's tail of ice and dust.
There's a flat-screen television
on the wall above the fish tank
breaking news of Austrian base-jumper
Felix Baumgartner: his legs dangling
twenty four miles above our earth,
suspended by a helium balloon
above the stratosphere. Up there,
our atmosphere looks like a cornea.
We have to stand so close to someone
to see their eyes the way he sees
that disked edge gilt like the sheen
of a glassed lake. My waitress says
nothing when she sets down the bowl,
then the oval plate of saw-leaf,
basil, bean sprouts, and jalapenos.
She nods, half-smiles, a fingernail moon,
and I can see where the steam has left
condensation across her brow.
Vietnamese subtitles run under
Felix's white body in descent,
spiraling in divine ecstasy.
A respectful slurping keeps cadence
in the restaurant. A few cooks step out
of the kitchen, lean against tables
with their chins in their hands. I tear off
each individual leaf of basil,
tear apart the jagged stem of saw-leaf,
drop both in the jaundice-colored broth.
I squeeze chili sauce from an unmarked
plastic bottle, and see a model
of the unstable body of Jupiter,
where there is only a chaos
of red, a surfaceless center.
Down here, we also hunger
for failure. Felix free-falls
834 miles per hour, whirling,
and whirling, his body breaching

the speed of sound, belting a sonic
boom into the air waves of our planet.
Sufi dervishes spin with one palm up
to receive God, the other hand cupped
toward the earth to radiate His love.
Felix tailspins, faceplate fogging,
a white light building behind his eyelids
as he gets closer, and closer to us.
Down here, I untangle the core of rice
noodles holding the other ingredients
in orbit. A body's distance
from the sun determines life
or death. After four minutes, Felix
levels out, palms down, pulls the rip
cord, and finally lands, fleet-footed,
on the desert floor in Roswell.
I'm down to my last slices of filet
in the puddle of broth. I wonder
if he'll be with someone tonight,
if he'll be close enough to say,
*Your eyes are lovelier than the curve
of earth's atmosphere. . .* .The slurps
continue, the voices of the cooks crack
like knuckles. The shy waitress returns
to my table, leaves the tab face down.
I say, "You have lovely eyes,"
but she does not speak English.
She smiles, leans to clear my tray.
Later, I regret not giving her
a bigger tip, writing *thank you*,
or a haiku on the charge slip,
any contrail to commemorate
our star-crossed passages.

II. Bodies of Strangers

Threnody for a Broken Woman on the Sidewalk

La Paz, Bolivia

You were folded over like a half-closed lawn chair,
rusted, contorted, too easy to abandon. You curled up
in the settling dust of dusk when we passed, dust that fell upon
the blue cobblestones of the sidewalk. Stray dogs were sniffing
at discarded star-shaped scraps of carambolas.
Several homeless men shuffled in circles
on the stumps of their knees.
We did not notice you, Senora,
until your hands scattered at our feet,
nails skittering across the smooth blue stones.
My friends & I were gorged with empanadas & fresh fruit juice
in our new alpaca sweaters, stoned off the gritty weed we'd bought
from that blond Canadian expat on the shores of Lake Titicaca.
We were juggling a soccer ball as you thrashed on the sidewalk.
It was too easy, and lasted only two seconds,
but that moment of passing lasts,
passes back into my hands
like a wilted photograph....
You were probably fifty,
your skin weathered as a leather saddle
left to cling over the bones of a long-dead horse.
Cataract eyes, like the centers of marbles, the pith of oranges,
blindly searched our three nineteen year old faces.
Some need, some desire beyond the body
pried open the thresher of your mouth
to reveal withered stalks of teeth:
coca leaves, spare centavos, a mug of chicha?
Beyond the body because you asked for none of these.
The sound that rose in your throat, lifted from your lips
was a wail with no air behind it,
a creaking of dry gears: weeping.
As if a psychotic doctor held your vocal chords
between tweezers, as if he was extricating the words
from your larynx, and stripping from your body
the actual, the moth-eaten flesh of memory.
This weeping could collapse
the chest, could rupture the heart.
How could we, three Americanos
fresh from the suburbs & summer semester,
have disarmed the sadistic doctor,
stopped to press our ears to your lips?

A televised fútbol game awaited in our hostel bar,
over sweetened Pisco Sours, the swapping of stories
for cigarettes with other young wayfarers.
We simply sidestepped, picked up the ball.
We didn't even break stride at all,
and within two seconds
we had distanced & outstripped you
from our wanderlust....
We still had the rest of our lives
for you to continue:
broken
on a blue
cobblestone sidewalk
in South America.

A Lyric for James Agee

His back to the porch
of a tenant farmer's home,
the breast of wood,
the stubborn flower
of a single family,
their relic of hardship.

He hears the family of cotton
croppers breathing beyond
the wafer of bone-pine walls:
the father rolling a last cigarette
he will smoke beside his wife,
in bed, in the room, with his
children already sidestepping
into the waters of sleep...

Last night, I nearly
wrecked my car, gawking
at a great fire in Riverside:
the ancient rust lining
of the smoke-spume's
underbelly signified
a still-growing seed;
an oil lamp lighting
the dry mesa, the lives
maybe lost to its flames.

I wonder why the ember
of cigarette I cup in my clean
palm fills some vacancy
of the temporary dark,
even when there is nobody
to draw the smoke
from my fingertips,
pressure the silence
into a bloom-crackling
of being not my own—
no one to share the listless,
lipped mystery of smoke.

To the Cashier at the Independent Video Store

Risen rivulets of scar tissue
score the insides of your forearms

like six dozen disbanded rubber bands.
I hand you the empty DVD case.

The skin over your wrist, over the vital blue
veins, stretches untouched to your hands.

There is a woman whose own lacerated forearms
and taintless wrists I have pressed my lips to.

“That’s \$5.45,” you say. I press cash
into your palm. “How’s your night going?”

You say, “It’s going.” The woman I know
would’ve said the same, a short reply

to convince me that she was never thirteen,
never a kid who wanted attention from parents,

her parents who spent the hours from dawn to dusk
within their cubicles at competing engineering firms,

parents who locked the doors to their bedroom
after microwaving a TV dinner for their daughter.

