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BLOOD KNOT

By

William Nicholas White

A Thesis
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for the Degree of Master of Arts
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BLOOD KNOT

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This collection of original poetry is preceded by a critical introduction that details how Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop's similar aesthetics in poetry have influenced my own. The following poems focus on themes that challenge the nature of "manhood," particularly the archetype of Southern masculinity, and highlight characters who struggle to understand themselves, their desires, and their society.

The critical essay tracks how Bishop's personifications, as she grows as a poet and as her narrator's "drive into the interior" of nature, become harder to define and control and how this loss of control precipitates a jubilant self-awareness—an awareness of the limitations and frailty of language, of poetry, and of human understanding to fully comprehend and capture the vastness of the natural world. Ultimately, this essay points toward and helps articulate my own questions (and struggles) as a poet: How much do I conceal? How much do I confess?

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this collection to my family, the people who gave me the material and to my parents, Steve and Carolyn White, who gave me the courage use it.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“Curious Creatures”: The Animals of Elizabeth Bishop

In “The Pangolin,” Marianne Moore discovers both beauty and balance existing within this awkward mammal, finding in its hard shell-like skin an intricate pattern of “scale / lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity until they / form the uninterrupted central / tail row” (1-3). Her acute descriptions marvel at the “impressive animal” (7), proclaiming it to be a “mode[1] of exactness” (38). Bestowing the animal “with certain postures of a man” (40), her meditation on the pangolin pushes the limits of personification, culminating with her giving the pangolin a voice to welcome the morning sun: “Again the sun! / anew each day; and new and new and new, / that comes into and steadies my soul” (128-30). Feeling a kinship with the armored pangolin, Moore’s reticent narrator is projected into the meticulous personification of this animal. In this poem, her narrator’s observations sound almost always declarative and confident, never failing to note the symmetry in nature, a “regularity” (2) that is exalted and praised. Indeed, like the pangolin that becomes “anew each day” (129) with the rising of the sun, her narrators usually achieve a certain rejuvenation from the order they find in nature, especially when examining the images of animals, such as the “compression” of a snail (“To a Snail” 1), the “strange detail of the simplified” jerboa (“The Jerboa” 137), and the “compactly incurved horns on bison” (“The Buffalo” 4). Moore’s narrators in these

poems not only assume that order exists within nature but insist on it. Like Moore, Bishop toyed with personification throughout most of her career. As Bonnie Costello notes in her article “Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop: Friendship and Influence,” “[t]he art of personification, scorned by most modernists, is revived by these two observationists” (143). Although both poets seem at home with the personification of animals, Bishop’s narrators differ from Moore’s in that they struggle with this notion of order in nature; consequently, her animal figures over time become more like Robert Frost’s “great buck” (16) in “The Most of It,” a manifestation of an unknowable, unsympathetic otherness in nature that Moore seemed to reject. Costello goes on to aptly remark that Bishop is “more impressed [than Moore is] by the mess of life than by its neatness of finish” (145). In Bishop’s early poems, most of her personifications of animals appear heavily influenced by Moore’s. Yet, even in these early Bishop poems, her narrators struggle to make the animals into the “models of exactness” (37) and sometimes fail. Different from Moore’s narrators, they labor to exude a certain amount of control over the animal images. And, as Bishop grows as a poet and as her narrators slowly “driv[e] to the interior” (40) of nature, the creatures become more unstable and even harder to control, and, with this loss of control, comes a jubilant self-awareness, an awareness of the limitations and frailty of language, of poetry, and of the ability of her narrators to comprehend and capture the vastness of the natural world. While her narrators become more accepting and open to the chaos and volatility of nature, the animals become less an emblematic construction or the reflection of the speaker and more a depiction of unpredictable creatures that avoid easy classification.

Like Moore in “The Pangolin,” Bishop gives human qualities and telling descriptions to most of the animals within *North and South* that reveal, however indirectly, the narrators’ own hidden emotions and reinforces the distance that the narrators require from the depicted scene. In “The Fish,” the narrator never explicitly states how she feels about the animal or about the experience of catching it. In fact, she mentions herself very little throughout the poem. Nevertheless, she allows her feelings to be inferred by the way in which she portrays the fish. She first personalizes the animal, calling it “He” (5,6,7), giving it a gender in three early lines of the poem, and her initial adjectives describing the fish disclose more about how she feels toward the animal than about the fish itself: she calls it “battered and venerable / and homely” (8), divulging quietly that she does not feel excited or proud about catching this fish. The narrator builds a subtle empathy for it as the poem progresses, “admir[ing] his sullen face” (45) and the “five old pieces of fish-line” (51) that hung from its mouth like “a five-haired beard of wisdom” (57). The fish becomes more human than the distant narrator describing it, an emblem for human endurance. The “victory” (75) mentioned in this poem comes not in her unspoken decision to release the fish but is a result of her ability to project meaning onto this animal as she holds it captive from its environment. And, even then, she seems to struggle with what she has discovered coming from within this animal: as she “look[s] into his eyes” (34), all that looks back are “shallower, and yellowed irises [that] / shif[t] a little, but not to return [her] stare” (43). This scene shows the narrator attempting to find meaning from nature and nature resisting. Unlike the narrator in “The Fish,” the narrator is almost nonexistent in “Florida” and contrasts Bishop’s own humility as a poet with the colorful tanagers who are “embarrassed by their flashiness” and the pelicans “whose

delight it is to clown” (11-12). Bishop uses the personifications of these birds as more than mere decoration for the poem; instead, she seems to be referring implicitly about her own reticent, reserved stance in poetry. Thomas J. Ravisano aptly remarks that “Bishop is often considered impersonal, even antiautobiographical” (21). And Bishop, herself, once said that she wished the confessional poets would “keep some things to themselves” (Schwartz and Estess 303). A certain amount of shyness characterizes these early poems; her narrators understate their emotions and allow the animal emblems to express emotion for them.

Both of these poems, in their varying degrees, show narrators at a distance, somehow aloof, and a bit unsure of themselves. In these early poems, the narrators take the animals out of their natural environments or isolate them, and thereby lessen the sense of danger, which allows the narrators to exert some amount of control. With “The Man-Moth,” Bishop’s most whimsical animal, the narrator “investigate[s]” (16) this creature mostly while it is away from “the pale subways of cement he calls home” (26). When the cartoon-like creation does return to its home underground, the narrator increases the sense of danger momentarily by describing the “terrible speed” of the subway and “the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison, / [that] runs there beside him” (37-8). But before the danger becomes too intense, the narrator pulls back and refocuses the poem into how the reader might “catch him” (40), how to, in essence, control this imaginary insect. Bishop’s narrator also tries to control the animals in “Florida” by framing them in a postcard. She situates some of the most disturbing imagery of *North and South* within this poem, and this seems at least partly because of her ability to present the potential dangers of animals through the lens of a picture, allowing her narrator considerable

distance. The foreboding mass of “buzzards” (30), the “mosquitoes [that] go hunting”(36), and the alligator that “whimpers” with the voice of an “Indian Princess” (48) are given a degree of remoteness, for the narrator reminds the reader that they are merely, like the state of Florida itself, “the poorest postcard of itself” (43). That statement dilutes the intensity of the animal images and prevents them from becoming actual physical creatures, becoming more than mere pictures. Most of Bishop’s narrators in her early verses grapple to frame nature in order to find some kind of order and meaning within it.

But, just as the eyes of the fish revealed no meaning to the narrator, there is an undercurrent of suspicion within these early poems that there might in fact be no order, no meaning, to be found, and Bishop’s narrators will continue to explore this concept and eventually accept it in later poems. Starting with *A Cold Spring*, most of Bishop’s narrators, no longer seeking to isolate or frame the animal images, move closer to the “brink” of nature. And the closer the narrators become to the unstable kinetic energy of the animals, the more they awaken to the “cold hard mouth / of the world” (“At the Fishhouses” 79). The title poem of this collection revels in the activity of the animal images it presents: deer are “leaping over [...] fences” (22), “bull frogs are sounding” (34), and “the fireflies [are beginning] to rise” (44-5). Unlike her animals in her previous collections, these creatures function in the poem without the safety of a frame, and the poem, overall, seems to have an “apparent lack of a fixed subject” (Stevenson 78). In fact, the narrator seems to be mentioning these animals sporadically, and their purpose in the poem is unclear, almost as if Bishop’s narrator is prohibiting them from being reduced to simple emblems, allowing them to echo the dissonance of nature. She explores

this concept much more deeply in “At the Fishhouses.” Instead of being only the observer, the narrator in this poem is also the observed: the animal in this poem, the seal, “stood up in the water and regarded [her] steadily, moving his head a little” (54-5). Like the narrator in “The Fish,” she is able to achieve empathy with animal, partly because they are “both believer[s] in total immersion” (52), yet unlike the fish in the poem, the seal remains a part of its environment, which allows the narrator to travel imaginatively through the seal’s body past the brink of the “clear grey icy water” (59), something her narrators could not achieve in her earlier work. Through this experience, the narrator awakens to the notion of ultimate “knowledge” (77):

dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth of the world,
derived from the rocky breasts forever, flowing and drawn,
and since our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown. (78-82)

Zhou Xiaojing in his book *Elizabeth Bishop: Rebel in Shadows* comments that “the speaker comes to a recognition of transient, historical nature of things and knowledge, which is identified with feel, taste, and fluidity of the icy sea water” (68). And this discovery will characterize most of her poetry for the rest of her career. Moreover, as Bishop’s narrators explore this knowledge, the animal images are depicted with more viciousness than before.

