Blue Run

By

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

Creative Writing

August 11, 2017

Nashville, Tennessee

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INTRODUCTION

My first memory comes from when I was about two years old. I was standing inside the back door of my family's apartment and was frustrated because I wanted to go outside but was not allowed. My parents now tell me that we had to stay inside because snakes had infested our back yard. I have been standing on thresholds such as that one ever since. Celtic tradition calls one type of threshold, the places where humanity and divinity meet, "thin places." Such paradoxical places might include a bush on fire yet unburnt or a virgin giving birth to a god. Thin places start on the broadest level at an individual's interior and exterior landscapes. The next level of thin places is in communication between people. As a physical means of making abstract ideas concrete in words on a page, written communication is a thinner place than spoken communication. Poetry is the thinnest place within written communication not only because it can contain thin places in its themes, but also because lines can be arranged on the page in such a way as to emphasize division. As a thin place, poetry is one of the most effective ways to investigate meeting places not only of humanity and divinity, but also of other dualities.

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The first set of opposites for anyone comes in the form of exterior and interior landscapes. I am not sure if poets are generally more aware of their interior spaces than their exterior environments because they tend to come from exterior environments which are uninteresting or because their interior spaces are naturally more interesting and varied than any exterior space ever could be. Scholars during medieval times memorized facts by creating "memory palaces," structures in the mind for storing information. All of our memories reside in some kind of imagined structure, and this edifice is more organized for some of us than for others. Whether an uninteresting exterior causes a vivid interior or a rich interior exists

regardless of exterior space, poets are generally more interested in spending time in possibilities (those fairer houses) than in actualities. In Percy Shelley's poem "Alastor," for example, the Poet character wastes away because he is too focused on the ideal and not enough on physical reality.

I wrote "Memory Palace," the first poem of my thesis, after reading Robert Duncan's esoteric *Roots and Branches.* His book gave me permission to take my favorite ideas from a number of different sources and weave them into a kind of sense. My poem includes references to my own memories, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *Cross Creek* (about her Florida homestead, which I visited last summer while living at the river), the ideas of place present in works by Flannery O'Connor and Simone Weil, Matteo Ricci's *Treatise on Mnemonic Arts,* the King James Bible, Emily Dickinson's poem #466, Kathleen Norris's *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography,* Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space,* Alexander Romanovich Luria's *The Mind of a Mnemonist: A Little Book About a Vast Memory,* L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,* John Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* and Demis Hassabis' "Decoding Neuronal Ensembles in the Human Hippocampus." Ultimately, besides presenting the brain imaginatively as a physical palace filled with rooms, the poem both praises the brain's power and acknowledges its ability to fail.

Our interior landscapes are full of the exterior places—somehow rearranged and colored by our memories and opinions—that have influenced us most powerfully. In *The Poetics of Space,* Gaston Bachelard writes that "The places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream—these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time." As a child, I spent a great deal of time daydreaming on a river in Dunnellon, Florida. After I lost access to the river, its landscape took up residence in my brain. Like William

Wordsworth's speaker in "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," this natural landscape often returned to me with "sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart; / And passing even into my purer mind / With tranquil restoration." I returned to the river last summer and experienced it for the first time without my family. I spent a lot of time in self-reflection and began to articulate my transition from childhood (and from being part of a family unit) to adulthood—to being an individual. Overall, my thesis moves from family-focused poems to poems in which the lyric "I" finds her way, on her own.

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My grandparents moved to their house on Blue Run in 1983. A decade later, the town changed Blue Run's name to Rainbow River in hopes that a promised multiplicity of colors would entice more tourists to visit the area. On hot summer weekends, thousands of visitors float down the river on innertubes. They pass dozens of alligators, otters, and other creatures unaware, focused instead on getting a tan or cooling off in the chilly water. Spring-fed, the water has been running underground for hundreds of years, and once it reappears to fill the riverbed, it is crystal-clear, bright blue as a swimming pool, and filtered clean of any discoloring or distasteful chemicals. My grandfather, who worked for a water-filtration plant for decades, used to say that the river would not carry electricity if it were struck by lightning. It was a safe place in a thunderstorm, he said. A holy place. And to this day, no one has ever been electrocuted in the river, despite the high number of tourists and frequency of summer thunderstorms. My grandfather beveled the words "Living Waters" into a piece of driftwood and hung it over the dock, where it hangs to this day. "Out of [the] belly" of "he that believeth on me," the King James Bible says, "shall flow rivers of living water."

My love of language and of metaphor grew out of my experiences as a child growing up in an old Presbyterian church in which we sang hymns, recited creeds, and read long passages of scripture. The first poems I memorized were psalms in which the Lord is variously a sun, a shield, a shepherd, and a stronghold. And Christ, himself The Word, spoke the lines of one of these poems before taking his last breath on the cross. My poem "Annunciation" functions as a kind of description of my birth as a poet when it presents the speaker's childhood practice of listening to and questioning stories from the Bible: "The words took root and grew, and spun, invisible until their time."

When I was growing up, my family lived in Michigan, where the majority of the year was frozen into a gray froth. The landscape of the South captured my imagination whenever we went to visit relatives. In the South, the world was indeed living—it was bristling with banana spiders bigger than my fist, swallow-tailed kites, water moccasins, black bears, wild boar, and alligators. Because of those alligators, the first emotion I felt at the river was fear. I understood that the water was full of monstrous lizards with ivory-packed jaws that could drag you underwater, never to return. One day, though, I got up the courage to grab the rough knot of the rope swing and swing out toward the river's middle. Just before I dropped, I remembered that I was not wearing a life jacket. As I plunged under the water, I felt a great freedom. There was no bulky piece of orange foam forcing my head to the surface. My body felt light, and I could twist and spin underwater more easily than I had ever been able to move above the water. I climbed out of the water and—no alligators in sight—jumped again.

When my grandparents passed away, we lost not only their lives, but their world. With their deaths fresh in our minds, knowing that it wouldn't be the same, we stopped going to the river. Over the years since then, the river announced itself more and more strongly in my

daydreams, and I was finally able to return last summer. It was exactly as beautiful, thrilling, peaceful, and frightening as I had remembered. I found a dead fish floating in the shallows by the dock and tossed it into the current toward a gator resting on a grass island downstream. The river hadn't changed, but my grandparents' house was loud with loss. True thin places, I realized, are ones which involve other people. The house was large and empty, and I played old videos on the television just to have the comfort of hearing other voices. I decided to take Christ's second commandment to heart: in order to love others, I must love—have a deep knowledge of—myself. I spent my time at the river plumbing the depths of my loneliness and memories, trying to gain some understanding of my personality, beliefs, and relationships, and recognizing my own insignificance while also recognizing my independence. This thesis is an expression of what I learned, as shaped by the landscape of the river.

*

My preoccupation with the landscape of Blue Run fits into a long tradition of writers writing about place. Obsession with landscape has been a characteristic of American poetry probably since the first words were spoken on the continent. The Native American cultures who communicated, lived, and traded with the European settlers shared their deep dependence on, knowledge of, and respect for the land they shared, and this translated into the writings of the English colonists, who often wrote about how much better the New World landscape was than that of the Old World. Ever since then, American authors have participated in this obsession with and glorification of the American landscape. Walt Whitman, for example, loved the excitement of New York City, the exoticism of New Orleans, the rural coastline of Long Island, and the war-torn city of Washington, D.C., and he wanted to include not only these places, but every part of America in *Leaves of Grass*. In "From Paumanok Starting I Fly Like a Bird,"

Whitman writes that he wants to "sing the idea of all," so he goes "To the north . . . to sing there arctic songs," to Canada "till I absorb Kanada in myself," throughout the midwestern United States, through the South, and even out to California, "to roam accepted everywhere" (2-8).