It wasn't so they, or anyone else, would notice,
though they, though no one, ever did.

I pocket my change, saying, “Thank you,”
for the movie, and for the things

I will never know about your life.

Regulars, the Married Woman, and the Lives of Strangers

I.

Everyday at three regulars show up
with hand-rolled cigarettes, in slippers
or straw hats, pulling from their pockets
crumpled singles for happy hour. Wilkie
hides a glass eye earned in Vietnam under
a brown leather patch, Shepherd lugs a steel-
string guitar on his back. Both breathe into
and massage harmonicas like they are resuscitating
fallen pigeons. They converge, and open tired
eyes like succulent blossoms in a good light.
Most days they do not work; they can only
afford to drink from three to six, when the light
fades to the color of autumn leaves in the gutter,
when it ends suddenly as their long hours of sleep—
the dreams of would-be troubadours deferred
because regulars, by definition, do not wander.
At six o'clock they clasp their pint glasses,
accepting what's left, and what will not last.
As a child I'd trap lizards in mason jars,
try to keep them alive with bits of lettuce
and droplets of water. Though they always
died, I would hold each new prisoner up to
the light, thinking, *But this time, this time.*

II.

Midnight, and my shift's just ending.
A middle-aged blond woman with pearl
earrings sits at the bar between two regulars.
I wonder what windfall has allowed the men
to stay this late. Maybe Shepherd pawned
his guitar, or Wilkie teetered an advertisement
in his hands for hours on a busy corner. Maybe
together they sang and made music on that corner,
collecting loose change in upturned hats.
I know the woman, Mrs. B, well enough
to know she has a white zinfandel whenever
she and her husband share the filet mignon.
They only come as a couple, and they only
come every other weekend for the specials,
always presenting pictures of their teenage
daughters for my adulation. She is spinning

a half-empty rocks glass in her hands when she sees me, and slurs, “Hey, James Franco!” “Where’s Mr. B?” I ask her. Eric Shepherd leans back, and says, “I got beer at my place.” The aroma of his tin tobacco—a compound of raisins and burnt toast—wafts his words. Wilkie sits straight-backed in his camouflage jacket, too quiet, his good eye wandering the length of Mrs. B’s tennis-elegant body. “Yeah, let’s go back to your place,” she says. She lifts the drink to her lips, and her blue eyes blur, distant in the tumbler’s mirage.

III.

Outside, the sky realigns its constellations, harmonizing in a once-nameless mythology. I don’t have to witness Shepherd and Wilkie wrapping their arms around Mrs. B’s waist as she slips into the crooks of their elbows, all three touching by the will of her loneliness—a tune they will live to replay each happy hour, a longing they will not outlast—or watch them stumble arm-in-arm to some back-rented room, where a twin mattress waits, no box-spring, upon the hardwood, and where the blinds stay drawn long into the iterant afternoons. I don’t have to look through the bay window back into the bar, past my reflection’s tenuous return, to study the way drunks fumble lips against the pearls of a woman’s ears, the way they adlib blues lyrics like life is just a matter of acceptance—but tonight, tonight we’re trapped in the selfsame glass, perfect strangers in the neon light.

To The Man Who Refused To Pay

I sensed it when you walked in.
The way my basset hound howls
for hours before a storm.

Something in the breadth
of your shoulders, the brawn
of your shaved head & polo.

You ordered pitchers of IPA,
round after round of neat Blue
Label, your grin waxing like a sliver

of moon...It *is* terrifying when
you square up after walking out
on your tab, the two of us standing

on the sidewalk, circled by the smoke
of witnesses, the small rock of your fist
inches from my face, the gone look

of your grey eyes foreswearing
the downpour, the breath-held
second before we touched.

To a Recently Deceased Pop Singer

I remember my mother singing,
I'll always love you,

in the car, and you singing backup,
and I threw my seven year old arms

skyward, like I already knew about
catharsis, about my mother leaving

my father, even though she still
spoke his name in her sleep,

even though he didn't sing love
songs, preferring to line dance

down the wee hours on Saturdays,
while I'd be home alone not sleeping,

with a pocket knife under my pillow.
But I think if he heard you

singing backup to my mother's
missing notes, saw my arms

arching for the support we needed,
then he would have jumped back in

the car, all of us together, and I'd
sleep, knowing you'd live forever.

The Broken Woman's Monologue

I was once your age, once had honey behind my ears and the dust of dried flowers in my palms. I was new, I was a virgin: beware. You walk past me like money bloodied by the hands of a murderer. I do not blame you, though I curse the rest of your youth, your optimistic vanity, which will end sudden as the sunset beyond the Andes, end as light ends at that spine of South America. I want you to carry me like a dead pigeon on your shoulders for the rest of your lives.

No, no, no. . . .

I once had eyes men drank like cups of dark coffee. I once ranged the foothills of the Altiplano like a rabbit, like wind-scattered pollen. I was a shaman's daughter. We grew coca, San Pedro, and potatoes. In the blessed thread of our blood we were chosen to take the spirits of our people beyond this, anywhere you call *here*, where light moves in waves over the fields of quinoa, a thousand ancestral eyes in concert with the breeze. . . I would have been a guider of spirits, an awakener of gringo tourists like you.

I should not be this, this potato sack of skin, body of bones, clawing at your feet. I *want*. I *need*, but I know not what. No more. Maybe if you'd just stop for a minute. . . .

I should have married a lawyer or businessman, lived in the two tiered houses far from the huddled tenements of the city. Don't you get it? I *was* beautiful!

And children, too. These hips were made to bear children, these breasts to make milk. Oh, my daughters, where are you? Grandchildren, come sit in abuela's lap. Milk carries blood, memories of the dark rolling and rolling before us. You three were bottle-fed, no? You think these rheumy eyes cannot see the coin-sized openings of your mouths? Ah, I get it now. You *fear* me.

I should've have been a respected medicine woman, but why, and why not? *Your* people made the coca leaves, cocaine, more economic than alpaca, more precious than tin or mystic, visionary experiences. Cartels killed my father for his land. They forced me to pick the leaves, to put my hands on the genitals of the overseers, to bear three of their bastard children who each starved to death. For them, I would not give up *my* milk.