In *A Cold Spring*, the descriptions of the animals, enhanced with their increased energy, become darker and reveal a brutality in nature that was only hinted at in earlier poems. The first stanza of “A Cold Spring” eerily depicts a cow “eating [...] after-birth” (14), which sets a somewhat mysterious tone for the rest of the collection. Alan Williamson mentions that in this poem “[t]here is a feeling—even as the weather finally

warms up—of something mechanical, contrived about the whole process” (102). He bases this claim partly on the way Bishop describes how the “[s]ong sparrows were wound up for the summer, / [...] and how the complementary cardinal / cracked a whip” (Bishop 55). Yet the purpose for these specific “mechanical” metaphors seems more of a way for the narrator to strip away the romanticism that these birds sweetly singing to the morning sun can represent and replace these cliché notions with phrases that present these birds as more impersonal, even dangerous creatures. The birds in “The Bight” showcase Bishop’s imagery at its most vicious: Pelicans “crash / into [...] gas unnecessarily hard / [...] like pickaxes” (11-13) and “man-of-war birds soar [...] and open their tails like scissors” (16-18). Bishop uses these depictions of animals to express that nature is neither moral nor immoral, but amoral: “awful but cheerful” (36).

Bishop’s narrators further complicate this notion when they become more aware of the restrictions inherent in language to detail the animal images that epitomize the disorder existing in nature. Bishop’s narrators in both *A Cold Spring* and *Questions of Travel* begin to mock the inability of language (and poetry) to completely capture the chaos of nature, the knowledge that is discovered to be “flowing and flown” (82) in “At the Fishhouses.” In “Cape Breton,” the narrator is intentionally using a purposely lame onomatopoeia when she describes the bleats of the sheep as “Baaa, baaa” (5). Her having them fall to their doom “into the sea or onto rocks” (7) was not a coincidence, either; Bishop’s narrator is making a statement about the inadequacy of poetic artifice. Bishop continues to test this weakness of the language in “Brazil”—here, her narrator seems to poke fun at the earlier poem “Florida.” As in “Florida,” Bishop’s narrator is depicting nature through a frame (a tapestry of a landscape); however, the narrator in this poem is

much braver, for she allows the poem to achieve a physicality that “Florida” shies away from. When describing the lizards in the tapestry, she begins in the most abstract and then she progresses into the concrete, as the character hacks through the jungle growth: “Sin: / five sooty dragons near some massy rocks” (24). From these mythic “dragons” (26), the narrator finally names them lizards and even allows the “lizards [that] scarcely breathe” (34) to become a source of danger for the poem. This section is unconventional and intentionally awkward; Bishop’s narrator is exaggerating the distance between the object and its resonance in order to further exploit the shortcomings of language. Bishop takes the parody of the personification to new heights in “The Armadillo.” The bombastic ending to this poem is quite reminiscent of the ending in Moore’s “The Pangolin.” Both armored animals are given voices, but they each speak very differently. Whereas the pangolin found rejuvenation, even confidence, with the rising of the sun, the armadillo expresses disillusionment and no understanding to the “falling fire” (38) of the air balloon that plummets down toward it: “O falling fire and piercing cry / and panic, and a weak mailed fist / clenched ignorant against the sky!” (38-40). Its voice is one of anger and futility, not exhilaration. And Bishop must have been thinking of “The Pangolin” when she wrote it, for the man-made air-balloons that become falling “egg[s] of fire” appear to be in direct contrast to the rising sun in “The Pangolin.” Bishop’s narrator is subtly mocking the ability of any creature, man or beast, to understand the unpredictability of the nature of which it is a part.

In *Geography III*, Bishop immerses her narrators completely within the unstable environment of the animals; instead of having the animals come to the narrators, the narrators are thrust into nature with the animals. Ultimately, Bishop shows in doing this

“total immersion”(52) that her human narrators can neither define nor control these animals but must accept them as bound to nature—unstable and void of meaning. In “Crusoe in England,” Bishop’s persona of Robinson Crusoe, filled with many unanswerable questions, tries to order and find repose within the existence of the goats and gulls which were at first “too tame” (102). Bonnie Costello posits that “Bishop’s Crusoe comes to land on an unresponsive, inscrutable but also uninspiring nature, in which, he finds it impossible to place himself” (120). But he fails to find meaning in these beasts there as well, for their “questioning shrieks” (Bishop 107) are “hurting” (106) to his ears and yield no answers, no meanings. Costello goes on to say that Crusoe “projects the structures of his own language onto theirs [...] But they [his language structures] are never realized as such, for insofar as the cries are perceived in human terms, they are only echoes of his own questions, addressed only to himself” (121). Much like the narrator in “The Fish,” Crusoe even tries to find meaning with a sheep by looking “at him [in the] pupils” (122), and finds nature resisting his attempt to define it: “I’d grab his beard and look at him. / His pupils, horizontal, narrowed up / and expressed nothing, or a little malice” (121-3). Crusoe goes farther than the narrator in “The Fish,” though; he tries to mark a baby sheep, make it his own by dyeing it a “bright red”(125). The result of his attempt to exert control over this animal is, of course, the animal’s “mother [would not] recognize him” (128), symbolic of nature rejecting something he has fashioned himself. Unlike Crusoe, the narrator in “The Moose” resists the urge to classify or make meaning from the animal image in this poem. Indeed, when the moose comes “out / of the impenetrable wood” (134), the narrator simply admires it “[t]owering, antlerless, / high as a church” (139-40). Helen Vendler states that in this poem “Animal life is pure

presence, with its own grandeur [...] it assures the poet of the inexhaustibility of being” (47). And, to be sure, there seems to be an overall sense of acceptance in the narrator of this poem with her own inability to order or control, and with this acceptance comes a “sweet / sensation of joy” (155-6). The victory of the narrator comes not in her finding some meaning in this “curious creature” (157) but comes in her acceptance that this animal cannot be condensed into some simple meaning, that it represents the larger mystery of nature, itself, which combines both the “plain”(149) and the “otherworldly” (153), the dangerous and the benign, the flowing and the flown.

Through her use of animal images over the span of her career, Elizabeth Bishop’s awareness and eventual acceptance of the chaotic forces of nature can not only be traced but experienced. The aforementioned poems seem the most impacted by her growing vision. Of course, she never fully abandons the techniques that she perfected in *North and South*. For instance, she still seems preoccupied with the framing of a landscape in a “little painting” (4) with her later work “Poem.” Nevertheless, she is a much different poet by the time her travels are nearly at an end in *Geography III*. Moreover, Moore’s influence on Bishop’s aesthetic wanes in these later collections; her narrators become more skeptical, more practical: “Bishop, a disarmed traveler rather than a collector, pursues an elusive image of stability, with less confidence about the self-protective value of art” (Costello 144). Bishop’s narrators are neither disillusioned nor disheartened by the inability of art to capture the entirety of nature; instead, her fascination with the incomprehensible seems only heightened and stimulated, even, by the prospect of failure.

Bishop seems to sum up this feeling most effectively in her poem “One Art,” where she muses that

The art of losing isn't hard to master
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster. (1-3)

“a certain reticence”: The Influence of Moore and Bishop

Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop amaze me with their seemingly effortless ability to create poetry that weaves together the precision of an engineer with the profundity of a prophet. Bishop writes in “Efforts of Affection: A Memoir of Marianne Moore” that Moore “[l]ike Auden, whom she admired, [...] believed that graceful behavior—and writing, as well—demands a certain reticence” (141-42), but of course the same sentiments can be said for Bishop as well, for both poets have the power to keep us, as readers, at arms length, while refocusing our attentions onto some mysterious apparatus (as Moore does in “The Paper Nautilus” and as Bishop does in “The Monument”) or some strange or plucky animal (like Moore’s jerboa or Bishop’s seal in “At the Fishhouses). Their aesthetics never invite us close enough to peer into the catacombs of their private lives—some readers might even go so far as to pronounce them “anti-confessional.” However, what they lack in “openness” to their personal lives and histories, they make up for with the concreteness and immediacy of their verses, the careful attention to each detail that is embedded in every carefully wrought line. I discovered both poets as a beginning creative writer, at a time when my poems lacked focus and stability and were permeated with juvenile emotions. These authors captured my imagination with their unassuming poems that demand constant rereading and study,

such as Moore's "An Octopus," which, after around the third reading, I discovered to be not about an octopus at all but, in fact, a icy mountaintop. I had no idea poetry could be so pragmatic and beautifully empirical, and my work looked terribly self-centered and indulgent when juxtaposed to their restraint and precision. Moore writes that "[f]eeling at its deepest—as we all have reason to know—tends to be inarticulate" (3), and my work before their influence was, at best, inarticulate. Both poets' fascination with the natural world underscored for me the importance of exploring the "outside" as a way to approach and convey the pathos of an inner, more private realm. I learned, essentially, that the spectrum of emotions—sadness, lust, anger, indolence, happiness—had to be earned. Like Bishop and Moore, I often found my catalyst in the use of animal imagery; the presence of animals, the concreteness of them, not as emblems but as actual creatures, allowed my verse to remain grounded. In four poems featured in this collection ("To a Sloth at the Memphis Zoo," "Peacocks on the Wallpaper," "Cottonmouth," and "Buckshot"), I attempt to reach and, consequently, explore complex emotions and situations.