Of course, the British Romantics were obsessed with the power of landscape as well. Wordsworth wrote about the power of nature on our moods and perceptions. The industrialization which threatened to snuff out rural beauty deeply worried Wordsworth and his contemporaries. The threat of industrialization is not quite the same in our day and age, but the natural world still affects us deeply, and some more than others. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a diagnosis which has certainly affected me during the long, gray months of Michigan's winters. Furthermore, when I am in a land-locked place for a long period of time, I eventually start getting antsy and need to find a source of water. During college, I would go to Jordan Lake outside of Chapel Hill. My favorite times were early in the morning, when mist rose from the water. The most beautiful places in Michigan are the shorelines of the Great Lakes during summertime. Here in Nashville, I hike along the shores of Radnor Lake. In "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," Wordworth wrote that the Poet "considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature." He wrote that we should allow nature to calm our minds. To take a vacation means to allow oneself to be vacant, or—according to Samuel Johnson's dictionary—able to be filled with God's grace.

In "Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree," Wordworth writes that "he, who feels contempt / For any living thing, hath faculties / Which he has never used . . . True dignity abides with him alone / Who . . . Can still suspect, and still revere himself." A love of nature, according to Wordsworth, leads us to a love of mankind by putting us in our place, acknowledging that we

are both suspect and worthy of respect. During Wyatt Prunty's craft talk earlier this semester, he spoke about how the Romantics had a horror of the future and a growing sense of the insignificance of the individual. Prunty's sense of poetic history has allowed him to draw connections between the innate subjectivity of the present poetic age and that of the Romantic Era, when poets fought against the specter of meaninglessness by proclaiming their presence in verse. Today, just as in the Romantic Period, we poets proclaim the self in spite of our anxieties. Each one of us is, as Kierkegaard writes in *The Sickness unto Death,* "a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal" (146), and that is what I hope to proclaim in this thesis—the messy synthesizing of both ends of the spectrum.

*

We can have transformative experiences as individuals when we let our interior and exterior landscapes inform each other, but communicating these experiences to others is its own type of thin place. One person's thin places become rich indeed when another person is involved. Spoken words are lost once they are said aloud, though, and even if they are remembered, they are subject to being twisted in the halls of someone else's memory palace. Spoken words might be a fleeting thin place, but written words are a thin place that lasts. Such words encapsulate unseen, abstract ideas on concrete, tangible pages. In Gjertrud Schnackenberg's poem "Supernatural Love," the father "touches the page to fully understand / The lamplit answer," suggesting that having a physical page to touch and smell and write on helps create a deeper understanding. Poetry is the thinnest kind of writing not only because it is meant to be read aloud, unlike most other forms of writing, which gives it an even greater physical presence through repeated vocalization, but also because of the technical divisions it contains, such as line and stanza breaks. In *Poetry as Survival,* Gregory Orr defines a poem as

"a threshold between disorder and order" (51). He likens poetry to life-brimming biological edges such as those between land and sea, meadow and forest, and the human body and air. He also compares poems to the thresholds of the social world, such as weddings and funerals. He claims that "it is on a threshold, at the edge, where we are most able to alter our understanding of the world and of our own lives in it" (53). I have chosen to devote my life to this thinnest form of writing. And in this thesis, made of this thinnest kind of writing, it is appropriate that my main subjects are types of thin places.

*

In the second poem of my thesis, "Nuns," I identify myself as existing in a kind of thin place between Sister Living and Sister Dying—I am Sister In-Between. Triplets, the three of us "sprouted in a space" like "Dead Lake," the ecosystem created on the dirt of an old cemetery—the dirt of the past, of "the forbearers / who anticipated our wavering navigations of their soggy world." In "Mistaken for Sister," our similar external looks are a thin place, containing our our unseen differences. Born ten weeks premature, the three of us were "feeding-tubed / [and] NICU-bound—skin blue-blistered under therapeutic bulbs" (see "Beatification"). The healthy one, I was released first, while Katherine was diagnosed with cerebral palsy and Elizabeth suffered from cardiac arrest at twelve days old. I have always felt guilty about my health as I have watched my sisters struggle physically (see "Palsy," and "Sister—Buoyant, Disembodied—") and emotionally (see "Pressure," "Birding," and "Sinkhole") over the years. I know precisely what the character of Robert Frost means when he says in Robert Lowell's sonnet "Robert Frost" that "When I am too full of joy, I think / how little good my health did anyone near me." Nevertheless, I have done my best to ease the suffering of my sisters. In "The Osprey," though, the speaker is snapped out of her obsession with helping her sisters when she imagines one

saying, “Why should I do what you say?” The sisters appear “to know // precisely what [they’re] doing,” and from this point on in the manuscript, the speaker is freed from her obsession with helping the sisters and instead focuses on knowing precisely what *she’s* doing. In “Yolk,” the sisters “ate over easies,” and, however uneasily, “gulped [their] separate ways.”

One of the sisters in my thesis is called Sister Living because, unlike Sister Dying, she has no physical ailments which are reducing her body’s quality of life. However, Sister Living finds living difficult—“Pressure” and “Birding” show her wanting to die. And in “Sinkhole,” she wants to escape: she “can’t do this.” Sister Dying, on the other hand, wants to live. A child’s unwitting dismissal of her broken body invites her to laugh—without malice—and assert her humanity. At the end of the thesis, in “Resurrection,” this sister reappears, smiling despite her limitations, and reminding the speaker that it’s “just something to be alive.”

In “Grandmother Had Never Not Lived,” I continue to explore the thin place between life and death. The grandmother is dying, and even though no one would say it, the grandchildren somehow understand that she will not return from the ICU. They would not admit her impending death, even to themselves, but they end up making a horror film in which everyone dies. In the movie, “one black glove // . . . preys till rooms lie riddled with bodies. / Snapped neck, poisoned, knifed, drowned.” The poem emerges from the movie at the end when one of the grandchildren “sneezed dust and laughed” so that they “had to cut the scene.” The children are so consumed with death that any sign of the joy of life must be eliminated. The children have been trying to deny the grandmother’s death, but in the end even their attempt to distract themselves with a movie fails to “split the dark.” The death cannot be avoided, but neither can life—they cannot help but laugh. The last line of the poem is a rhyming chiasmus: “sneezed dust and laughed, we had to cut the scene.” “Sneezed” rhymes with “scene,” “dust” with “cut,” and

"laughed" with "had." This mirrored division once again suggests the life and death threshold which the poem explores. Finally, since the poem is a sonnet, there is a rhyme scheme throughout. However, the last line does not rhyme, suggesting a break from the confines of the poem, and perhaps even from the confines of death and grief.

Throughout my thesis, Christ exists as a threshold between life and death. In Flannery O'Connor's story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor suggests about the Grandmother did not live up to her potential because she did not take death seriously: "'She would of been a good woman,' the Misfit said, 'if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.'" The absence and even erasure of death in today's culture often makes it easy to forget about death and live comfortably. Christ, however, "hold[s] the keys to death" and stands as a threshold between life and death, since he is the only one who experienced death and came back to talk about it and the afterlife (Revelation 1:18).

A number of poems in my thesis take their titles from events in the life of Christ. Many of these poems are set in the speaker's childhood, but the speaker's sisters generally fade into the background while the speaker comes to understand her own relationship with God. In "Annunciation," the speaker's Christian upbringing instills in her a love of language and imagination. Words take root in her just as The Word takes root in "the favored one." "Incarnation" comes directly after poems dealing with the sister's cerebral palsy. In this poem, the speaker finds relief from the body's troubles—under the water, she "was not heavy— / [she] could not sink—[she] was light filled with light." In "Beatification," the sisters worship by dancing to their favorite Tom Jones song in "glow-white underslips" after a "stiff" church service. In "Crucifixion," the speaker promotes her own path instead of considering those around her. The poems about the sister's depression and the grandmother's death follow

"Crucifixion," and the speaker feels a profound sense of loneliness. In "Deposition," her "loneliness festered." She hears "The nasal tang // of an electric sander" but sees "no craftsman, no tools." She is unable to see God—"I couldn't see // what you were building in the world behind my world"—but the fact that she can sense him aurally brings some comfort. A few poems later, in "Presence," she asks to feel God's presence and is sent one of the lowliest of his creatures—a cockroach. The speaker is given a greater glimpse of God's glory in "Resurrection," when her sister's joy draws her gaze toward heaven.