Now? Only tourists can afford shamans now. If I had anything to *give* you, would you stop, would you take my hands in yours? My people are poor and no one has called me *hermana* in so long. Each day it's harder to speak. Soon, there will only be sounds. Yes, I'm getting back, closer, and closer, thank God, back to where I started, with sounds.

Wait, one of you has stopped to look back at me: upon your shoulders, now and forever.

Jasmine Sends this Message to the Cypress Tree:
Fragments of Letters from Layla to Majnun

Majnun, they call you,
but sometimes I hear an animal wail

from the desert outskirts
beyond my guarded tent

and know you are still
Qays. Boy with eyes

like petrified honey.
If you come to me

you are dead by
the guards' long blades;

or an apparition,
beside me in bed.

Layla: child of night:
my name

predestines me
beyond bright stars.

Come then, madman,
as only you can:

a lone coyote, howling
at the edges

of our civilized world.

Majnun,

Night again & the stars unravel
the selfsame light over us both,
though we are to each other remote
as the spaces between those stars.

I hear you sing for me incessantly
among wild animals. Curious people
caravan out from the cities to witness
your wildly inspired love-ranting.

I hear for you there is no difference
between the lions, the jackals & the men,
this night & tomorrow, nothing between wine
and love. . . It is all a drunkenness.

On the page, at least there glows
the mutual stars and single moon.
Elsewhere, we only share desert.

Wasn't it better, dear stranger,
when we were still children, days
trading glances across the schoolyard,
before we knew we were in love?

Self-Portrait

I remember the way you'd look
at me like I was ugly, a shriveled fig,
just so no one would suspect us.
I didn't care. Your life in this world
was already over, our lives joined
and disjoined by our fathers,
by our warring bloodlines.

Oh little Qays, unpalatable,
sand-covered scrap of fruit.

At least, Majnun,
we don't have to
witness the end of our love
like all the others, those fakers,
like drunkards who smile
and swear against wine
through lilac-dyed teeth.

Imagine our love
waxing like a moon,
or an eye opening from sleep,
the bloom of a calla lily.

Imagine how cliché
it would've been
when you started to notice
my breasts, your erection
sprouting from under your robe,
your tan cheeks reddening when
I looked down, then up, into your
brown, pubescent eyes. . .

How foolish, Majnun!

Imagine the moon in middle age,
gibbous, rounding out, less and less
darkness for it to fill,
the only wonders left
in the chipped edges. . .

Imagine our love like a rat
one night at supper twenty years from now:
the sudden panic,
our legs bumping
into the solid wooden legs of the table you built,
and the tea spilling, and the children laughing
and me shouting, "Get it you fool,"
while you stamp and stamp your feet
long after the rat is gone,
bits of bread stuffed
in his cheeks.

A thing that never begins,
my love, can never end.

We're lucky, crazy man:

between us there's never an unkind word,
never any words,
and I never have to see you admiring another woman's eyes,
her lips, her hips, her hair,
never have to feel your hands slap my cheek,
never our children's cheeks,
never have to bury our children,
never to, with an overeager smile, tell acquaintances
how good & happy & gentle we are,
never have to share a single desperate kiss,
which might have disappointed like over-aged wine,
which might have murdered us instantly,
which might have erased us from this mirage,
and saved us from life-lasting waywardness:

two jackals wandering the desert tableaux,
sniffing out rotting meat in the moonlight.

Jasmin sends this message to the cypress tree,
is what I whisper before unloosing
this scrawled, tattered leaf of papyrus
to Zephyr, who like a drunkard will stumble
with it, greasy & forgotten, in his back-pocket,
till he falls so hard it lifts out dove-like,
and lands at a stranger's feet.

How strange would it be
for that stranger to read this
eyelash-thin piece of paper,
this impossible love letter
about rats & wine.

Would he carry it, broken-
winged into his tent to share
with family & friends?

Would he say, *Ah yes,*
I loved like that once. . .

And the others in the tent—
have they heard of you,
heard rumors of deranged Majnun,
who bewitches the desert with his manic verses,
who sings lions & gazelles to sleep at his feet,
who sleeps with lions & gazelles under palm trees,
who can now never be my lover,
and yet, who is my only lover?

Have they heard of me,
borne of night, the only woman
who could ever return
the love of such madness,
who writes all day in
her pocket journal
like a heretic raving
in the market square:
Allah lives in my ear,
I swear it, Allah, inside my ear!

Each of my words sings for you;
each of your songs speaks to me.
They are vultures, these strangers,

scavenging the carcass of our love. . .

Now it is done, another dove,
another dove, bones & feathers
under the sandals of strangers.

* * *

An Interlude:

Baseball, Moon, & the Ellipsis of Childhood

My brother and I are playing catch,
twilight to near-night, lilac, in the backyard.
The baseball begins to dim, smacking only by grace
into the glove. Then the moon, a silvered wafer. . .
Thwack! the sudden impact, cartilage of my nose,
twig-snap, eyes anointed with tears and the metallic
velvet of blood lining my lips. . .

I lost it in the stars and now it rises up,
such childhood, such invention of memory,
my father's cigar smoke, curling beyond the patio,
the lemons thrust forth on their boughs,
tombstone among weeds I crossed
over my dead pet rat, the hard thin knuckles
of the seams, the ball's divine, slightly skewed,
backward rotation, counterclockwise,
against time and against time.

Splayed in a lawn chair, bag of frozen peas
pressed to my face, blood drying on my t-shirt,
I watch the back porch redden as if red handkerchiefs
were placed over all the lamps. I am not aware of moths
flinging their bodies ceaselessly against those lamps,
tap, tap, tap, only a thin partition of glass between them
and their beloved: Why did God let this happen,
why did He ever place something between us,
something so clear and illusive that we think
we can reach right out and touch the flame?

And here in this sustaining space I sleep,
as only a hurt child can, with the surrender
of flowers, blooms closed as though
this forgotten night might never end.