Moore and Bishop's influence on my manuscript is perhaps most recognizable with the poems "To a Sloth at the Memphis Zoo" and "Peacocks on the Wallpaper" since both poems adapt the techniques mastered by these poets and, consequently, are used to enhance the inner conflict of the narrators. Without question, Moore's "The Monkeys" gave my poem "To a Sloth" the direction it needed; my poem, initially, was simply about the reflections of a burnt out school teacher, toying with the idea of suicide and, even more alluring, his prospects for escape from the dismal life he has found himself boxed into. The poem—if it were to succeed—demanded some kind of structure, and while

reading Moore's *Complete Poems*, I discovered "The Monkeys" and was immediately drawn to the zoo as a potential setting for my poem. In her poem, the narrator "recall[s] the magnificence" (7) of the array of animals at a zoo-like place and, for most of the first and second stanzas, catalogues them with exuberant language, starting with the monkeys who "winked too much" (1) and eventually settling on the ambiguously named "hairy carnivora" (12), which leads the narrator into a brief, thickly-veiled meditation on art. Moreover, this concept—narrator drawn into meditation by a detailed observation of an animal—stayed with me for a while, cooking in the back of my mind, until I finally decided to incorporate this fertile setting into my "teacher" poem. My narrator needed an animal that could taunt him with its languid existence; thus the sloth was perhaps the only creature I could conceive that would fit this role. Instead of beginning the poem with a naked, ungrounded meditation, I used Moore's technique of description as a method of jettisoning into the meditation, which added both depth and precision to my poem. Indeed, from mentioning the awkward animal's scientific name to describing its "fishhook claws" (9) to even a small section devoted to the way it "dangles" (12) in a tree, most of the first stanza of "To a Sloth" deals strictly with description. And these descriptions, as the poem progressed through multiple revisions, eventually evolved into telling observations from a broken narrator who finds his students' laughter as disturbing as "tire squeaks" (20).

Bishop's use of framing creatures, isolating them from their habitats, in many of her early poems, such as "Florida," became a helpful tool for my writing (and subsequent revising) of the poem "Peacocks on the Wallpaper." Unlike Bishop, my decision to present only pictures of peacocks (pictures on hospital wallpaper) came not from my

desire to exert some sort of control over them; rather, I wanted the framing in “Peacocks” to add another layer of dolor to the mood of this poem that details the sad death of a family matriarch; consequently, these beautiful birds become more active, more alive as the narrator’s grandmother slowly dies. Despite its tropical setting, “Florida” remains a very disturbing poem, partly because of the danger it suggests. To be sure, the skulls of turtles, the “clatter” (21) of palm trees, the “sagging coast-line” (28) add to the foreboding mood of this poem, but it is that which is not seen in her poem, that “something” that the buzzards “have spotted in the swamp” (31), that assists in making this poem a haunting testament to the talents of Bishop. What stuck me about this poem (and what I wanted to imitate in “Peacocks”) was the uncanny presence of animals and how they seemed to be watching us, reading us as we read them, almost as if they were frozen at that moment, refusing to even blink, and would unfreeze as soon as we moved to another room. Though stationary, they pulsated with a taut energy, an energy that is never realized in the poem, which, of course, only heightens the tension even further. This tension is what I wanted for my poem. Near the beginning, the “motionless peacocks” (7) are merely pictures, but soon they gain animation through the power of the narrator’s imagination. At first the birds’ singing lulls the narrator, and they become a welcomed escape from the darkness in the room, but I wanted the singing to crescendo in the poem, however subtly, until the peacocks finally “fanned out their plumage brazenly” (37) and their tails developed a texture separate from the smooth wallpaper, becoming “as tender as [...] Chinese fans” (39). I end the poem with the peacocks “Singing in high voices in anticipation of the kill” (59), right before they become active. And, like Bishop’s “Florida,” this unclaimed energy, the final image of the birds ready to walk off

the very wall, electrifies the poem with a nervous tension, which, ultimately, I hope, keeps the mood of this poem about death somber and dark.

The interaction between the narrators and animals in my poems “Buckshot” and “Cottonmouth” mimics how Bishop’s narrator interacts with animals, specifically in “At the Fishhouses,” in order to approach some complex meditation or thought. In “At the Fishhouses,” as explained in the previous section, the narrator encounters a seal, whom she begins to sing Baptist hymns to, and through this observation of the seal, the narrator is able to imagine the unforgiving water in which it swims: “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear” (49). Eventually, she is able to contemplate the unattainable “ultimate knowledge,” which has the power to completely engulf her, she realizes, if she is not careful. I employed this technique—using an animal and its environment to reach a deeper, more profound meditation—in the poem “Buckshot” to gesture toward the unstable relationship between a father and son. Their opposite reactions to the woodpecker gestures toward how deeply conflicting the viewpoints of these characters are: the narrator is mildly curious about the bird, the father wishes only to kill it. Their opposing reactions grow into full-blown obsessions, with the narrator listening with fascination at the “combined cacophony of the bird’s / percussions, plunking in some Morse Code-like rhythm” (54-55) and the father vying for a chance to shoot it. When the bird is finally shot, the killing of it is a source of pride for the father who brags about it to his friends and of despair for the narrator who ends the poem with the desolate image of the “naked sky” (88). In the poem “Cottonmouth,” another father-son relationship is explored, but this time the focus is not necessarily on the relationship between the two men but on the stories that persist between them, and in order to approach this meditation

effectively I needed the image of a cottonmouth snake. Though only in the periphery of the poem, existing primarily through the voice of the father and the imagination of the narrating son, the cottonmouth was intended to be the embodiment of a natural animal, neither the static emblem for good or for evil. Rather, this snake must first be an actual snake in order to become the impetus for the father's fantastic stories. As the poem progresses, the snake accumulates meaning becoming on one level the tender link between the aging parent and child, on another the symbol for the father's outrageous sense of truth and reality. Ultimately, if these poems are able to reach a varied emotional complexity, it is due in part to the example set by Bishop in her poem "At the Fishhouses."

To be sure, many, if not all, of the poems contained in this collection are tinted with the combined influence of Moore and Bishop. Yet I imagine that Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop would probably read my work with disapproval. In addition to not counting syllables, straying from most poetic forms, and finding little use for meter, much of my verse lacks the "graceful behavior" (141) for which they strived. Once, Moore discussed the three tools necessary for writing poetry—humility, concentration, and gusto, arguing that "humility is an indispensable teacher, enabling concentration to heighten gusto" (20). Although our aesthetics differ on many points, I do nevertheless feel a kinship with these artists, with their openness to the world around them. Though often I fall short, I strive with the following poems to craft a perception as sharp as theirs, to convey emotion as precisely as they can.

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CHAPTER II

THE POEMS

Buckshot

1

Perhaps it was the acute redness
outlining the woodpecker's crown
that first unnerved my father,
or, maybe, it was the way it hopped
on its toothpick legs.

I remember lounging on our patio, solving
crosswords in the newspaper, when it perched nimbly
on the plywood floor in front of me.
It must have flown down
from the oak tree to further inspect
its reflection in the sliding glass door.
It skipped to the edge of the doormat, reading
"Welcome Home,"
and tapped lightly at the picture of its own
knife-like beak.

Behind the bird's transparent image,
my father's hulking frame came into view,
almost as if he were formed from the glare
in the glass, and without a sound, the woodpecker
darted back up into the oak.
"That's trouble," said my father,
not really speaking to me, but more to everything else.

2

My father had flashbacks of war,
not of his actual time in combat,
but of some weird amalgamation of all wars.
Usually, it was just him and Hitler, squaring

off under the Eiffel Tower. And sometimes he wouldn't win, Hitler would shoot him in the face, classically between the eyes. He could see himself then blinking and exhilarated in recognition at what had happened, the grandeur of it all, to die in such a way.

He sometimes felt—he told me in whispers some evenings after we had watched the sunset—that he could hear the ground breathing, undulating, puffing up with the malodorous stench of the dead.

The ant beds were always doused in gasoline; and moles were all hunted out of hibernation. His yard was a utopia of concrete and AstroTurf. The only things allowed to live were the trees that were there long before he was, and they seemed to grow taller each year in defiance.