In "Palsy," this same sister "tells me [her] pain helps her know God better, / as though he were stitching himself to her." The two of them are linked: "She feels, he feels / the jabs and tugs that pull them close." And at the end, Katherine responds to "some kid's" question—"is it a girl?"—by saying "I am." Her answer not only asserts the value of her existence, but it also further suggests the connection between herself and God, since "I am" is one of his names (Exodus 3:14). "Palsy" is a sonnet, and the turn in the middle of the poem feels appropriate as a threshold between the first part, which takes place inside the sisters' living room, and the second, which takes place outside in a park among strangers.

*

Poetry has traditionally been a religious art. Harriet Monroe said that one of the services Whitman provided to the art of poetry was "purely spiritual—his reassertion of the ancient conception of the poet as prophet, and of poetry as religion, as an ecstatic expression of faith" (Brown 43). If thin places are the meeting places between heaven and earth, perhaps the ultimate thin place exists in Christ, the God of heaven walking on earth as a man. As humans, we have a common footing with Christ's humanity. Christ's mixed humanity and divinity create a permeability in the divide between us and God. All humans, furthermore, are created in the

image of God (Genesis 1:27), and that print of divinity in humanity creates a similar exchange between the two.

Marilynne Robinson is one of my favorite novelists, with her careful, poetic descriptions of her characters and their landscapes. In Robinson's essay dismantling the widespread, overzealous dismissal of Puritanism, she writes that the Puritans were "by no means characterized by . . . fear or hatred of the body, anxiety about sex, or denigration of women" (37). In fact, they sought "to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love," as Calvin wrote, "Whatever the character of the man, we must yet love him because we love God" (qtd. 53). In some ways, the Puritans were precursors to Modernism in that they "encouraged simplicity in dress and manner and an esthetic interest in the functional which became bone and marrow of what we consider modern" (36). The Puritan poet Edward Taylor was my tenth-great-grandfather, and I have inherited his passion for writing about matters of faith. In his poem "Upon a Wasp Chilled with Cold," Taylor writes, "all my pipes inspired upraise / An heavenly music furred with praise." I especially love the word "furred" in this sentence, because it complicates the heavenly music's praise—the furring suggests not only protection, but a layered, tangled, matted depth. I hope my poems engage with faith and praise in a similarly complicated manner.

Like Taylor, Emily Dickinson did not publish most of her poems, and she was also deeply interested in matters of faith. Richard Sewall writes that she was "perhaps the most religious person in town" because of her "ever-questing mind" (26), and Dickinson wrote to Higginson that immortality was her "Flood subject." Dickinson wrote in the same forms as the unconventional hymnodist Isaac Watts, and the work of both Watts and Dickinson has been accused of faults such as "vulgarity of language," "defective rhythm," and "bad rhyme" on

different occasions (Lease 40). So, in a sense, Dickinson was merely the next step in a line of hymn-writers whose imaginations brought out accusations of blasphemy. Her faith seems to have been "furrier" even than Taylor's, and her unconventional use of conventional poetic forms proves the depth of her engagement with the mystery of divinity. I hope that the content I include in my poems and the forms into which I fit them suggest my own wrestlings with the divine in a similar way.

Dickinson describes her poetry as "Possibility— / A fairer House than Prose" (657). This house contains numerous windows, doors, and chambers, and the roof is open to the sky. She suggests that she can access paradise through her poetry, but she does not do so without limits. Yes, the house has no roof, and the walls might be more window and door than brick and mortar, but it is still a house with a foundation planted firmly on the earth. The rim of the earth suggests Dickinson's idea of circumference. In a letter to Higginson, she writes that her "Business is Circumference." Her poem "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" sums up her philosophy of approaching different subjects from an angle—by giving the reader a glancing blow rather than a punch in the nose. In one of her poems, Dickinson "Went out upon Circumference" and sees both the earth within and the universe without (378). This circumference from which Dickinson viewed both the known and unknown parts of her world was itself a thin place. Both aspects came together at her feet as she stood on the threshold. I needed to root my thesis in the foundation of Blue Run's landscape in order to construct the window-frames through which I contemplate the mysteries of existence.

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The Modernists were influenced perhaps unwittingly by the Puritans but certainly knowingly by Dickinson's sharp, associative, jewel-like poems. I think the two Modernists to

whom I bear the most kinship are Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore. Like Stevens, I am very interested in the interplay between imagination and reality. My poems which are told from a childhood perspective are indebted to Stevens' poem "Questions Are Remarks." In "Questions Are Remarks," young Peter is a "voyant," who sees the sun "as it is," a "that" that is also a "what," with no question mark added. He sees the world in its pure essence, in its what-ness. So, too, does my child-narrator accepts mystery matter-of-factly, and any questions become statements through which the world is perceived. God is equated with possibility ("Annunciation"), dancing to Tom Jones becomes an act of worship ("Beatification"), letters sent up the chimney become prayers carried across the sky in a flock of starlings ("Burning Letters on Christmas Eve"), and a helium balloon becomes a cat ("Miracle").

While I was at the river last summer, I read Linda Leavell's biography of Marianne Moore, *Holding on Upside Down.* I felt a kind of kinship for Moore in our common Presbyterian heritage, deep devotion to our families, and, of course, in our love of poetry. I admire Moore's poems as imprints of her eccentric, highly composed mind. I like her use of syllabics and enjoy using the form in my own work in poems such as "Sister—Buoyant, Disembodied—," "Yolk," "Freediving into the Headspring," and "Big Mouth." In my reading of Moore's work, though, I sometimes feel a certain lack. I admire the formal facility of her brain, but I feel that her mind sometimes overtakes the poems at the expense of heart. I prefer to keep any emotion simmering below the surface of my poems rather than boiling over the top, but I do want my work to move my readers in some way, and I hope that my thesis contain some sense not only of my mind, but also of my heart.

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Throughout my thesis, I use a variety of techniques to echo the idea of thin places in the words themselves. Many of my poems are constructed of couplets, and the fact that each line has a pair suggests the possibility of a threshold between pairs of opposites—such as man and God. I use syllabic and metrical verse to mimic the thin place between the body and the soul. Since syllabics are based only on syllables and not on the rises and falls that those syllables create, I use them in some of my poems to suggest the tangible, earth-bound body. I used word-counting, not syllable-counting, in "To Keep My Brain in Check" for a similar effect. Syllabics remind me of the rosary—rubbing beads between one's fingertips in a kind of physical prayer. The rises and falls of metrical lines suggest a lift-off from earth into what's beyond, and this metaphysical element suggests the soul. Poems like "Palsy" use meter to this effect. A few of my poems ("Nuns," "Yolk," and "Sifting—A Sacrament—") lack punctuation in order to suggest the permeability between opposites, a technique I picked up after reading Ellen Bryant Voigt's *Headwaters*.

I enjoy using internal rhyme in my poems to connect dissimilar ideas. When I use end rhymes, I prefer to make them as subtle as possible through slant rhymes and enjambment. Rather than blatantly announcing themselves as perfect rhymes do, slant rhymes suggest a sound connecting two other sounds which are similar but not exactly the same. Slant rhymes have some sound in common, but they also have differences. The commonality between them is a thin place. My poem "The Shore's Prayer" is based entirely on the sonic connection between the words I chose and the words of the Lord's Prayer. Homonyms are another sonic thin place—though the sound is the same, the meanings diverge. Whenever I use the word "prey," the reader may also think of the word "pray," and vice versa. In some of my poems, furthermore, I use anadiplosis (from the Greek for "folding up")—I repeat a sentence's final phrase at the beginning

of the next sentence to fold the meaning back on itself (see "Incarnation" and "Birding"). All of these technical and sonic repetitions should act as a kind of autostereogram—a series of repeated two-dimensional images, which, when stared at long enough, reorganize themselves into a new, three-dimensional image. Words and sounds that are repeated in close proximity can, I hope, create a deeper meaning than any of them hold in isolation.