* * *

In another version of our coexistence
I am the one who dervishes mad and into the wilderness.
In this tale, my shadow tells me, our love
is never denied: we wildly consume a single night
under acacia trees, roiling the fruit of our teenage blood.
This night never to be repeated for we are strangers,
and you are only night-falling here on pilgrimage
with your father's caravan. I know nothing
of you or your people. We don't even exchange names
until after we've known the name of each other's bodies,
name of that fused, singular body. Our animal laughter keeps
even the lionesses at bay. And then, in that exquisite purple of night,
when light has begun to leak ink-like into the horizon,
you walk me back to my tent, and we farewell,
for the first and last time.

Next day you are gone, and life is normal,
but how can life ever again be normal?
The hours crush unnoticed like sand grains
underfoot. I cannot look anyone in the eye,
not for guilt or for shame, but because they
have not your eyes! Olive-green, sweet oiled
in sunlight. They cannot understand me.
They ask, Layla, what ails you?
I shrug.
They coax, Layla, please smile.
I smile.
There, they coo, that's better.
I turn away.
I return to the acacia grove to visit
the ghosts of Qays & Layla, one apparition
with two voices, rhapsodic and hyena-like,
rattling the leaves.

I daydream, I live fantasy. Shadow,
speak no more; without words, tell me how you exist
in daylight.

Years pass, I grow old.
What more can I say?
I sleep with many men.
What more?
I am the village whore;
and my beauty for being
a whore is renowned.

I have been seeking Qays' equal
among the passersby, the sweaty seething throngs
of proud men of faith.

One day Qays returns to our town,
again on pilgrimage. I am just stepping out
of the tavern into the dusk of a still-scorched day:
the most resplendent caravan, headed by the most beautiful man,
passes like a mirage, his tribe surrounding him like flower petals.
Someone whispers to me: That is Qays, sultan of Banu Amir.
So he is: I say.

His passing is slow, interminable as child birth.
He waves to gawkers, flexing his broad jaw
with smiles, tidings. His eyes, olive green,
sweet-oiled in sunlight, focus on me,
standing at the tavern entrance.
I am still beautiful, though
ragged in faded lilac skirts.
He draws his horse near,
dismounts, draws nearer,
a breath-space away.

What are you doing, Qays?
A wondrously arrayed young woman,
a woman of beauty to match the sultan,
asks from the caravan.

He turns to answer her.

I slip into the tavern.

He does not follow.

I commence with the wine.

Shadow, please stop!

The most beautiful woman to ever whore.

You're right: better to be requited
countless of times
if for only one night.

Penultimate

This will be the last
of the unsent letters,
unsung, dirty scraps of paper,
wind-scattered, dried-up, unseen,
like the roots of dying trees. . .

Come to my grave
in a few days, Qays;
give Layla&Majnun their grand finale,
curtain call, final howl, then bow.

Die upon the upturned earth above me:

let your flesh continue in the flesh of scavengers,
let your bones enrich the soil of our only bed,
let your verses return in the posture of flowers.

Now write the last words in the book
of our bodies and leave the last page blank.

III. Bodies of Lovers

A Lesson in Desire at the Age of Sixteen

In the sub-alpine wilderness of Ice House Canyon, in late August, when mosquitoes roil the air around a body, I came upon a woman, sunbathing topless beside a stream. She was large, and her hair was black. A six pack of beer was sunk in the water below her dangling legs. Canopied sunlight mottled her breasts. With a child's knee-jerk reflex to avoid that which is terrifying, potentially obscene, I looked away. She said, "Hello, how you doing?" Casual as if I was a visitor in her home, and she'd been expecting me. She asked if I wanted a beer. "Sure," I said, and she retrieved the six-pack by pinching the plastic webbing between her toes. She ripped off a can and underhanded it to me. We small-talked about the heat, the easy summer light tumbling through the oaks, and then she asked if I had a girlfriend. She cupped her breasts with both hands. I gulped and said that I didn't, but I didn't tell her I was still a virgin. "How about orgasms," she asked, "you like them?" Sixteen is too young to understand loneliness, what a body will endure to cure it.

She took a long pull of her beer, slurping as she tilted it back, back until it emptied, and then she crumpled the can in her fist, and tossed it into the water. "Do you want me to give you one?" she asked, her trace of a mustache moist and catching the light. I said that I had to go. She laughed, and laughed. "Oh, don't be scared boy, I won't bite!" I turned and ran above the stream, over the tops of stones in the water, realizing that I'd just refused the only woman who had ever wanted me.

Summer Solstice

One year, roiling Santa Anas
herded droves of yellow butterflies
along our streets, the avenues of pepper trees.
Whole heaps amassed, buttery, across windshields.
I was only eighteen. Now, I keep returning
to the incense-musk of women before I knew
they were women. I keep wondering if it's this heat
that drives the earth, if the woman I miss
notices the solstice where she is.
I was only eighteen: a summer summed up
as clove smoke, warm forty ounces of beer, driving
with the windows down through parking lots at midnight.
Now that she's in Bali, I keep translating the chimeras of youth.
The window sifts the same street-smells & far-off freeway-breathing
from all those years ago.
Today is the longest day. The crickets know it,
and so ply their legs feverishly.
I am counting cracks in the maple leaves,
refusing to recount backseat fumbblings,
the mine-for-yours of adolescence.
Instead, I am writing the woman 8,000 miles gone,
telling her about mounds of dead butterflies,
and nothing more from that summer.

Rubaiyat

The hills like lomography prints,
a couple driving in Santa Ynez after a bottle
of unfiltered Chard. The dusk-sun wrings its palms.
Guts laze with triple-creme brie, apples, baguette.
Cigarettes outstrip their breaths.
Old jazz radio & trellis
after trellis. He parks
next to a two-pronged oak,
pisses among tall grass.
Her hair lignifies along
the saddle of the tree.
Is there need for story? Maybe
her ember will sway the field aflame.
Maybe his eyes will tincture the roads lily-white
till some doe wanders the wrong moment
of the blind highway. Maybe we
won't be slaked without gristle
and the arrival of night.
He lifts her like stemware,
hears a moist finger ringing
along its crystal rim; hears it
in the olive-amber of her eyes.
They were brown this morning, he marvels.
Let vine engender grape & grape convert to wine.
Sunlight, she says, *it changes them*.