3

The tapping started that night. Somewhere up in the top branches of the oak, we heard the woodpecker tap-tapping. My father first thought the sound was tiny pellets hitting the side of the house. He tumbled out of bed and screamed for us to hit the floor. Grabbing his shotgun, he went outside into the night. And the bird hushed.

Not long after, the sound of its tapping became expected—a constant, especially at night. In bed, I would listen to the combined cacophony of the bird's percussions, plunking in some Morse Code-like rhythm, and the dull strikes of my father's steel-toed boots as he paced back and forth, back and forth, on the marble floor. I began to distinguish, by rhythm and intensity, what the woodpecker was doing in the elm. During those short, fast,

angry taps, it was marking its territory.
The almost silent, timed taps were it snatching
small insects. However, my favorite was when
it was attracting a mate: the rapping was varied
and irregular, as if it were going insane.
It was seduction by noise, and the beating of its beak
to the crusty elm of my father quickened something
within me that I could not quite understand.
One Sunday, after church, I was reading
on the patio when the little creature
again alighted on the ground. And again,
it was preoccupied with its own reflection.

Maybe, I thought, it was narcissistic, seeing
in its sparse, reflected image a mate it could never have.
I reasoned that I, too, would probably fall in love
with my reflection if it were like that:
the way the smooth black and white plumage
accentuated the breast muscles that puffed out
so proudly, the way its little figure moved in sharp angles,
the way its beak was both tender and dangerous.
The minute architecture of this thing—the vicious perfection of it!

My father had already aimed the shotgun before
I even realized he was there. The woodpecker
was too late in takeoff. And the sound of the .12 gauge
punching through the air pinched my eardrums.
And I fell out of the lawn chair.

4

If it were a cartoon, it would have been funny:
a bird blown to smithereens by buckshot,
the equivalent to a Mack 10 army truck
smashing into a person, a body disintegrating
in a matter of seconds.

And my father would later laugh to friends how
nothing was left of it but a few feathers.
How the amorphous mass of pellets hit the
woodpecker's body in mid-flight,
leaving little more than particles of dust,
as it fanned out into the naked sky.

Objets D'Art

His grandfather's dictionary—*Webster's New World*—the food of silverfish. His grandmother's chest of drawers, fattening with dust and exhaling the comfortable smell of urine. Boxers, folded underneath his bed, the crotch sewn shut by his mother's canny hands. Some teeth, both canine and molar, their knotted roots reaching out of a jar in the medicine cabinet, coveting a return to his father's receding gums. These relics from a knuckled past can undo him

but only when he isn't looking.

Handles

Inside my grandfather's old Ford Ranger,
the one in the cow pasture,
the one wild sumac and cattails pull close
and chew on during the night when no one is listening,

sleeps a forty channel citizens-band radio,
once a lifeline for hunters, which had connected
their static-scarred voices, using primitive
sound waves that bounced through the dark wood

from one ear to the next,
announcing each black and tan hound dog's location,
as the dogs, themselves, unwittingly led the deer and the rabbit
to the silent men in trees.

Still, even today, I can see those men
high up among the branches, searching,
and sometimes I speak their names:
Mailman, Rooster, Higgans, Short Fingers.

My grandfather was Bald Eagle.
Each handle, a coat of arms,
a show of worth to a makeshift fraternity
that most of them thought dated back to Marconi.

When I was old enough to be given one,
CB radios had become obsolete.
All those men, whose real names I can't remember,
are dead now.

Bald Eagle left the truck to the field
to rot, to keep the company of old, unwanted heifers.
And I cannot help but toy with the question
of where the forgotten radio waves go,

once they had satisfied the listener?
Harsh voices resuscitating cold-coffee mornings
and late evenings with the excitement
of a kill—do they just disappear?

Can all that energy really evaporate?
I like to think it's still boomeranging
in space somewhere, conversations in continual
limbo, a choir of old men.

Perhaps their voices still ricochet
off the elms and oaks and poplars,
the same territory their bodies had stalked.
If I tune my ear to the right frequency,

I may can hear them whispering
into the ears of the raccoon and the bobcat,
challenging the song of the bobwhite.
Echoes of these old ghosts pass

through me when I walk this old wood;
I've learned how to endure that they call,
"What's your twenty?" not to me,
never to me, but to each other.

Blood Knot

Light, again. This time through fog, channeling
over the wasted pasture in front of my house.
I can feel the wind holding what breath it can,
the soybean field trembling with unclaimed arrowheads.
And pheasants and whippoorwills gather together
the prickled net of last night's stars, and that old time
inheritance of dread that had risen from the bank
of the Big Black to kill my father's Labrador
now hustles moans from our neighbor's grey mule.
A negligent mouth had strewn the dog's intestine
across the front yard, ribbons of blood and innards,
reminding me, as I am always reminded in places
where death has visited, of Mr. Norwood and the knot
of blood that pulsated in a furious little bubble
right below his hairline when he was alive.
I was among the children who tortured him
on Halloweens with rotten cantaloupes thrown
at his door, with honked horns late nights in front
of his house, with my witty jokes about his knot,
the emblem of our scorn. I was at college when someone
told me of his suicide, the after dinner bullet to the brain.
I was intent on seeing him one last time, to look upon the knot
with respect for once and, in a way, ask for his forgiveness.
What I found, though, was a forehead smoothed
by an embalmer's magic and a coy smile that mocked me
as only the dead can.

Yes, morning, we see you in all your peculiarities—
taunting the splendor of a slaughtered pet, baiting
me to call out to the blood-soaked roughage
and the blood soaked leaves and pinecones,
to the light, even, that abstract quality meant,
I guess, to breed optimism. I call out and only hear
the echoed voice rebounding off the river bottom,
trundling through carnage like a labored laugh.

Cottonmouth

Always my nothing mouth becomes sore
with the lack of language, the inability
to compete with my father's worn-in charm
at telling stories, especially when he dredges
up that old, old one around the end of summer,
when the honeysuckle vines hang over the shed
like tired arms, their buds dry, hopeless.

After pushing the Cub Cadet mower
under the shed's awning, against the east wall,
near a kind of still life: rusty garden shears,
a long machete, a couple of sawhorses,
he tongues a ball of chewing tobacco
to the other side of his cheek, gargles
a bit, then spits in a paper cup and places
it on the shed's only windowsill.
This performance always prologues the story.

When he begins, his voice drops to the drone
of a bumblebee, and a glint of light cuts through
the glass and illuminates his spit,
which at this distance could be mistaken
for spiced tea.

The story's initial plot went something like this:
He was piddling in the ditch beside our house;
the recent rain had slicked down shoots of grass
with the efficiency and skill of hair grease,
and he—maybe struggling to zip his pants—
fell. Glimpsing a snake, he gathered himself
up just in time to miss its needled kiss.

Two years later, he defined the snake
as a cottonmouth, a detail that gave the anecdote
weight, provoked the deacons to nod their smiling
heads like men on television infomercials
and his coworkers to squint their eyes
as if they knew what he was doing, even if he didn't.
But I can't quite remember the moment he added
the lawnmower (a red snapper, then), the subtle art
of cutting grass, or the steep incline that inevitably
tipped him over and pinned him beneath the swiping
blade, leaving him to the mercy of the approaching cottonmouth.

Neither do I know when the story started to follow us into the shed, or why he only told it to me now. Perhaps he knew how important it had become for me to hear it, perhaps he had noticed that the snake story had somehow uncoiled itself from around his amorphous words that first gave it life.

The way it looked at me, he would say, I can't describe it, but it wasn't a look that scared me. But I can describe it—that's what I want him to understand, that I know the story better than him maybe, that under the weight and frenzy of an upside-down mower, the snake slinks into his periphery, inching at the delicate pace of a professional. The cottonmouth blinked once, twice—its big, watery eyes close enough to see the stubble on his neck, looking at my father as if it were not expecting him, looking at him the way a baby looks when he sees his own reflection for the first time. *No, he interrupts, it just stared, stuck out its little tongue, then slide away, harmless as a puppy. A miracle.* But not quite a miracle—no the miracle would have been if it had stayed longer, moved close enough so that it could have pressed its little forked tongue to the tip of his earlobe, could have smelt the burning Old Spice that haunts a place long after he has left it.

Here, this is all we have of truth—that we are both liars. And sometimes we try to pull each other closer to our side in a kind of tug-o-war with me wanting to speak, him speaking too much. Me, knowing he will always win, him, dragging me through the center, my legs behind me as worthless as pale ribbons.

After finishing, he leaves me to the leftovers of the story, embedded underneath my skin like redbugs. One day, I know the story will no longer change. This snake will brave to slither across his neck, the story's last and most fantastic incarnation, and my father will feel every one of its delicate ribs, as it struggles to tread across the mysterious contours of his throat, and the belly of the cottonmouth will be the last he or I will ever know of it.

How to Escape the South

How to escape the south (without the South escaping you),
how to lose those yall's, your snuff cans, the memory of aunts with teased hair
can prove difficult for those, like you, who tell the South they are through.

So you move North, with Ph.D., to Vermont, where a few
fellow professors—their eyes grinding like chainsaws—suggest you might care
to learn “how to escape the South (without, you know, the South escaping you).”