*

Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* gave me permission to create a mythology out of my own personal and familial history. In "A Chat with Grandfather," the speaker is "a frigid little king KO" who has a "pretty posse" on the middle school playground, much like Lowell's "creepy little gangs of boys at recess" in "91 Revere Street." My family's history starts with a Scottish dragon-slayer, but, in "A Chat with Grandfather," I suggest that these grand beginnings have not been lived up to over the years, leaving the family in a past-obsessed, diminished state in which they are unable to leave the house and have, in effect, become the dangerous creatures which the family's original members fought to destroy. "House on the Spring" takes place in the same setting as "A Chat with Grandfather," and it again refers to the family's obsession with perfection and with the past. However, the speaker stands apart from her family's obsession—she doesn't look like the rest of the family, and, as a kind of unwitting, young, and blue-goggled Cassandra, she is able to recognize the unacknowledged sadness of certain family members. In "This Blood's Been Upsetting for a Long, Long, Time," I refer to the dragon-slaying family history again, but in a more positive light. In this poem, the speaker and her sister Katherine have inherited the dragon-slayer's blood and are able to stand up to those who terrorize society—in this case, through a dismissal of Katherine and others like her who look different because of their disabilities.

While I was at the river last summer, I read Elizabeth Bishop's collected poems and Brett C. Millier's biography of her, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. I felt a deep connection to Bishop in her desire for a home which she could never really find, and I visited one of the "lost houses" she mentions in "The Art of Losing": 624 White Street, in Key West, FL. While on the island, I witnessed the hordes of roosters she describes in "Roosters," their cries catching "like a wet match" until the whole town is aflame. I understood Bishop's loneliness not only from living alone at the river, but also from feeling isolated as a writer, as one who often experiences life from the outskirts. I also recognized her sense of shame from my own feelings of shame as a young person, after I recognized my sin but before I came to an understanding of grace. In "House on the Spring," I tried to capture this sense of shame, when the speaker sees herself in the mirror as "ugly. The deeper [she] blushed, / the bluer [she] became." Like Bishop, I write with reticence, tending to avoid excessive emotion or sentimentality.

*

Overall, my thesis presents a transformation. While standing in the river's thin place, the speaker turns from focusing on just one aspect of the thin place to seeing a greater range. The speaker has inherited a resistance to change, a devotion to preserving a seeming perfection which, held too tightly, becomes stragnant, even destructive (see "A Chat with Grandfather" and "House on the Spring"). In "Pressure," the speaker is immobilized by her sister's depression: "I couldn't / breathe, couldn't say *No,* couldn't say *Sorry,* couldn't / say *Love,* because to her it all was added weight." In "Caught," the speaker's own loneliness makes her "immobile, unable to release that ticking, brutal force." When these moments of suspense are broken, the speaker moves toward freedom. The suspense is often broken by a physical swallowing—of bringing

what's outside in. "The Alligator and All It Gathers" ends with a directive not only to the predatory alligator, but also to the poem's unrecognized speaker: "Swallow—with force like that, anything will bleed." "Freediving into the Headspring" ends with a less ominous—but similarly spell-breaking—command: "swallow your fill and breathe." From the "cracked egg" in "Yolk" to the broken arm in "Birding" to the "curly head [that] breaks / the river's surface" in "Encantado," these poems contain shatterings—a pain that, as the sister reminds us in "Palsy," "helps her know God better." Coal breaks "into the fraught color of a breath condensed" in "Mistaken for Sister," and it presses "blacker, blacker, // then out of blackness entirely"—seemingly into diamonds in "Night Drive Past the Debris from a Wreck." Diamond chains drop "strand by poisoned strand" in "Encantado," and diamonds break "light into every visible shade" in "An Exchange Student's American Experience." Everywhere, "this / bodied breaking earth" screams to the speaker that she is "not alone" ("To Keep My Brain in Check"). Her eyes adjust slowly over the course of these poems. In "Perceiving a Smudge of Pink," she initially thinks she is seeing a peony bush—"a mound of blossom." The happy naïveté of her childhood gives way to a more perceptive understanding of the world. As her eyes adjust in "Perceiving a Smudge of Pink," the speaker realizes that she is looking at "the steaming // heap of a wild boar"—and she's glad to recognize the boar for what it is. She would "rather pluck" its organs "and arrange [them] here / with stems of bone" than gather the stems of peonies because she wants to see "how we look inside, / living hidden from the earth."

The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass.
Beware lest he devour you.
We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.

– *St. Cyril of Jerusalem*

The smell of the cypress strengthens the nerves of the brain.

– *Marianne Moore, "Novices"*

MEMORY PALACE

Follow me into the safety of my mental highlands,
where exists
all the place I need,
all fixed, in order.
Enter through the pearlescent orb's shadow—
a scar centered on my forehead.

(I had collided with the candlewick edge
of a cakeplate in my mother's hands
invisible on the midnight mountaintop.)

Inside, revealed by the crack of flashbulbs:
a many-roomed dark oak hall.
In one chamber, my deceased grandmother
snaps a fresh sheet tight across the bed, preparing
a firmly rooted contraplace with an everlasting roof
of gambreled sky.
Full of blue.
Full of the mind of God.
(Sky and earth are brought together
when we mount too high
and descend too low.)

*

After I stepped outside in search of dessert,
I could never forget
the exact locations of my friends and family
crushed under the weight of the palace
I couldn't hold up at the party.

People paid me to perform with my endless
memory,
but this created confusion in my mind.
I didn't know
what to do with a broken brain.
One soul said, *If your head were filled with straw like mine,*
you could also live in the beautiful places.

*

A mind too moist
can't burn, so I wrote
and lit the paper, so that I could see
the memories in cinder and thus
forget.

When the ice cream saleslady answered
and black ash came bursting from her
mouth, I could not

*

The memory-house showered with salt
shrivels like a slug.
The morgue's gray matter, objective
spatial
framework
of the hippocampus
slimes,
collapses.

*

Even those living
ten thousand generations hence
will be able to enter my mind
and find a deep tenderness pervading that vast monotony.

Exit at the asterion—
turn the knob of this fuming cyst
and be gone to the place of yourself.

NUNS

my sisters and I were bent
on starting the first protestant convent

back when boys perplexed us
when they felt “a connection”

when they broke us up
then broke up with us

oh Lord we cried
enough to fuel a salt water park

but boys got somehow older kinder
(our friends got married babied)

the convent was disbanded
relegated to my brain where

more haunting than the split between
boy & girl was life & death

a loneliness at the heart of things
where I keep us three in that nunnery

with new names to match
what we’ve become—

Sister Dying (who wants to live)
Sister Living (who wants to die)
Sister In-Between (who wants both)

ANNUNCIATION

Night after night, Dad sat down with the gilt-edged Bible
and we sisters snuggled around him, concaving the glossed metal

frame of my little-girl bed. We traced the weaving lines of text
and raced to rub the page's corner from the one behind and flip—

images of a man and a woman became a baby, another baby,
a woman and a man. Donkeys, salt, kingdoms, soup. One night

we'd reach the back cover's separating leather, and the next night
we'd open the front cover to watch it all happen again. The stories

made sense to our child-minds, but Dad asked for questions.
If Jesus is God, I wondered, is God Jesus? The angel appearing

to the virgin found Mary nestled among bedcovers, and the favored
one's first words were a question: since what you say is

scientifically impossible, how can this be? God said God is possibility.
The words took root and grew, and spun, invisible until their time.

DEAD LAKE

A hundred years ago, they named this lake for the dirt
under it, churned after the mass disinterment,

pronounced vacant, headstones carted off to higher ground,
river impounded, sacred land embalmed by flood.