Grown Boys

My friend in Washington calls to tell me *it worked*.
That is, sex worked. No wait, these words are meant for you too.
At twenty five, he waited nine years since his first and only time.
I think of a child waiting for a lull in the tide to sprint past the breakers.
No, he is quite handsome, and a graduate student of pure mathematics.
He can play “Aquellos Ojos Verdes” with his eyes closed. He can perform
for an empty backyard in summertime. That night nine years ago had
been at the beach: he’d loved the girl since love became a resonant
song lyric in junior high, sweet as sixteen in the backseat of a Chevy,
while the rest of us laughed away our pimples and un-pitched voices in the
swathes of bonfire light. Now that we are grown up, love has become
less than lyric; it has an arc like the movement of a song we know too well.
Lost his virginity one night at the beach. I will not tell my lover this story,
though she likes my friend. She would hear too much of it in my voice:
nostalgia for the boy on the balls of his feet, swaying,
the still-living thrill of waiting for a break in the waves.

To the Mythological Figures in *Monolithos*

I.

Now I think of Jack Gilbert
listening to sirens in the dark,
out on his porch, head cocked,
the song purling on the waves of wind
lifted from the salt-dense swells:
the nothingness of flesh
calling him out.

II.

Now I think of Linda Gregg,
the woman he called his wife,
palming tomatoes for ripeness
in the moonlight, among the seething
crickets, dragging her cigarette
as his footsteps shatter
across the shore.

Travel Notes

And I remember the octopus
salad our first night on the island.

And I remember the candles flaring
on each table in the crowded taverna.

And I remember children plucking
the feathers of the wayward pelican.

And the beautiful waitress
who pinched their ears, then coaxed
the bird back down the shore.

And I remember saying, after too much
red wine, that dogs are like toddlers,
only more loyal.

And you, then, signing the air
to signal for the check.

After that I remember the ouzo
we drank from the bottle, without water,
to bridge the water between us.

And I remember the raw thread
of your long, foreign cigarette.

And your ankles in the Aegean
as ships buoyed in bulbs of light.

And those lights going out
as the stars became legion.

And I remember walking back
to our hotel in the dark, on a road
so narrow, I had to walk behind you.

The Cuckold

I'm drinking champagne
in my daughter's Fisher-Price
plastic castle, in the yellowing backyard.
My wife took all the flutes when she left
so I'm taking long, effervescent pulls
from the bottle. The \$5 bottle sweats
in the Inland Empire summer heat;
its sheath of sunlight presses against my eyelids.
I imagine flying buttresses, gargoyles—
those exquisite ruins we visited in Ireland together—
a crystal chalice clinking the rings on my finger. . .
Now it's a Lego castle I built
when I was my daughter's age.
She looks up at me from the slide,
juice box in hand.

Last Night with Aphrodite

Summer afternoon in Athens and we are smoking fast cigarettes on our balcony, drinking ouzo without water, and watching the pillars of the acropolis waver in the hundred degree heat. An empty bottle gleams on the banister. The one from which we're drinking passes between our hands; we never set it down. Our goal is three gleaming bottles before nightfall. Because, what else do two do in Athens?

I am naked and Aphrodite is as well. Her skin glistens with sweat; wherever we touch, water glides between us. "Isn't this Athena's town?" I ask her, running a finger down the valley of her back. "Hers and Poseidon's," she says. A man in the tenement building across the street opens his window, lifts his neck out into the heat, and whistles.

Aphrodite hurls the empty bottle of ouzo. The heel of it strikes him in the forehead, then sails down, down, to shatter on the street. The man tucks his neck back inside, cursing in Greek. "Good shot," I say, lighting her cigarette.

"Will you give me a child?" she asks.

"Not for many years," I say.

"Will you marry me?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, "when I get my life together."

She swills what's left in this bottle, then raises it above her head, ready to strike me with it. "Time is love," I say, deflecting her wrist as she swings. The bottle dislodges from her grip, and lands on my big toe. Blood rushes to the nail bed.

"My clock is ticking!" she says.

"I know it is, but you will live forever."

She cries into my neck and her tears mix with my sweat. Whole streams undulate down the skin of my ribs. I grab another warm bottle from inside the room. We drink, and smoke, and laugh some until it gets dark. Floodlights bathe the acropolis. The ruins look like bones, a burnt carcass above the city. The streets, the empty storefronts, the traffic signs are all covered with graffiti. Our concierge says it's not safe to walk alone at night.

A few stars escape the light pollution, blaze high and cool in the sky. Athens slows down a few degrees. Two bottles now trap vague light, there, on the banister.

"You have the most beautiful eyes," I tell Aphrodite.

"You're a child," she tells me.

* * *

We would never have children, Aphrodite and I. She was gone when I awoke. I got a letter six months later explaining that I'd gotten her pregnant that afternoon in the ancient city. That she had an abortion because I didn't deserve immortality.

Her last words for me: I can't blame a human for being afraid to grow up.

The Athens I remember no longer exists. Heat and ouzo, two tanned bodies on a balcony, cigarettes. Whenever I drink the stuff now it is always with water, and always when I am alone. But I remember what it was like to believe, to know that I'd be with her forever. I still remember that false perfection. And when I remember this, my mouth waters, flooded with the taste of her sweat.

Some Things I Think She Told Me

*In France, two lovers would
keep an apple beside the bed.*

Her hair branches like a plum tree
in a photo I've found in an old shoe.
As a man near death, wandering
the house to find my former life,
I handle fruit I have
not touched in years.

*But here, we'll keep a glass
of water on the nightstand.*

The shoe is loose,
and when I raise my leg
it dangles from the ankle,
like the plums of the tree
in the yard, weighed down
by the stones buried
within their bodies.

*The water is for stillness, symmetry,
to set molecules in concert.*

I look at the photo all day,
and decide to return to France.
But I recall that I've never been,
that I didn't know her long enough.

*Can't you hear us now, old man,
like the resonance of a tuning fork?*

Rain flicks the window, water
rejoins water; droplets form streams.
I tuck her face back into the shoe,
where I will not remember it.

Waiting for the Check after Brunch, Edith Remembers Her First Lover
After a photograph by Alex Roger Greenburg I

Her blue-veined hands are brittle as the glass of orange juice,
and the eggshell tablecloths reflect onto her sweater
an afternoon quality of sky she once knew. . .