You date a librarian who thinks your syntax's exotic and you a little dove that flew
up from that strange, barbaric Mississippi. She concludes that life there
must be difficult for those (like you) who tell the South they are through.

Her parents meet you on Halloween; they think your accent a ruse,
an act to go with your pirate costume, perhaps? You only smile and stare,
for you haven't learned yet how to escape the South (without the South escaping you).

She travels to England. Says she needs space from your slow speech, your Delta Blues.
The faculty chair suggests that tenure will be denied, and what's left of you scatters into
the air.

He mentions life here must be hard for you, who can never *really* be through

with the South. And you're awake now, tossing in bed like a wounded deer. See it from their
view:

You could've tried harder, stripped your voice of that sling-slang distant flare,
because how to escape the South (without the South escaping you)
must be possible for those, like you, who have decided—goddamnit—they are through,
through, through.

A Stirring

1. Kaleidoscope

Perched in a tree, just below him,
I crouch on a branch and tremble in morning dew.
We are hidden and stink of doe urine and dirt.
He nudges me when I doze-off and grunts if I move too much.
I feel ridiculous in my itchy Mossy Oak camouflage
That inveigles only the poor of sight.
I pretend to be invisible.

Glowing fragments of glassy light
cut through the stasis of grey and black,
climaxing sharply in my eyes.
No bobwhites cry out for the morning,
nor do the crickets saw their legs together.
The woods hush for us, or maybe it is merely holding its breath?
Fall's not completely set-in,
and dawn, at first, colors everything a token shade
of inexperienced green,
but it only lasts the duration of my inhaling breath,
for the world suddenly awakens into a soundless spectrum
of dark olive and jade and emerald.

Things take on a texture,
a tangibility.
The ground below us turns craggy and yellow-brown,
a shade of tortoise shell that evolves after a few yards
into a wet mush, checkered with hairy brown pods
too resilient for the early frosts.
This immeasurable, cloudy field of last year's soybean
separates us from a long row of dark oaks,
and even at a distance and through a frothy mist that has congealed the air,
I can still distinguish the tree's silent silhouettes—tall and arrogant—
and the wiry chains of kudzu
that droop over them and cover them completely
in leafy albs.

2. To a Deer

Before he notices,
I see you materialize from the morning fog.
You hover and glide through the field like a sailboat.
Watching you, he and I become silent, almost reverent.
With your head bent low,

your thorny antlers hidden in the brush,
you taste the salt-lick.
You pause and raise your head.
Do you see us?
Your ears twitch just barely,
the flutter of a dragonfly's wings.
I realize you are foreground to the sleeping oaks.

Meanwhile, the light slowly dissolves the fog,
and kudzu-covered oaks rise up,
looking like frozen zombies,
with their heavy, tortuous branch-arms
outstretched, splayed, and forever paralyzed in mid-clutch
for something just barely out of reach.

"Now," whispers my father.

Coming and Going

March 22, 1996:

The light that never seemed good enough shone through the high windows in big, blocked shafts and illuminated the peach fuzz on the boys' arms as they ran lay-ups. Watching them was a boy with big, square glasses, only eleven and a face already rife with pimples, who tried to bounce basketballs that wouldn't submit, that turned into thick pumpkins, sagging inward on themselves. He wore socks on a floor that he was told was too tender for his brogans to scar. He saw his classmates as a herd of gazelles that ran and leaped and turned and pivoted—they are of one mind, too, he concluded. His brogans grinned at him from under the bleachers, grinned at his socked, flat feet. He should not have been there, for he knew his stomach better than they did. His mother said it was just nerves, a condition that her Uncle Shorty had. His doctor gave him pills that made him sleep too much. He waddled to the bleachers, near the bathroom, where a girl the previous year, on a dare, had asked him out. He knew practice was almost over and never saw the ball coming toward him. The yell from the coach to watch out was too late. The boy knew it would happen before it did; his bowels emptied themselves and mudded the floor...and they stopped bouncing and shouting and running and gathered around him, to look at him, at what he did. All things halted, it seemed to him. They circled him, perhaps more shocked than he was, and they held their basketballs tightly under their arms. And as they approached him, he was sure their basketballs had turned into boulders and could swear he heard the muffled laughter of his brogans.

January 16, 2005:

He was summoned to the Mexican restaurant *El Rodeo's*. Speaking Spanish held a certain charm that night for the boy no longer in glasses. He needed his nouns to have a gender and his verbs to be hopelessly irregular; he needed to escape, *escapar* into unfamiliar sounds laced with diphthongs and rolling *r's*. He realized that he should speak Spanish now and Mexico "Lite" should be the name of this restaurant. The shiny-fake plants there never knew sand or poverty: the crowns of cycads hung incongruently from the stucco ceiling, and their leafy tendrils drooped down towards him and his parents and tickled their heads; a giant barrel cactus, obese, swollen with air, spiked with dull thorns, guarded the cash register, where the *chicas* worked; and the silvery-sparkler bloom of a *Pseudobombax*—eternally erect—was laughing with its curly leaves bent under, as if they were four arms resting on nonexistent hips. And the laughing must be what separated him from his parents. "Grad school," said his mother again as she ate a tortilla chip softened by multiple dips in a watery red salsa. And her tone gave her away. But he only said, "Yes, grad school." And, he should have been speaking Spanish.

April 30, 2007:

He, now in a stranger's bedroom, waits for the young woman to return from washing up in the shower, washing him off her thighs. He is not asleep; his wide eyes cut tiny fissures into the ceiling. As she steps under the stream of hard water and becomes one with the sage and citrus body soap, he turns sideways and curls into the fetal position. The window is open, and he can see past the parking lot, into the night where the darkness fades, becoming what he imagines are homeless men and women gathering around a metal trashcan alight with fire. He can almost smell the burning cardboard and even laughs when he thinks they laugh. Shedding his cover like an unneeded layer of skin, he spreads his nude body out wide . . . into a star, a starfish. He hears the cars hum on the highway, coming and going, coming and going. She towels off in the doorway, looking at him, as if not sure what he is or who he is and not caring, either. She moves to close the window and then sinks down beside him in the dark.

Peacocks on the Wallpaper

Those unblinking disks depicted on the peacock tails
matched the cold cobalt blue in her daughters' eyes.
Each sister smudged together with the other, becoming
a phalanx of groans and nervous twitching,
and, like a bouquet of disregarded flowers, drooped
forward, shadow over shadow, draping the old woman
in a patchwork of craggy silhouettes. Nurses floated
in the hallway, listening without looking, then looking
without speaking. I felt like I was breathing in a different
air, something oracular and electric, an air that should be
popping around me like soda-pop fuzz, that should be scented
with an incense to outdo the urine that permeated the air.
And on the wallpaper stared the peacock's smoky onyx eyes,
ignoring that death was in the room, not hovering over
my grandmother, not willing her lungs to collapse
with the touch of its bone-white finger but standing in the corner
like an obedient child waiting for its mother to finish shopping.

And the peacocks showed me a trick too precious to ignore:
how they sang without moving their miniscule beaks
so quietly that only I could hear them, a song that rekindled
memories, mixing them, doling them out at random:
first, her yelling out half-remembered proverbs
from her window as I walked past her house after school.
Then, the time when she called my mother a whore for wearing
pants to church, when she told me before graduating college
that my face was so sunken in that I'd never find a wife,
when she thought a particularly long Indian summer marked
the dawning of the Apocalypse.

Above them the fluorescent light flickers a bit, and even now
they cower at her feet, crusty and callused by years
of walking barefoot on gravel roads and standing on concrete
floors at the chicken mill, catching the headless birds,
gutting them thoroughly before they went on further
to be processed.

Sprouting tail feathers as tall as my hip, these peacocks
on the wallpaper, little more than turkeys in Technicolor,
fanned out their brazen plumage, unfurled their tails
tender as the Chinese fans my grandmother
bought in bulk one April at the festival in Natchez.
Her words come up in my throat, were spoken with my own voice:

Their arrogant beauty's deadly, she said to me under her porch
while we purpled our hands peeling butterbeans, the quiet tenor
of her voice coming from me now in whispers. I say, It'll sound
like an ambulance siren or louder, even, when it kills.

We saw it take down a rooster once.

Claws came out of nowhere, took off its whole head.

But no one takes notice of me or my strange voice
because one of them could have said it, or a voice
from the hallway, or all of our voices in tandem,
chanting in shades of the same awful color.

And the old woman's lips crinkle then
like a crisp slice of bacon. Soon she would end
with a jerk and a sigh, no more painful than a flu shot,
becoming after a final swallow as lifeless as the television
bolted above us on the ceiling or the chair hidden
behind the doorway or the peacocks on the wallpaper,
singing not for the dead but chanting a verse full
of grass and dirt and blood, a song for me
and maybe the rest of the living, chanting in high voices,
ready for the strike, anticipating the kill.