Composted coffins seasoned this bowl of watery grass
membraned by the heavy sky's humidity—

warm and crowded as a womb, a place so fertile, the heat
makes life of nothing—limbs from larvae from eggs invisible—

a teeming emptiness. My sisters and I sprouted in a space like this.
All heart at first, each the size of a fungus gnat (one just stumbled

across my face to suck at the tear ducts), we grew eyeballs
(eyelids fused shut until just before birth), then buds of hands and feet,

longer, larger, so that we had to struggle for room. Submersed leaves
haze the backwater with billions of oxygenated bubbles—

hydrilla rises with these to form floating mats, which join
hyacinth, pennywort, and lilies to make a dense, unrooted tussock,

where starrush, maidencane, and sugarplume spring forth. I turn my prow
against the current, toward the river's mouth, past the cypress knees

bent in the shallows as though in prayer. Bowed like the forbearers
who anticipated our wavering navigations of their soggy world.

MISTAKEN FOR SISTER

Three women, bony and slight, same blood.
So thin-skinned and big-veined that blue deltas

spread visible inside our arms and legs.
The river's bulky, jet-feathered birds look alike

from far away, too. Anhingas and cormorants
dive into the water, and their heavy bones

and plumage soak the wet instead of shedding it
to pull them deeper down. They rise together,

sleek black heads, ochre beaks, small fish
writhing to deform their clenching gullets.

They eat and leave white crusts behind.
Up close, the cormorant's eyes are aquamarine

above its curved bill, the anhinga's bloody
above a straighter, sharper beak. Sister's

eyes are dark and wet with some pain
I can't know. She worries me like the bird

muttering a deep staccato buzz, incomprehensible
maybe to the other species. But I forget

our same or different selves when one spreads
its wings to dry, breaking like coal

into the fraught color of a breath condensed.

PALSY

Across the room, my sister's arm trembles
to me, so I lift it around my neck.
She tells me this pain helps her know God better,
as though he were stitching himself to her,
invisible needle lacing each nerve
sharp glint by bloody glint. She feels, he feels
the jabs and tugs that pull them close. I lean
back, but her elbow tightens, holds me fast.
Don't leave me, she says. Later, rolling her chair
in the park, I frown at some kid asking
(some parent saying, shhhh): is it a girl?
This kid's arm, raised, flings in sudden unwant
from a cup—water bright in the bent air
before it drops. My sister laughs and says: I am.

SISTER—BUOYANT, DISEMBODIED—

When the river splashes
my nose and slathered sun
turns it distranslucent,
the head-top reflected

could be hers. If it were
her body underneath
the water, not mine—which
kicks to dispense the wet

in ponderous whirlpools,
frigid fibers tensed, live,
inserting themselves whole,
human, worthy of heed…

but I don't want to talk
about ability—
she could not set her feet
on cerulean sand

sunlight dapples ghostly.
Two unlike twins, we were
identical until
disaster in her brain

released what's underneath
into spasm. Deeper
down, we split, disparate.
All her sinews strung stiff

and flinching. Hips angled
left. Taut hamstring tendons
cut. Knees never straight. Feet
hanging numb, marbled, mauve.

Puffy cluster of toes.
It's true—when a body
has no weight, it has no
need to stand.

INCARNATION

In the living room's early morning dark, I found
my grandfather kneeling under the Christmas tree's foamy light—

head bent, hands raised. This was prayer. Mom had told me
that we all live in God, and that it's good to ask God

to live in you, too. In the bathroom, I dropped my nightgown
at the tub's clawed feet. Deep green lilypads brushstroked

all across the floor. I cupped my hands to sip.
Live in me. I climbed over the tub's edge and plunged

under the water. Under the water I was not heavy—
I could not sink—I was light filled with light.

BURNING LETTERS ON CHRISTMAS EVE

My sisters and I wrote, *thank you*
for coming all this way, then listed

trinkets and the most exciting
gift—*whatever you think is best.*

Our letters fell to ash. We asked,
how can he read them when

they're all mixed up from the fire?
It's like a prayer, Dad said. *Our words*

don't make perfect sense, but answers
always come. Smoke scoops spiraling

characters from the blackened sheets,
lifts them up the chimney, and spreads

them on the lit web of the sky
till starlings take off in a crush

of crying feathers falling
into line. Flap as one their wings.

This one soars. This one soars. This one
soars. We press hot against the panes.

A CHAT WITH GRANDFATHER

One morning in the sitting room,
my grandfather raises his Blue Willoware
as greeting, reaches to pour me a cup,
but pauses—his hands a minor earthquake
wherever he goes—so I fill the mug.
We walk our coffee black around the room.
He stops at the family crest, hand-stitched
by Great-Aunt Helen, with its fire-breathing
smudge in the top corner—*a greate dragone*
Twentieth-Great-Grandfather William *slewe*
in 1192, rescuing the land with a lance down its throat.
Huzzah, they cried, you've saved us all! Have
a seat in the House of Lords! A college at Oxford!

Next we halt at a mahogany panel—hung
from matching brass clasps—flaunting
a five-toed oriental dragon snorting smoke
toward a photo of Great-Great-Grandfather Nelson,
who saved Tsingjiangpu from elephantiasis,
tumors big as melons . . . these stories made young-me
think myself half-Chinese; I told my kindergarten crush
to call me *Ma-di-ah* like my grandfather did, pointed
out the slight declination of my eye, and his eyes
glazed, uninterested—"You mean you're not American?"
Oh, but we were! Something had begun to gnaw . . .
When the great evangelist married in
with a name not quite refined, the Great-Aunts
said "we'll call you Bill" . . .

Somervilla, the Shenandoah mansion,
chandeliers and unpaid toil ticking toward 1864 . . .
My grandfather points out the crystal dish
they saved, and takes a yellow M&M. Great-
Aunt Louisiana Leftwich had a funny name
for small chocolate candies—so like certain toes—
and laughed at the postcard of dark-skinned babies
dangling over rows of teeth—*come to Florida*
and see our fresh-born gator bait! Stay out of the sun,
stay as pale as Great-Aunt Kay, soldiers of the triple-K . . .
A neighbor shrieked at Great-Grandfather Robert's door,
"My baby!" One jon-boat and a shotgun later, dead
alligator pulled ashore, split throat to tail, and inside,
perfectly whole, a terrier mutt, bud-pink collar and tags intact . . .

Grandfather looks back at the mahogany board
and begins another story about the Green Dragons,
his mascot in middle school—"We frequented
the soda fountain after sporting events—
they gave us ice cream gratis, even post-failure."
At my middle school, a gasp fell across the playground,
whispers reaching me and my pretty posse,
Elizabeth fell off the swing—so I dropped everything
and ran to my sister crumpled under the metal bar,
but it wasn't my sister—two Elizabeths
in the class—so I caught my breath and relaxed,
a frigid little king KO standing over her lacerated face,
sneering, *That's not my blood,* and marched away.

Grandfather shakes so hard he drops his cup,
cold coffee darkening his khaki pants,
the cup rolling to the floor, just hard enough to chip,
not break, the blue scene trembling; the birds
mid-flight can't figure out how to take the worms
from each other's mouths, and the fisherman's hook—
I can't tell if it ever breaks the sea—and the blue half-moon
rolls over, uninterested, in the gut-slime sky . . .
I gather the cup without a word.
Another layer of dust collects—
Grandfather hasn't been outside in days.
Lizards swallowing our own claws,
we are insatiable, flawless, and overdone.

BEATIFICATION

Tiny and starving, being driven home from church,
we cried out, *Feed us!* We salivated as the grilled cheese

and milk-red soup got hot. No longer feeding-tubed
or NICU-bound—skin blue-blistered under therapeutic bulbs—

we shed our stiff dresses like pretty skins around the house
after service. We danced pre-sup in our glow-white underslips,

rolling iris at our favorite song, canines clacking along
to Sir Tom's stylish oh-what-a-blessing. We rolled our hips,

roll-roll so fast no grown-up could wheeze after us. Sister said
sister, sister, sister: She's a lady. She's a winner. She's got grace.