*

Back to the sheets, a shared cigarette,
two glasses of gin bedside, the open blinds,
only the veneer of skin between them in that squat loft.
Sam Cooke gauzes over the radio, *Darlin,*
you send me, over & over, honest you do.

*

Her lips part like a calla lily. No chocolate cake
can replace an afternoon; nothing now to smooth the pearls
of her hands. Please, garçon, won't you clear the forks & knives?

IV. Bodies of the Dead

Pallbearer

The dead man's shoes weigh heavy
On my feet. As a child I'd run the hills
Like water, vaulting headstones until
some chaplain growled, *Enough!*

My wrists strain with the monolithic casket,
and I gaze at Los Angeles gauzed in smog.
Does death-blood alchemize to bluish ore
In the veins? No one cried, or waited

To see his descent: the dirt to dirt.
Pinwheels, birds whirring olive trees
Throughout Rose Hills. Wandering,
I found one *Ivania Espinoza*. My age

And the earth freshly-turned! Oh Ivania,
I had to steal my grandfather's shoes.

The Flesh Writes Its Own Myths

Sometimes, a pile of ashes
outlines the body on the floor,
by the bed, a butt smoked
to the filter.

Also, a candle, now unlit,
on the mantel, maybe some rags
of denim, a zipper, a Zippo,
a smoldering ring of keys.

Who's to say our bodies
aren't made of what we drink—
that booze can't burn over
the blood like a river fire?

There are stranger stories
than spontaneous combustion:

Only for turning to look
back at Gomorrah as it roiled,
Lot's wife turned into a statue of salt.

Only for turning to look
back at Eurydice, Orpheus
lost her & lyred a lifetime of elegy.

The time I stacked frozen corpses
of dogs into the county's incinerator,
I turned only to see the afterimage:
smoke unspooling into a winter sky...

My penance paid for driving
under the influence: the flesh,
like all cause & effect,
no longer some great mystery.

Dear Roger, What I Remember

You say to your son, “Alex, it’s half-assed,”
then smash the bicycle launch pad he built
with old particle board & two-by-fours.
Your hair grazes the long garage light
bulbs as you stomp inside the house.
Next day you skill-saw, sand, measure
Masonite to the curve of a new ramp.
Another afternoon, you repeatedly stab
the box of an RC car with an X-Acto
knife because batteries weren’t included.
You & Alex laugh, but I don’t get it.
Your wife cures cancer, makes millions;
you pack lunches, shuttle us to practices.
My father laughs a little when you call
him at the office to arrange “play-dates,”
and asks me later why you don’t work.
One spring morning you go missing.
Alex bawls at lunch under the bleachers,
the days pass, and I wait, wondering
how a dad could run away. Finally,
the police find you near Silverwood
Lake, but can’t identify what’s left
of your face. As usual, you’re wearing
Velcro sandals with white tube socks.
In class we make pop-up sympathy
cards with construction paper & tape.
I come over after school. Your wife
can’t stop crying. She says you’d quit
your medication. I ask Alex if he’s okay.
He shrugs. We take the ramp you made
out into the street, and ride till it gets dark.

After Making Love We Visit a Dying Man

My wife finds a half-moon
of dried soap beside rotting
oranges and mail her grandfather
will never open. He says to her,
“Don’t fret, it’s just death”—
just like he’d say something
about the rain, or rats rustling
in the attic. Flakes of skin
brush off his arms like ashes
when he hugs each visitor,
and I cover my mouth
so I don’t inhale him.
He stares at the popcorn
ceiling as if it might tunnel
into the roseate sky, a blooming
upward and outward—as if the body
could combust into a skein of off-white doves,
leaving the visible world like cold breath.

There’s a calligraphic edition
of *The Rubaiyat* in his bookcase:
illustrations of men and women
lounging on plush oriental pillows
with bread loaves or golden chalices
in their hands. I wonder if the book’s
willed to her, if the human will to outlast
our bodies should cease with desire...
This grandfather made love to his
sister-in-law after his wife’s funeral,
in the same bed that he will die in.
My wife and I leave, pressurized
like the rinds of overripe oranges.

After making love again, we pass
a cigarette back and forth between us,
talking about what lasts, as if the sharing
of words mattered more than their meanings—
as if the dust of the dying man’s skin
ascended upon the rungs of our smoke.

Forgive Me, Father

Earlier today my father's legs were bilaterally fractured below each knee: the left bones neatly broken; the right tibia & fibula a confluence of shards. In the town's old animal shelter, he'd been demonstrating how concrete-cutters can slice through the burning façade of a building. Two bored cadets sledged a kennel wall at the opposite end of the stalls, and the slabs keeled over like dominoes, a swift succession that reached my father in seconds.

He spoke to us under heavy curtains of morphine, asking if everyone was okay, if he saved the people trapped on the other side of the wall in the fire of his imagination. The cadets bawled, and my mother's face sharpened into acute angles, all jaw & cheek, as she said nothing. I looked down at my own slender legs and imagined two snapping matchsticks.

On the drive back home, bolts of lightning splinter the sky like tree roots. I think of how the doctors didn't show their teeth when they said, It's a miracle they're still attached. Now, moving forward among the lattices of light at dusk to work the late shift, I feel like someone spared, a child lucky only to have smoke in the lungs, an ash-blackened face. I pass an overturned vehicle on the freeway and wonder if the undercarriage of a car can conduct lightning.

Montage for a Woman I Knew Enough to Mourn
for Gisselle Sandoval

I.

Flying over New York,
the baseball fields glitter
like diamonds at dusk.

II.

You died in San Fran
while I summered in Greece,
and on this sleepless return flight,
in a moment of clarity after drinking
away my last Euros in terminal bars,
I wonder how they transport the dead,
if bodies are stowed among
the luggage and crated dogs.

III.

Because I don't know
how long you've been dead,
and because we must all return
from where we came,
you might even be en route
to some flat cemetery
below me, one unlike
the long, green slopes
of the West Coast.

IV.

Did the dogs cajole
in their cages as you flew
toward the tear-shaped
patches a last time?

V.

You never drank
because you couldn't.

VI.

I will never know why
you quit the pills that had
pacified for most of your life
the foreign liver within you.

VII.