Birthday Dinner

In Possumneck, MS, where the same old joke is told at least twice a year,
where a newly-paved highway cuts perpendicular
 across a bone-brittle railroad track,
where the library and the post office and the Presbyterian Church
 are located in the same yellow-grey building,
where after heavy rains one year,
dark brown water freed itself from the narrow boundaries
of the Big Black and the Tombigbee overlapping, swallowing, drinking-in
even more dark brown water that must have escaped from the weak earth
when we weren't looking, too busy staying alive—it
snuck up on us in the streets, vanishing the cemetery, making
little ponds out of the soybean fields in front of my house.

We lived on a hill, and the water sallied around our doublewide trailer;
we became a houseboat overnight, isolated. And looking from the right distance
and from the right eye, we must have been something akin to a junkyard yacht.

On Wednesday, the lights blinked out.
Thursday, my mother fried the last breast of chicken.
Father discovered from the old freezer that Friday aged slices of venison,
 frostbitten and grainy.
The meat hissed in the frying pan like angry cats making love and
saturated the air with a wild musk that made our eyes
 constrict and water.

The river crested on Saturday, my birthday, and mother
cooked what was left: a deer heart, plump and maroon.
She sliced it into three triangular chunks, serving me the biggest share.
And we ate the heart silently.

“We'll get by,” said my father,
 touching my mother's slumped shoulder,
his red arm dripping little diamonds of sweat onto her blouse.
She forked her last bite, examined it—mushy and sponge-like impaled on teeny
 Metal tongs—
And began to cry.

And I was never more in love with my family.

Communion

The man in the green alb spoke of eternity in hushed whispers.
Although his words were written on the pamphlet,
his lines already plotted-out for him,
his inflection, his delivery, his tone, made them believable.
Soft light from candles outlined his thin figure as he stood
before us; his thick eyebrows arched suddenly like wings in flight
when someone coughed, breaking the grandeur of his performance.
And I wanted to believe his little voice.
I wanted so much for the brown wine I sipped
to transform into the blood of the Lamb,
for the tortilla-thin wafers to mutate
into the puffy flesh of Jesus.
The Baptist preacher of my childhood,
the man robed in white short-sleeved collar shirts
and obnoxious ties, would laugh at this Episcopal priest
as he quietly, in the rhythm of a lullaby,
chanted Latin phrases that held no significance,
except that their sounds were exotic to my inexperienced ear.
And when my turn came to receive communion,
I followed the people in the pew beside me—
hypnotized by the romance of tradition—
and took my place at the communion bench.

"Yes, Father, I am a sinner," I echoed.

And I was five again. The Sunday school teacher drew a dot on the blackboard.
The chalk was the thick yellow kind that would flake off
on hands and become crust under the nails.
"This dot," she said, "represents your time on earth.
These walls that surround us only represent a teeny bit of eternity.
Things that we abstain from here, the misery that we endure,
is just a speck of dust, a dot of chalk, when compared to God's timetable."

I had nodded in agreement then, as I nodded now. Head bowed,
I remembered the ravens that massed around the drawbridge
at the Tower of London. Feathered alligators hungry for
the ears of the guides, the old men who dressed like beefeaters.
I remembered how their wings were clipped because
legend warned that if they should ever leave the Tower,
London would fall.

And I stared at these ferocious things, secretly longed for them to fly away from that stony prison, to look up and find the sun blacked out by the hideous flapping of their wings, no longer clipped, outstretched in the air, feeling the whoosh of wind under their breasts for the first time.

Comes a Gypsy

Now that I think about it, London smelled like no other city I had ever visited. Can not quite place the odor, either. Must be some mix of attic dust and urine and the cool burn of coals. See me there, as I step out of Westminster Abbey and wince as if in pain at the stale brightness of a decayed city settling back into the earth. In front of me, the River Thames, gurgling onward. To my back, the London Eye, called “ugly dinosaur” by true Londoners. Now I am trudging against the wind: notice how everyone avoids me, almost as if they can smell America on my clothes. Two months earlier, I bought that jacket from Old Navy for no other reason than it was black and long and had big round buttons, captured what I thought was the London look. Here I am now further up the street, sandwiched between other pedestrians who jostle me back and forth between them. Look quickly and you will see me becoming a dark ink spot, a bruise among bruises upon the pavement.

Notice the small boy, the one I don’t yet see, the one wearing the dirty pinstriped jacket and rolled up trousers. Watch as he approaches me, he circles back, then the dive forward, the gentle tug at my coat. In his right hand, a bouquet of paper flowers, and his other opens palm upwards with the assured grace of a professional. See how the child’s eyes are urgent and hateful and how I hand over on command a coin outlined in gold—two pounds I think—as he shoves one of his blue roses into my lapel, stabbing me with the roughness of truth-not-yet-understood.

Now, here is Trafalgar Square. Notice the pigeons are as big as dogs and find solace near a man sleeping under one of the lion statues guarding Nelson’s column. Look away, and they turn to examine the back of your head. Near my hotel, two lovers embrace like wrestlers, each wanting to pin the other, but stare a moment longer at that young man whose mouth is innocent, benign. See how he tries to disentangle his body from the skilful sinewy arms of an older woman, a gypsy. Dressed in beige, all beige, no color touched her, the woman put her hands everywhere on him, leaving no limb, no patch of flesh, untouched, as if she were giving him a deep tissue massage. See how she strokes his face and chest and hips and, finally, his crotch, searching for plunder, whatever his body has to offer up : passport, spare change, morsels of food, class ring, tickets to the British Museum. Can you hear him scream?

No one else seems to notice but me. Look at how I shuffle from side to side. I want to scream, too, harmonize with his high pitch, ache with this young tourist as she releases him, eyeing me. Feigning feebleness, she approaches, her salt and pepper hair, her dumpy mid-section,

her sad eyes—all clever weapons. Notice the agility in her old shoulders?
Or the quickness in her step as she moves through the flow of people,
clawing forward, ravenous in the lips, hungry for meat? Her cap
flies off, now turn quickly to see it dance over the heads of the few people
between us. Hair spills out behind her, becomes a tussled cape.

See how she looks ready to take flight? If so, then, you must understand how
I could not—would not—move away from the spectacle. If you want to know
the whole of it, part of me longed for her, anticipated her slow approach, step
by fierce step, her special attention. The gypsy now extends her arms.
Look at my arms, see them rise, too, for an embrace of sorts.
But she sights the blue boutonnière blooming limply out of my chest,
the blood on my doorpost, so she sidesteps and passes me by.

This Is the Morning of the Sleeping Bull

I remain in bed listening to a mule's crooked gait
across a freshly tarred road, then to a mail carrier's
sudden slap of the mailbox, the hinges screeching,
smoothing out, becoming rain-on-tin-roof noises
that can sneak up on a body at nighttime, cradled
in pillows and soft egg crate sheeting, lost somewhere
beneath the negative force of blankets and electric heat,
knowing, without knowing, that in this there is no time
for harvest, no room for potential, that this is the morning
of the sleeping bull, so warm, so benign, that leaving
seems nonsensical and unnecessary, even when
a fleshy envelope of light opens up and, then, the pushing,
the pushing forward of everything, all of it,
into a chaotic brightness, into a slap on the ass
and a guttural cry that catalyzes mortality's ticking clock.

Viticulture

“The path from here to that village / is not translated. [. . .] / There are limits to the imagination.”

—Robert Hass

As you sip on a glass cheap merlot,
you try to imagine the coarse hands
that first plucked the grapes
from a vine, growing somewhere
(you assume) in France. Acute bitterness
surprises your palate, a bitterness
almost as pungent as the husky laugh
from the mouth of the woman
who owns nothing in this world
but those coarse hands. You can
see her stooping to coddle the vine
like the baby who died the instant
he left her shallow womb.
Hands now around her hips,
she waits for you to continue
this flutter of thought, this skeleton
outline that will become her life,
but you can't. This is all you have for now.

Later, you're talking to your wife
over dinner at Angelo's, that Italian
restaurant you both like so much
because of the way the garlic bread
glistens, weighed down with half an inch of butter.
After appetizers, your wife begins to bore you
with her diatribe about Republican women
who insist on dyeing their hair
that awful shade of neon blonde
and stringing Doris Day pearls
around their tiny necks, a spiel
that seems rehearsed, as if the words
were written by someone else.

But before you are able to contemplate
this further, you feel the woman-of-the-wine's
sandpaper hands scrape across the back
of your neck and down the bumpy ridges
of your spine.

Picture the way she rolls
the littlest marbles of grape in her mouth.
Only you can appreciate her expression
while the juice, as sharp as truth, squirts
down her throat. You remove a lemon
from your glass and sip tap water
from a plastic straw, while the woman
calls for Diablo, her pet dog, her arms
flapping like a hungry pigeon
after slices of bread. You see the way
she hulks her shoulders in the heat,
the way the edges of her mouth crust
over with a sugary, purple firmament.
And she begins to say something
about her child, when your wife silences
her with a question about your *tiramisu*.
The woman fades into the restaurant's beige wallpaper.