HOMESICK FOR SISTER

Fog spreads like thick frosting
over the river, so dense
her fragile limbs could rest

on top of it. I lower myself
to the dock and lie the way she does,
folded, bent, unmoving.

Cicadas make a soft crackle
like the sleeping breaths
that filled our girlhood room.

Murmuring draws my eyes
past the dock next door,
where a man and two women

are entering the river. He says *glory*
hallelujah, glory hallelujah
and strokes the low-hung mist

the rising sun is burning gold.
The women gasp and hang together
as they slosh deeper into the icy

current. *In the name of the Lord*
Jesus—the preacher reaches
for their hands. They go down

as one. Before they reappear,
the river smooths itself above them,
as though it were that easy

to banish someone altogether
from a felt and fathomed world.

YOLK

back when we sisters did
everything together
with surprise mom called us
to the kitchen we came

wide-eyed and she showed us
the cracked egg lacquering
the bowl her palm swiveled
see the two yolks she said

pointing to the sleek suns
in their viscous sea *twin*
chickens from the same egg
we asked reverently

if they could be eaten
or if we could help them
grow we imagined them
slurping into a shell

sealed and yet-unbroken
she watched them chasing each
other around the bowl
and cellophane-wrapped them

in the fridge where we could
watch until one morning
we ate over easies
and gulped our separate ways

THE OUTFALL
March 1988

On the shine of my grandparents' laminate countertop,
my mother found a bouquet of forget-me-nots

not meant for her. Her parents never asked
how she was feeling, though she and my father had driven

for hours after the concert. Before they reached the house,
they passed over the outfall under the bridge's concrete

girders, one river—blue—blurring into the next one—
brown. They'd been buying tiny socks and bows

until the doctor frowned over an ultrasound.
My mother a coffin two days until the removal.

The night of the procedure, my parents found their seats
at a Springsteen concert, tickets bought months before.

Pink and blue spotlights swiveled all across the stage.
A carnival march's minor chords buzzed

as Patti led out a rainbowed heap of helium, then Bruce
with that voice pulling everyone into his tunnel of love,

where *you've got to learn to live with what you can't rise above.*
Their tickets were front row, but on the back side

of the stage, a direction the Boss (strutting in that abundant,
black suit)—a direction the Boss never faced.

GETHSEMANE

For a stretched time, the sandman forgot to sprinkle
good-dream-dust on my eyelids. I'd wake

from a pocked cluster of dendrites (the brain
like a garden of silver-leaved olives), weeping.

In the dim light, I thought my pillowcase was spattered
with blood. I'd find my parents in the living room—

every night the same. *I don't want you to die*, I'd say.
I don't remember what they said or how long it took

for this fear to stop unsleeping me. Their no-word gaze
meeting over my head, soft unblinking, lips fallen apart,

was a breeze rustling my anxious brain back into place.

SWINGING—A CREED—

My legs sliced the sweating air
as the rough ropeknot rouged my hands

in the game we called *continuous,*
sister on shore shouting *lift your toes*

so water-drag wouldn't stop the rope's return,
and right at the apogee's pause, I hung

inanimate under the almighty blue,
believing in the rope-top invisible,

heaving the heavy hemp to the riverbank
as a splashy display buried my descent

and limbs quickened to propel the murk—
my form smearing bright beneath—

while above, the knot staggered back to shore,
and another sister floated into the brisk

space between the treed banks and dropped,
rope falling to the next sister as I scrambled,

gushing water onto the velvet bank—*hurry,*
hurry—rushing to make it back in time—

don't let the rope fall away—my toes sifted
the tangled humid wind—breathless, gasping,

we fought to keep the game alive.

CRUCIFIXION

I had an eye for architecture—paper, plaster, lath, studs.
I used masking tape to mark the thick mind-walls

glorifying my corner of the room over those of my sisters.
In my favorite book, a Revolutionary-era girl watched dogs

pull two-by-fours from a wheelbarrow outside the soldiers' camp.
Then she saw the planks had hands, feet. I decreed that cutting

my sister's legs off at the thighs would make it easier
to carry her through the hallway's tight gullet. I could chop them

off and nail them to a cypress frame. The dogs gnawed, swallowed.
I charged her two quarters each time I cleaned her corner of the room.

Dropped them in my leather bag, hollow and rich with cellulite.

PRESSURE

My sister sat behind me in Chem class, so I
don't know if she took notes. I copied diagrams
of *deposition—when gas turns dense and skips*
the liquid stage. Getting ice cream in the kitchen
the night before, I didn't think it meant anything
when I teased her, *Leave some for the rest of us.*
Her shaking hand pulled the silverware drawer
off its tracks. *Deposition—a pressure so intense—*
She found a knife and held it to her heart,
asked, *Do you want me to die?* Her eyes said, *I do.*
I had known *sad* but not *depressed*. I couldn't
breathe, couldn't say *No,* couldn't say *Sorry,* couldn't
say *Love*, because to her it all was added weight.
Tiny vinyl flowers glinted around her toes.

BIRDING

A swallow-tailed kite overhead
spins like my sister and me

merry-go-rounding as girls.
When I called her to the jungle gym—

she hurried, tripped, fell heavy
on her arm, and it didn't make sense,

second elbow halfway from the first,
fingers a frozen claw. I'd never

seen her break. Never known it could be
my fault. The kite tucks its talons tighter

and drops into a lower current of air.
Years later, that message from her

college roommate. *She's talking about her—*
The bird rudders itself at right angles

to hold its heading. Its underwings
and undertail white. *About hurt—*

All-around fringe of black down.
About hurting herself. I called

and didn't breathe and didn't breathe
until she picked up. She picked up,

but how to keep her breathing after?
From where I stand underneath,

it looks as if the kite is two birds,
a smaller lifting a larger on its back.

SINKHOLE

I've never seen this fist-sized hole
behind the house, so I feed a hose down in
to figure out how deep it goes. The brass nose
scrapes the walls but can't find the bottom. I let
the water run, hoping it fills quickly to the rim.
A sinkhole gulped a house across town last week.
Kids playing soccer froze and stared straight through
the house-less air as their ball spun over the edge.
They never heard it land. My sister drives up, says
she saw the caution tape shivering on her way home.
They come out of nowhere, she says, terrified.
How does that happen? I don't know how,
any more than I do later tonight, when we're running
late for a party—I'm grabbing the keys, heels clicking
to the door, holding it open behind me—but holding it
for no one, because she's not there. Another
panic attack. She's in the other room, saying,
I can't do this. I hug her, tell her
it's all right, we don't have to go out
tonight. I step outside, turn off the water.
The soil at the caving mouth isn't even damp.

THE OSPREY

Its talons hold to the highest point
of a gaunt, hairless tree,

where it hangs a bream—that bright,
finned teardrop—out to dry.

I paddle back and forward,
forward and back so I

will not drift, waiting
to watch it eat. It will not

eat. I don't look away
when it holds my eyes in its eyes,

not wanting to look afraid,
trying to look self-possessed the way

you wave your arms wide
to ward off a larger beast,

an appeal to the sense you hope it has,
not present in the gator's grape-sized brain,

or that of the great horned owl, talons
six inches long, which struck and killed

a neighbor skimming debris from her pool.
The osprey rotates the fish in its claws

and looks away. *Eat,*
I say, *eat it already*, and it fixes

its buttery eyes on me again,
and spreads its wings, wider

than I am tall, and shakes
the still-gasping, salty fins,

like my sister saying, *I won't,*
why should I do what you say,

you don't know what's in my mind,
and shuddering, but appearing to know

precisely what it’s doing,
crosses the river with her prey.

GRANDMOTHER HAD NEVER NOT LIVED

at home. She lay in the ICU that Fourth.
We stood in her yard to split the dark with fire.
Cicadas hushed. Bats fed in fragile dives.
We made a horror movie, nothing like
the joke-films we'd made in summers past.