Your close friends praised
your fearlessness, held your
hands bedside in San Francisco
as the homeopathic remedies
ran out of time.

VIII.

We hadn't spoken in months.

IX.

You died, but continue
to check-in at places
like Mama's Diner,
JFK International.

X.

Meanwhile, I tanned
on a Grecian beach, sipping
aperitifs, accepting the gradual
glow upon my skin, the lazy roll
of the Aegean, the sea
receding beyond the horizon
like distance was a limit,
an edge one could walk
off into an field of sky.

What Waits To Be Made Clear

I.

My mother is pouring warm water
she has cupped in her hands over my head,
and explaining death.

My eyes are pinched shut,
the upper half of my body
rises like a sapling
out of the bathtub.

I must be four;
the bathroom is filled
with the gauzy afternoon light
that washes the walls,
and reflects across all the mirrors
of my earliest memories.

The room echoes with splashing,
and my mother's voice
cuts through that sound
the way teeth pierce
the body of a grape—
a thin skin of resistance,
and then, without effort.

*You know her, Uncle Mike's daughter.
No, she had brown hair, Greg.*

Now I can only remember
sitting in her lap a few times
in a large couch in front of the rabbit-eared television,
the thrumming of my blood when our skin touched.

*It means she went to sleep,
and she won't ever wake up.*

Monisa died with her eyes open,
in her boyfriend's car on the way to high school,
and that night of her death I loosened my limbs
under the covers, pretended to dream
a sleep that has no end, a darker room.

II.

I will not understand until I am in my twenties,
when I choose to remember that the blood of the dead
communes with my blood too,
that it was a police chase
that killed her.

Why the cops did not call it off
when they saw students pulling their hand-me down cars
into the lot, students who were already unbuckling their seat-belts,
flirting and turning up the volume on their tape decks—
why my cousin and her boyfriend did not hesitate
before the last intersection just a few seconds more to kiss,
to look each other in the eyes, see their own faces reflected there,
and say something they would tell many lovers throughout their lives—
no one can ever know.

What stays with me is that afternoon in the bathtub,
the amber, almost orange light
bathing my mother and me.

Monisa remains fourteen,
my brown-haired cousin.

And here, remaining most of all,
is the squat, darkest bedroom.
In here a child speaks under the covers
with his eyes closed,
in a man's voice to clarify the dark
room with light,
as if he could
ever imagine what waits
to be made clear.

Variations of Communion

The tomato plants are skeletal now.
Autumn, and I have given up on them.
A green water pot fills with spider webs
under the avocado tree, while the oblong fruit,
hard as baseballs, weighs down the branches.

* * *

I have seen wild brook trout
writhe out of half-frozen lakes
in the Sierras, their bodies
like slivers of aurora borealis.
I look into their eyes as the blade
filets them open, and their blood
returns from my hands to the water.
A magenta sac of roe often
unfurls from their bellies
in the thinning light,
paying out posterity.

One night, a brown bear groaned
on the far shore while I fried my fish.
Stars froze upon the lake as the pan hissed,
and the scent of flaking white flesh
lifted into the air like so many moths.
I tried to stay up all night,
fingers curled around the knife,
but this time too, I gave up.
The bear must have eaten
someplace else.

* * *

I can count my dead family
on just two hands. But I've never
cried for them, even beside the open casket,
touching the bluish marble of their hands.
Even now, I want to only remember the smooth,
firm skin of the season's last tomatoes,
the oil that anointed them,
and the thick flakes of sea-salt
I flecked them with.

Even now, there are too many
bodies to count, and my hands
can only break more bread.

V. Heavenly Bodies

The Apocryphal Callous On My Fingertip

A moth hurls itself into a candle's flame,
here, on the back porch steps in spring.

The wings catch first, a burst almost
the color of the red glass candelabra.

His body thrashes in the mire of wax.

* * *

A night in the smoke of childhood, now,
a night when I burned my forefinger's tip
on a filigreed candle just like this.

God depends upon a snake lying
in wait under every apple tree.
Adam & Eve won't divorce
for two years, when I'm six.

I bawled at the restaurant,
fist closed within a pitcher of water,
then into my mother's blouse
on the balmy walk
back to our house.

Why didn't they warn me?

* * *

Now, I see why moth represents
the perfect lover:
to self-annihilate for one
luminous second!

Fallen fruit skirts trees in the yard.

Back inside, I remove the shades
from all the bulbs, the housing
from each fixture:

To sleep in this unadulterated light;
and yet, still, I don't understand love.

A Story of Heavenly Bodies

“We have all been expelled from the Garden, but the ones who suffer most in exile are those who are still permitted to dream of perfection.”

—Stanley Kunitz

I.

My grandfather kept a stack of *Playboys*
beside the toilet when I was eight years old.
Sneaking into his bathroom during a barbecue,
I risked an ass-belting, even damnation.
God the Father had a shape then too:
an agate-eyed behemoth
who could squeeze the breath
from my lungs like two cells
of bubble-wrap, or simply
pluck me from the earth.
Fumbling through the spreads,
blood pumping to my fingertips,
I understood that a body
is pulled to other bodies:
father to mother, moon to sun.
I believed Eve was there before
me, that I could die on my knees
in the bathroom for the nameless,
irresistible orbit she held me in.
Outside, my family’s laughter
clattered among wind chimes,
ice cubes jostled in grandma’s
tumbler of whiskey, a twist
of lemon flared in the late
afternoon light. I stepped
into my grandfather’s shadow.
“Keep outta there,” he said,
pinching my collarbone.

II.

Twenty years later I am at dinner with my grandparents.
He is not as tall now, six foot three compressed to under six.
He slouches at the table, breathing loudly through the bouquet
of gin blossoms that is his nose. He cannot take his eyes off
our waitress’ bronzed décolletage. “My grandson here is single,”
he says, and winks at her. I hide my face behind a pint of beer.
The candles cast haloes upon the white tablecloths. “Jackass,”
my grandma mutters to her glass of Crown Royal. The waitress

just looks at me, her tongue pressed to the back of her teeth.

III.

Black holes never stop
collapsing. Sparks of light,

splintered from their event
horizon will fade forever,

drain like sink-water to a pinprick
among the scatter-shot of stars.