And for weeks after, she's lost to you, a nomad
that appears now and then in vague phrases
and clipped words that don't mean much.
But one morning in the shower, you invent
the child's crooked coat-hanger mouth
gasping for his first breath as he wedges
out of the woman and into the arms
of a midwife. You can hear above the spray
of water the midwife wonder aloud at his zucchini
green eyes, at his dimpled cheeks (just like his father's,
a graduate student from the United States).
The midwife hums to the baby a lullaby
in French, something you don't understand
exactly, but you gather she's trying to coax the baby
into staying alive, to open his eyes just once more.
After kissing his blue lips, the midwife
relinquishes the lifeless mound to those hands
that will forever pluck grapes from the vine
that will grow atop the makeshift
grave for her stillborn, grapes that will harvest
a little better than the rest.

Here you are, finally—a fiction with muscle and bone,
but her wide-eyed disgust finds you as you towel off
in front of the mirror and muse at your affinity
for abuse. Her life is really nothing to you, nothing
but a string of carefully chosen words and line breaks.

She joins the rest of your creations in some locked closet in your head. Like her, they all ask, why? Her voice is so quiet and still, though, it could have been an echo of your own coming back from a deep canyon, resounding through your chest and ribs: *why?*

When you try to celebrate the conclusion of her story with what's left of the merlot, something about the way she trowels through the soil, preparing the ground for another crop, triggers an excursion into the unstable territory of "what if's." What if you had been kinder to her, let her son live, given her a husband and a litter of children, made the midwife a doctor, given the woman a townhouse in downtown Manhattan. But you didn't. You gave her little more than field of grapes.

Drop the glass and move to the mirror. Listen: What if you, yourself, were nothing more than a swift afterthought, trapped in a scrap of notebook paper, your life a garbled mess of words. What if you are the creation some woman with coarse hands imagines when she ponders about what sort of person will drink the grapes that were fertilized by her child's body.

I'll leave you with this:
When you die, what if when you get to where "there" is and discover no one there but a pair of unattached hands, waiting to cram your mouth full of black grapes?

Changelings

1.

Here is the child
who says he is my own.
See the way he whistles,
the way he digs in the garden
and under the porch hunting
for earthworms, for roly pollies,
for the lizard with a purple
line trailing down its back.

Here is the earthworm
that is twisted around the sticky
fingers of the child. Hear the eight
frantic heartbeats, expecting quick
death offered by a blue-jay's beak
or a fishhook's manicured finger.

And here is death,
who says he is the child
Let him touch me on the face,
the neck. Let him undress me,
unbutton my flesh,
unlace muscle from bone,
put me to bed.

2.

Here is the child
who trees cats and lumbers
after my elongated shadow.
See the way he disappears,
the way he is a broken see-saw,
is a tangle of frustrated jump-rope,
is a forgotten cup of shaved ice,
melting under the heat of memory.

Here is the shadow,
the body's natural curtain,
that distorts me on the wall.
Hear the way it sounds like thunder
as it shrinks, claps shut,
becomes the center.

And here is death,
who prefers daylight and soft voices
to a dead man's perfect pupils
staring through him vulgarly,
as if he were no more a man
than a kite, somersaulting
through cloud, is an airplane.

3.

Here is the child
who claims he is me.
See the way he wonders
at my purple-scabbed elbows,
the way he caresses the ditch
furling down my chest.
See the way he looks at me
as if he knew my secret name.

Here is the ditch,
gullied by years of hard rain.
Hear the sound our feet make
as they step across the eroded
carcass of some woman
we used to know.

And here is death,
who slips into my bed,
as welcome as my shadow,
who places his ear to my chest,
counts my heartbeat with his
own, who tastes the blossom-
blood of dogwood on my lips.

The Uncollected Letters of Willa Cather

“It does not matter much whom we live with in this world, but it matters a great deal
whom we dream of.” –Willa Cather

1

Bleached crab shells, a wedding gift from her,
fashioned together in an awkward
paperweight, protect scraps of her last letters
to me from an open window’s fury

and remind me once again that it was more
than just my story that began that day I met her,
as she built white sand dunes amid lofty yawns

rolling off the Gulf of Mexico. Music was playing—
maybe Debussy’s Claire De Lune. I forget from where
it filtered in. She called herself William.

Her body flaunted a Midwesterner’s square shoulders
and flat nose. Yet before a bitter penny of judgment
salted my tongue and coppered my eyes, she reached out—

hand darting across sunlight and blue sky, across algae
and beach foam, across the evening star
and pockets of time—to tuck a strand of unruly hair back behind
my ears.

2

I made hiding into an art that could rival hers.
I married the first boy I found that could say “Isabelle”
and “McClung” together without the shadow

of a smirk curving the edges of his lips and, then, hunted
for corners everywhere in our new house that could conceal
her infrequent letters. I read in darkness, making out her cursive

as best I could. Sometimes—those times when frenzy shaded
into the illogical—I would slide slivers of sentences into the slim
space between my corset and belly, squeeze her words into me.

When her letters stopped coming completely, I began
to bite my nails off and spit the parings at my own reflection.
Once, I tore her words from the page,

balled them into little pills, and swallowed each,
one by one. Acting became my profession. To smile
on cue as well as dance slyly around chronic

heartache; to pinch out the right term of endearment
and eat the bladed truth. But I could not bury it all:
the shiver of gooseflesh as my husband's unnatural

appendages touched my inner thigh, the empty stares I'd fall
into as easily as I could a warm bath, my pillowcase damp
with the excess of dreams.

3

Hair parted down the middle, a face designed
with straight lines and of sturdy bone, this picture can never
bring back the soft, plainspoken whispers that begged me to leave

Pittsburgh, go back with her to the beaches in Texas,
or escape to a chateau in France, to "be dissolved into something
complete and great."* A happiness I thought I could never live.

Time's fingers disfigure everything: all her letters yellowed
and withered into an onion's unforgivable skin, and her
handwriting
became blurred as if placed under a foggy glass.

Her jacket, now a brown bruised mushroom of fabric,
left on her last and only visit, lies folded in my hope chest,
hidden under my children's baby clothes and blankets.

An unremarkable jacket, a relic from this mother's only life.
At times, I will wrap tight enough in it to taste the rubber and oil
in her sleeves, the ink beneath her fingernails,

the rosemary and thyme behind her kiss,
the sweet wetness under her breasts.

*quote from Willa Cather.

Memo to Marilyn Chambers:

Cronenberg couldn't quite capture those eyes wide with wonder just before the money shot. Too preoccupied with monsters in your armpits, he forgot to bottle the pure heat that dimpled up through the camera in your blue movies, the ones we found under our uncles' beds—tapes with titles torn off, with fuzzy pictures and crumpled film beneath the plastic blade protector, the treasure beneath the cove.

How many times did our fingers tremble as we held you under our shirts, sneaking you off to our own VCR's? How many seconds did our eyes linger over the strange position of your back, the pucker of flesh between your eyebrows, the surprising weariness in your arms and legs as a faceless man flips you over?

We were taught by our fathers to never look for you in our wives, but you still find a way to slink into our bedroom anyway, beside us as we enter and reenter the ones we love. Never pushy, you watch our naked backs tense then release, rise and fall as if afflicted with palsy. We cannot help ourselves when it comes to the imprint your face on the Ivory Snow detergent box left on us, as it looked down from the cabinets above our mothers' washing machines, a dazzling smile that seemed to understand that we will always come back rummaging around for something more lost than sex, something we don't like to think about too much: a dark ritual we never brave to give a name.

To a Three-Toed Sloth at the Memphis Zoo

No signs announce you as “Sloth,”
or even as your given name
Megalonychidae of the *Pilosa* order,
as they do for the lions and the pandas
and even the tiny ants.
You are almost hidden,
tucked away in your own private corner.
And left undisturbed, you would sleep
suspended by your fish-hook claws
and cling to that plastic tree, ignorant
and dangling the way an awkward Christmas
ornament dangles, which a family
is really too embarrassed to display
but decides to put on the amputated evergreen
anyway, hoping to cover some hole.

My students ignore you because next door
the tiger (even when sleeping) promises
more excitement, more danger,
and their screams for it are as painful
to the ear as tire-squeaks
and stay with me like grief
long after the harsh decibels have evaporated into the air.

Of course, you are asleep,
between two worlds, between rain forest
and asphalt, and perhaps this side is your haven,
perhaps this is your utopia, because here
you cannot hear the Howler Monkeys,
only the muffled whine of easy listening
funneling through the loudspeakers.

The shadow of a slightly older man and woman
encloses mine; they laugh about something.
And I turn to find that my white collar shirt,
washed and ironed over and over into a substance
not much thicker than gossamer,
and my Wal-Mart khakis pose
no threat to his earring, his tweed jacket,
his black Converse shoes.

We are dirt farmers, you and I,
(because my mother preferred casinos to zoos,
because as a boy, I would wait for her in loud lobbies
to give up and to come back to me,
because cigarette ashes corroded her eyelids,
because diet cola stains ruined her sequins).