Inside, we heard a sound like the dampened tap
of her spoon in the lemonade we used to spill
pink and thin on the porch. Our on-screen selves
go happy on a hike but find a space
plagued by an outline, shadows, one black glove

who preys till rooms lie riddled with bodies.
Snapped neck, poisoned, knifed, drowned.
Last scream. Blank screen. When one of us
sneezed dust and laughed, we had to cut the scene.

HOUSE ON THE SPRING

The spring has troubled the house
for years, bubbling into the basement
with every heavy rain to spread
a thick web of rivulets
along the concrete floor. Upstairs,
Aunt Liz shows us slides of a young
and grinning Uncle Walt floating
through the basement on a door
that popped off its hinges
when the stream overflowed
and the rain dropped harder
than it ever had before.

This is perfect—she smiles over us
as we gather, year in, year out,
on satin cushions in a haze of dust.
In the projector's light, everyone's faces
glare, over-composed. One slide
shows us cousins, young, on the stairs,
arms around each other,
smiling fiercely and half-toothed—
except for me, serious
and straight-armed, unexplained
blue-lensed goggles like fly-eyes
above my nose. *We've all changed
for the better,* one cousin says,
Maybe even Mary. Everyone laughs.

I toddled around, peering
through the goggles and repeating,
you look blue. *You look blue,* I said
to Grandfather. *You look blue, Mama*.
They smiled a little.
I didn't have a name for sadness yet.
When I walked by a mirror,
I jumped. I don't know
if I had ever jumped before.
The freakish eyes, too big, too blue.
A suffocating, inarticulate pang.
I was ugly. The deeper I blushed,
the bluer I became.

AT THE GLASS

The sun carved a white tunnel overhead
as I walked from the dock back to the house.
I caught myself in the reflective, metallic film

stuck over the broad, front window to keep
heat and prying eyes from getting through.
I stepped up close and smoothed my eyebrows,

arching one, then the other, over and over
like a wave. I laughed and reached to touch
my glassed mouth. When my nail-tips

met their reflection, I remembered—
anyone behind the window could see
through it to me. I blushed, guilty

for looking so long. I made
my self fall out of focus, holding
so still that I was invisible even to me.

Hummingbirds sucked sugar from a feeder
under the eaves. Hanging quick in the air
as though they had no wings. What was nearby

sharpened. Underfoot, the sun-crunched grass.
In a live oak overhead, a clump of Spanish moss
hanging like a hand but fleshless—

stripped veins drying gray. Before me,
the river a scar across the window. And behind,
the held banks dissolved into the water.

CAUGHT

A squirrel strained through a pipe
into my home's cast iron stove.

All night long it scratched, clattered, a frenzy
reverberating louder and louder, dense metal tolling

an anxiety I couldn't see. An all night sleeplessness
in which to consider my self, my life, either

frantic, with no way out, or immobile, unable
to release that ticking, brutal force.

MISTAKE

I tried to train our puppy to linger
at the door until we came,
but I stashed paper towels and Clorox

in cupboards and behind
shelved books, so that when we
didn't arrive in time, I could find

her failures before our parents
saw, got upset. Once the spot was clean,
I billowed a blanket's folds, tossed

a casual pair of pillows, or tented
a newspaper so the spot could dry
unseen. Post-removal, the place

was good as new. Sure, some things
are only acceptable outside.
A cormorant would marble

the carpet gray. Roaches flock
like grotesque brooches—eleven
flushed this week. Mice—skin and bone

melt behind the sweating fridge.
A scorpion, ruby-tail raised, hesitates
right now in the sink.

When I look back on my life—
when I look back on our lives—
I see the spots I didn't clean.

THE ALLIGATOR AND ALL IT GATHERS

Without sun, the river has no people.

The flashlight catches a cypress

in stillness, moss on every branch

glowing twice its mass. A roosting anhinga

hides its snake-like neck underwing.

Each lacewing falls to the light

like thick snow. Frenzied against the bulb.

The air a thick, suspended sweat.

Water hangs like black glass, emptied.

The beam pins a body washed-out

below the surface, bugs burning

dense and white above it. Eyes flash red when hit.

Longnose gar floating under the sunken oak.

Softshell turtle nestled within hydrilla stalks.

Possum taking a sip from a low-slung bough.

A tail brushing past. A snout.

An arm. A leg. Red dots the surface.

Swallow—with force like that, anything will bleed.

DEPOSITION

When I lived on the secluded river, my loneliness festered.
I couldn't eat. I couldn't pray. Reading turned into

running my eyes over the same sentence time after time,
absorbing little. I sat on the dock and watched the otters

teasing each other, cracking open pawfuls of shell-shine
and floating supine on the water's invisible crust. The nasal tang

of an electric sander permeated the air. I looked, but I saw
no craftsman, no tools. The buzz buzzed on. I couldn't see

what you were building in the world behind my world.

TO KEEP MY BRAIN IN CHECK

the misted infinite expanse of thinking
lonely swallows me

I'm a blind numb fly drifting
through gray pudding

I can't help but sink but
my skull needles

with crow-calls that shake me out
concrete slapping underfoot

I step I stamp each nerve
abuzz I cross

shoes kicked off each crabgrass blade
a slicing papercut

sweetgum spikes piercing my soles I
kneel clench these

deep into my fumbling palms against
the nagging alacrity

of an obsession swiveling
again into fog

I am not alone I am
not alone screams

this blood this dirt this
bodied breaking earth

PRESENCE

For maybe a thousand fan rotations,
all alone and unable to sleep

I've mulled over one sentence: *you cannot*
see my face, for no one can see me

and live, so I will put you in the rock
socket and cover you with my hand

while my glory passes by. I say, *I want*
to feel your presence. A sudden skittering

swivels me from my perch in the center
of this king-sized bed to see a blue-brown

roach dragging its excessive feet across
the ceiling. I flip-flop-swat

and swirl it down the toilet into silence.
I had to—they've been known

from sleeping eyes to nibble lids,
without which I would go blind.

Before I switch off the light and take this sleep,
I thank you for the flip flop, for that effacing flush.

My eyes close as you preserve and pass me by.

PERCEIVING A SMUDGE OF PINK

Late. On the far bank,
I see what appear to be

honeybees hoisting
yellow-patched legs

from an ancient,
over-bloomed bush

of peonies, heavy
stalks cascading

a mound of blossom.

The falling darkness
pulls my pupils wide,

pressing each iris
to visibilify the scene

until I see I'm wrong—

it's flies planting young
on the steaming

heap of a wild boar,
skinned and pulsing

with kidney, heart,
capitula I'd rather pluck

and arrange here
with stems of bone

blood-scribbled.

That's how we look inside,
living hidden from the earth.

NIGHT DRIVE PAST THE DEBRIS FROM A WRECK

Red, headlit in the intersection, these
small diamonds dazzle sense right out.

Even a darkening will shine—
black coal pressed blacker, blacker, then

out of blackness entirely. Could these
ever be precious: glass pieces—

shocked—take the light and twist it
into siren flashes stretching over

old bottles smashed on pavement.

HERE IS THE CHURCH

I used to play the game,
hands folded inside out,

knuckles a roof ridge-line
and index fingers a steeple

pointing high, thumbs
pressed tight for doors,

which open to reveal
the laced congregation—

here are the people—
fingertip-heads wagging,

bunched, splayed
in a lattice like the spikes

on a palm tree's trunk.
Push the spikes aside to see

what they're hiding:
heart of palm, a nascent faith

shock-white and so tender
it breaks at the touch

and, when exposed, grows
its own shadow—

like a bruise, like a blush—until—
don't look—it's disappeared.

MIRACLE

A few days before, someone had given us a helium balloon
we pretended was a cat. We'd lie in bed and send it up

to the ceiling and tug it down again. In the story we heard
that night, a group of devotees dug a hole in the roof

and dropped their friend at the teacher's feet. I told my sister
we should ask him to fix her legs. I started praying.