No one's seen the improbable
disk of a singularity's elegant

ingestion of light, but having
read the articles, I believe it.

I have seen the bodies of men
wither within the gravity

of bodies denied to them.
My grandfather will die

with his evidence of Eve,
and I will never escape

the pages of this story.

Barbershop Hymn

The barber clasped
my skull with his fastidious,
bristled hands like he was plying
fallen avocados for ripeness.

He gingerly lifted
my string necklace
to run the clipper's teeth
across my nape,
then swept away the severed
split-ends with a powdered brush.

The fine white powder
floated with follicles
in the late afternoon light;
I used to believe God
drifted in the illuminated
dust of the YMCA chapel
as we sang hosannas.

I was told one Sunday
that God had counted
the hairs on my head
before I was even born,
that he knew their number
like our days upon the earth.

The barber nicked my ear,
and a waif of red
rose exhilarated
to the skin. . . .
No apology,
he simply dabbed
at the droplet with a tissue,
pressed it there
the way a prison guard
or priest might wipe a single
tear from the born-again
murderer as he walks
to the gas chamber.

Now I know that
no matter how many
avocados pass through my tree,
it'll always feel the same
when the kitchen knife
slips into their flesh,
and strikes the seed.

Eating Corned Beef in the City of Angels

There is an inner need existing in them. They may give it different names, but it is the same thing.
—Idries Shah, Sufi Sheik

The all-night Jewish delicatessen bustles
with loose-tongued Angelenos, ready to laugh
at Latter Day Saints, Scientologists, etcetera.
Yet half of us have consumed the Eucharist,
or prayed to Santa Claus for presents.

The only man here loosening the knot
of the tie around his neck, the grease
of sandwiched animal fat mingling
with a woman's kisses, and easing
into taste buds—I am Godless.

I feel shame for falling from wonder
as so many have: the lost candles
and Christmas lights of childhood,
lifting my hands for manna to mimic
the choir, certain of their surfeit of light.

I want to believe in something
beyond myself, a green-eyed beloved,
the Reuben, or the clouds of sea-mist—
not locusts—hiding heaven above us.
I want to ask everyone here

if the ancient golden plates
buried by American angels
are any less believable than the stone
tablets of commandments carried
down from Mt Sinai by Moses.

I want us all to believe that the stars,
by illusion of mist, have ceased to exist,
that the woman and I are angels
posing as lovers onstage, paid actors
merely waiting for the curtain to fall.

Angel Tongue

Genie is the pseudonym of a feral child who was the victim of one of the most severe cases of abuse and neglect ever documented.

Genie was locked
in a darkened room
until she was thirteen.
Plates of soft food
were shoved through
a slat in the wall.
Her father wore
a mask to empty
her chamber pot,
to bark or growl
from the shadows.
I say, *that's awful*,
my voice like stained glass,
a window composed of roseate,
irregular shards. Breath solders
the words, places the pieces in pattern.
As a fifty-year-old, Genie gestures,
grunts, dresses herself. The drapes
drawn tight over the window
of language acquisition.
When I was thirteen
I broke the filigreed
glass of our front
door twice. My
mother beat me
with a pair of tube
socks. That night,
standing outside
the closed door
of my parents' room,
I heard her fall to her knees and admit
that she'd fallen
out of love with
my father. There is no end
to the comparisons wrought
from human suffering,
justified or not. If Genie
spoke now, after all these years,
we could not bear it, just as a bare

eye can't behold the sun.
My teenage self whines,
she doesn't belong here,
in this memory, but having always hated
my voice, I keep quiet, and leave
the room darkened,
the way it was for her.

Shelter in a Time of Drought

I lay the bare slabs of stone
Into the dirt and fill the cracks
With clay and breathe the dust.

My small shelter on Sunset Peak
In Mt Baldy faces L.A. & today,
In the fecund spring dusk, smog

Skirts the foothills like an ocean;
Dry, impossible spindrift dovetails
The stubby slopes of the San Gabriels.

A hut is an open room made of stones
And wood, nails, corrugated sheet metal.
A sea signifies water, the grist of ozone.

It's Easter & I suddenly wonder
How I can fit my fractured life into
Mythology, breathe the hallowed

Golden air of cathedrals when
The high arching windows
Have all been shattered.

I need a story believable as dust
Upon skin, as smog in the lungs,
An empty tomb I can step into,

Roll back the stone and rest,
Accepting the terrible beauty
Of a dead body that awakens.

The Cure for Loneliness

My great grandmother remarried my grandfather
after he was dead. None of our family was invited.

My great grandmother looked into the eyes
of a young man, host of her dead husband,

and said, under the prescient eyes of the God
she discovered, before the eyes of the church

she just joined, said, *Oh, Sam, yes, again, I do.*
Sam was both looking down from heaven,

and standing within the body of the stand-in groom.
The young man would've spoken if my grandfather

didn't consent: an elegant solution for the separated
dead. Still, I wish his ghost could've appeared

among the requisite witnesses to offer his objection,
his knowledge of the earth's irresistible gravity,

explained that it blankets each of us no matter
how hard we writhe in the grass, no matter how

we tie the knots of our flesh with the fabric
of the throbbing world, even if a simulacrum

stands in our place to undo those knots, to carry us,
in our very beloved's eyes to the stars and beyond,

where endlessly expanding space suggests
that loneliness is an utterly human condition.

The Devil Explains What Love Is

Remember, I came before you.
God said *Be* and I was at his feet,
wings tucked in, docile as a perched dove.
Like a mother he fed me from his breast,
conjured the poem of my being
from nothing: you need
metaphors to understand
that I can still taste his milk
on my lips. Of course,
I'm explaining envy,
why I fanned my wings,
and strutted like a peacock.
Every prayer is blasphemy.
A virgin waiting at the altar
is my only sister, but even she
doesn't know what love is.
She wants to upset divine order,
yet she could never measure
the spaces between stars,
the emptiness of the blood
under her skin, her empty heart
against a broad chest in bed.
How could she believe
that my story is the only
true love story? She imagines
her lost man settling beside
his wife after burping
their newborn back to sleep—
I can actually smell the milk,
sour on that infant's breath!
None of you deserve it,
not even the unrequited.
Learn to stand under His
light, wed to shadow.