She flinched, knees lurching to her chest, eyes wide. *Ouch,*
she said, *Make him stop—he's hurting me.* I unclasped

my hands, and our cat scurried to the ceiling. We held
God's ears. He agreed. Strength is strongest the weaker we are.

AN EXCHANGE STUDENT'S AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

At church, you elbowed me
at the words you didn't know.
One, in a hymn I can't remember
now, was *glory*. *Comme un diamant,*
I said, running out of French
and sort of scattering the air
with my fingers to show the radiance,
imagining a diamond breaking
light into every visible shade.

You asked if we were going
to The Black People Building for lunch.
Alarmed, I asked what you meant.
Confused, you said, *the wall*
where they all sit, and I realized
you were thinking of the low,
ivy-covered walls out front
of the dining hall, where students gather
and tend to sit divided,
and the sign above one group's faces
reads *LeNoir*. But it's pronounced Le-Nore,
I told you, after a university founder.

We went instead to a place boasting
Cuisine from around the world, Noodles & Co.,
where you tapped a pictured, yellow,
melt-glow mass, and exclaimed,
J'aime le mac-n-cheese! We thought
the voice behind us was laughing, too,
until it said, *Get back across the pond,*
you don't belong here, frog . . .
and though you reddened above
your blue-and-white-striped sweater,
I convinced myself you hadn't heard.

The voice was wrinkled and white,
like that of the General, who had hundreds
of slaves with beautiful names—
Romeo, Virgil, Washington—
at Fort Defiance, his now not-talked-about
plantation, where he sat to pen a letter
to his son—*I took the cowhide & walked*
slowly over to her . . . she has always been
a petulant, discontented creature, disposed

to be dissatisfied with her station in life . . .
she only about half-way acknowledged
her flaws, but promised that she would try
to do better, & so escaped without a blow . . .

All of this tired, ancestral, blanched blood
in my veins . . . but you know blood absorbs
what's breathed, and I don't hold my breath
when I walk past LeNoir. We were singing words
you didn't know when the hymn said,
He will transform our body of humiliation
into the body of His glory. I remember
you reddening, and all I did not say.

ENCANTADO

My kayak skims over the people-less water,
and I revel in my quiet, undisputed

mastery of this place, until a curly head breaks
the river's surface and shakes a shower

of beaded drops. Shirtless, waist-deep,
he could be a merman, or half-water. Before him,

he dangles a massive snapping turtle,
clawed hands flapping, broad, pumice head

pursed, spiny tail swishing. Biceps clenched,
flexing, the man waves the beast in front of him

the way the Amazon's pink dolphins
select rocks from among the riverweed,

pull them to the surface, and dance them
in their beaks, a ritual of delicate strength

to impress any nearby females.
I bet this sucker'd get at least a hundred,

the guy, seeing me, brags, lusting
for the black market's love of funereal delicacies,

the mouth now craning, frenzied, seizing air,
but I paddle on, leaving them in my wake,

while under the riverbed, down in the karst caverns,
a glowworm glides through its mucus tunnels

and drops diamond chains—strand by poisoned strand.

SIFTING—A SACRAMENT—

drop anchor so the screen-bottomed box
bobs a half-submerged and ceaseless yawn

dive down a silk-green aisle shedding
riverweed like mildewed doves

surface a streaming sand capsule—
muck slurping from shovel to screen—

yank the sifterbox to furrow the current
so particles descend bright as ash

jettisoned hydrilla slinks downstream
and limestones cast out waterworms

behold: a broken alligator scute
and enameled sliver of mastodon tooth

borne across the river and splayed
wet on the deck's bleached railing

where bloody dusk drowns the split
pieces and a nightbird chokes its hymn

BIG MOUTH

The artist hammers
smooth-shank nails to make
the planed board's facade

a pegboard marquise.
Showers the caught fish
with borax, splits skin

from regimented
muscle, jettisons
eyeballs, entrails, bones.

Dabs the husk till dry.
Restitches the skin
with green-gold thread.

Gorges it with sand.
Rejoins the basket
of head, tongue, gills.

Repaints air-devoured
color across scales.
Coats it with varnish.

Crams sockets glassy.
Presses the body
against the sharp design.

*

Somewhere among stuff
too painful to see
in grandmother's house,

her joke-fish ripens
a goatee of dust.
Cheap latex stretches

over a plastic
mechanical frame.
The hushed fish trips, some

motion sensed. It flaps
its tail. It lifts its

woozy head and seems

to say, to repeat,
Take me to the river,
drop me on the altar.

She called this stuff art.
Art, when copied,
loses credence at its core.

THE SHORE'S PRAYER

"*Far off, I heard the springs of earth praying . . .*"
- *Pericle Patocchi*

O water, which art in Blue Run,
shallowed be thy frame.

Thy sinkholes hum
until undone.

Unearthed, damaged, as written.
Give us our say, our daily breath.

And relinquish our frets
as we release your fetters.

Depleted, not by desiccation,
but by splendor, chosen, able.

But thine is the sinkhole,
and the hour, and the fury. Again.

THIS BLOOD'S BEEN UPSETTING FOR A LONG, LONG TIME

The dragon kept things
a certain way. He picked

ladies with feathery braids,
who could never run

faster than his flight, then spit
severed heads out the cave's mouth

so all those conquered,
unblinking eyes could keep staring

down, rapt, at the village souls
soon to join them. Pretty, pretty, pretty

the noses rolled across the moss.
He was insatiable, unstoppable,

until my thirty-third-great-grandfather
strapped a katherine-wheel to a stake,

struck a match, commenced the fuse,
shoved it down the lizard's distracted throat,

and quick-hid behind a boulder
while the fireworks spun

inside the reptile's belly and out, into
the soon-joyful, fleshy air.

The firework-wheel was named
for Saint Katherine of Alexandria,

who, before beheadment,
was meant to die on a spiky iron hoop

until it inexplicably dispersed
when struck by her heated gaze.

Saint Katherine the princess,
the misty-bright flower

of young women, coral-collared,
honored daughter, star of the world,

the smart one, whose wisdom
radiates still, eloquence convincing

even unbelievers of their faith.
The suave and waiting man

at the restaurant asks me
what my sister would like to eat,

and he startles, fumbles
for his dropped notebook

when Katherine from her wheels
answers for her ravioli-loving self,

and we laugh after he leaves,
knowing all the *can't*s

that *can't walk* does not imply,
and she can't stop giggling,

each peal of joy a paradox
painful in the ears of the uninitiated,

the keepers of things and bodies
a certain way, either

perfect or imperfect,
themselves always only one—

oh Katherine
of the wheel, of the throat,

of the being
forced down the throat—

of the explosion—
the purity—the echo—the saint.

RESURRECTION

On speakerphone, my sister tells me she asked Jesus into her heart again.
I'm slightly alarmed at first, thinking that asking once should suffice.

As we talk, the phone slips out of the strap on her wheelchair
and slides to the floor, out of reach. *Oh no!* she says, *can you hear me?*

I can tell she's smiling as she speaks, her curved lips
lifting her voice's register so that the syllables spring from the speaker,

bouncing into my ear and then out, shimmying up and away,
pulling my eyes toward the empty cross of the window frame,

of the telephone pole outside, of the intersecting planetracks in the sky.
Are you there? she calls down, *Isn't it just something to be alive?*

FREEDIVING INTO THE HEADSPRING

An underwater this clear looks like air—
shows no disruption no matter how firm
the kicks sending you past the cavern's edge—
spring-carved blue building as the sides steepen
past beds of tangled grass—and sun can't reach
the sand's cold boil pressing half a billion gallons a day
through layered limestone—each wet molecule
azure—you think how strong you are to hold
your breath down deeper colder bluer down
wet burnt lungs glugging eardrums—more than your
head your heart hurts chest hot enough to burst—
pressure swelling each lost air sac a lost
thought replaced in your soul with only up—
bubbles mingle from the rock from the tongue
rising up up rising—the shivering
sand the sprouting breath-beads on the lips—oh
take eat you will be a spring whose waters
will not deceive—swallow your fill and breathe.

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