You awake,
eye the couple and me,
gently shake your head,
and move behind a limb out of sight.
My students—in the butterfly cages?
So, I follow the couple to the polar bear aquarium
and sit on a bench nearest the pool to watch
the cubs, swimming over one another, follow
thick sets of paws as they float across the glass.

Later, I am still on the bench, thinking of you,
little sloth, thinking that I could make you have a purpose,
if forced to find one, if forced to climb
over that fence and step onto your sanctuary.
I could start with your fur, rip it off like duct tape
and fashion it into a crude shawl.
Your claws! I'd easily pluck them out
like they were acrylics and superglue them
into an exotic pair of earrings.
And I would then be pronounced animal,
not quite monkey, but mammal nonetheless,
and I would come live up in the trees with you.
And mister would be forever stricken from my name.

Great Uncle Cody on Antiquing

It begins that first morning we eat breakfast
amid a circle of empty chairs, as way down
the dark hall, an east window blooms blue
through slat after slat of beige blinds
we had bought on sale with loved ones
who have disappeared into the fabric of our bedspreads.

We know we know better but still we turn
yellow with the caulk around the bath tub,
we droop with our walls, with our wallpaper,
even, our backs curling inward into us
over and over like pathetic apple peelings.

Let's walk down to the window, open it up
to what little light we can find. Let's forget
we forget the little things these days,
how what's left of the two-dimensional tulips
and stitches of deer on the tablecloth quiver
under our palms, sucking in as much air
as we do, how our bored fingers cannot
seem to help themselves anymore, exist
now for the sole purpose of pestering the abruptness
of right angles where walls meet and rooms end.

We hunt for the overlooked places in a room
where thin saliva-like spider essence cottons
into large clumps of old man hair. We rub
the web against our lips, so we can't forget the bitter taste
of living. Sooner or later, we all get lost in places
that should suffocate us with memory, not leave us
unable to understand the leftovers on the stove,
the barking dog next door. Strange how we counted
ourselves clever for knowing where to step,
where to dodge the landmines of age that had surprised
so many others, whose names escape us now.

Afterglow

The shower's infected again
with blue-black bugs I haven't a name for.
Each dark spot, a tiny convulsion, beating
in unison. Connect the dots
and find the heartbeat, I want to say.
I pick them off the white linoleum,
as nonchalantly as I would pick blackberries.

And I think of you.
You and me on this tub's unforgiving floor.
Remember mumbling about the feel
of this cold linoleum against your bare back?
Remember how I was in you before I knew I was in you?
Pushing us together, lunging almost, I could hear
you gurgle to catch your breath.

Your elbow dug into my shoulder, faucet scraped
the back of my head as we kissed, too awkward
to continue, too embarrassed to stop; we didn't
question the need for a bed, and I became
little more than an ant-eating monkey
sticking shoots of grass down dark
misanthropic holes of moist mulch.

Afterwards, a thin tear of blood trailed
down your leg. You didn't see me watch
you turn on the shower and wash yourself.
You must have thought I left you to the steam
when stepped out.

Later, you would cup my face between your hands,
your teeth would pinch my mouth shut, your eyes
would say in a tender squint: *Here he is, see how
he giggles and twitches as if in love? See how he
cannot speak in complete sentences?*

I wish at that moment you could have peeled
back the layer of skin above my chest, taken a closer inspection
at what was underneath, at all the blinking and spinning
of the wheels and pulleys, at all the mixed wires
that make up the intricate network of my heart.

I douse the tub in Clorox
and watch as the water becomes a growling gyre.
As a child, I would skip over
onto the bathroom floor before the water
had completely drained, afraid
I'd be taken down with it.

But you were too quick with me.
You sucked me into you, in your mouth,
and finding me limp, you spit
me back out, left me twisted
twisting down the drain.

Mélange of a Marriage on a Snow Day

Shadows of a man and woman shuffle out from behind the green barn door.

“Did you know my daddy used to call me The Stargazer?”

“I want to go down to Fay’s right now and hear the lady astronaut croon her sad blues.”

Surprised by the cold, our gerbil never made it too far from its cage.

My razor slices against the grain, against the lacy flesh above my jugular.

Rain puddles into the green barn through a latch left open by the woman.

“Look up. My sign’s Taurus, the bull.”

“The lady astronaut will only sing early Gershwin, you know.”

Downstairs, Peter, our cat, found a plump burrito for breakfast, the remains of our kid’s gerbil.

Says she likes the smell of my aftershave. Should come here and prove it.

Last night temperature dropped, water froze in the barn, sky released its impersonal dandruff.

“Tilt your head, see the bull slide over the horizon, spooked by the looming sun.”

“Only early Gershwin, has been know to invent words for ‘Rhapsody in Blue.’”

Peter looks guilty, don’t tell the kids.

She licks the bumps across my neck, a special burn we keep between us.

With morning the snow will thaw, sluice out through corners of the barn.

“Snow too wet to make angels in here. Should we still wake the kids?”

“Play the record we bought from the lady astronaut.”

Sly Peter, white Peter, we could lose him if we wanted.

Before the children come, let’s touch the ice with our naked fingers, see how fast we can melt.

Brinkley Heights

On the first day they met, she had the missionary color her name on an eggshell poster board with a blue magic marker: S... A...D...E, pronounced Sha-day, not Sadie, she had at once corrected him. This was the side of Memphis that did not have a church at every corner. And the rusty bikes and the cracked pavement and the rusted hubcaps tangled together with a clutter of gravel and trashcans that even cats avoided. He decided to walk her home after the Bible lesson, even planned to tell her how to become “saved.” They walked under power lines with dead shoes drooping over them like limp half notes on sheet music, and they walked beside houses with broken windows and bullet holes still etched in their flakey skins. Dusk, a blanket of dark reds and browns, settled over them and the day exhaled most of its heat. Almost dark, she asked him why he was there, why Brinkley Heights. He lied, said he felt led. By what? She asked. But he did not know, so he changed the subject.

She saw the other, scrawny boy before he did. A ski mask covered his face. There was enough light left to see the gun he had pulled. The slender barrel lifted directly in front of his face, and the black nothingness eddied and churned inside its shaft like a dark undertow. The missionary wanted to go back to the time he was a boy, to the road he had walked on from school in the afternoons with nothing to threaten him but the occasional grass snake. He belonged to that dirt road and the river that ran parallel to it and the all-white private school that was held up by ignorance and good intentions. He had no business at Brinkley Heights; he understood then that he had no right to mission to these black kids who needed much more than salvation. He was the abomination.

--

He sat in his room, looking out his window for the bright dots that vaguely shaped Taurus, but the sharp angle of the church’s roof hid most of the constellation from him. He began to rock like a cradle, then. Rocking back and forth on his bed—repeated to himself the *ABC’s* of salvation, the silly mantra he could never bring himself to mention to Sade: First, *admit* you’re a sinner; then *believe* Jesus is God’s son; finally, *commit* your life to the service of Christ. How could he stop himself from saying it, from rolling the memorized words over his tongue, pronouncing each syllable precisely?

And the missionary became a child again. In Sunday school:
his teacher was bulbously pregnant, and her eyes rolled around
and around in their deep sockets, erratically circling nothing,
confused compasses. She revealed to him and the other children
the secrets of Mary and the Holy Spirit,
and how God, like a mist but not a mist,
permeated through the pores of Mary's body,
planting the Christ child in her belly,
how the baby Jesus, a tiny transcendental kernel
of popcorn, cooked in her belly for nine months
until he mushroomed finally into buttery yellow holy goodness.

Now he's the boy shaking in the baptistery's blue water,
nude under a white robe not much thicker than the membrane
of a butterfly's wing. The preacher lectured to the congregation,
telling them how lucky the boy was to believe
and, then, placed his hand over the boy's nose and mouth,
and the sweet smell of tobacco burned in his nostrils,
as he was submerged in cold water.

Five years later, he still wonders about her.
Sade's a woman now, perhaps that boy with the gun
would become the one who first whispered wetly
in her ear about love, as he slowly removed her tank top.
The missionary doubts he will always carry her face with him,
but for now he could draw her portrait if he had to—her nose, her neck,
her lips accented with crooked teeth, more dangerous than he first knew,
and, of course, her eyes—a deep-feeling chartreuse that reflected
all manner of light, hers were the sharp eyes of a cat, hard enough to crack
open his breastbone like a stray bullet.

On Skydiving

There's magic to the wind crashing against the exposed folds of my ear. The gaping mouth cut into the side of the plane's hull, others' arched feet teetering back and forth before the jump, the jet engine's mechanical heartbeat—all of it is kicked back behind me. Now, I am a ball of yarn unwinding itself, a belly full of canary feathers, an open throat that has forgotten how to swallow its own salvia. The faraway ground is not "ground," is nothing more than a quilt, blue-green and yellow, pieced-together patches from an old woman's apron. Gravity hasn't fully embraced my suspended body, only because it cannot find the exact crinkle in between ozone and ground I am hiding. And I lose words to moments like this, moments when I wonder what part of me I could cut out to add to the jigsaw below, what adage I could say to the pale horseman that he hasn't already heard before. Should I fear those embankments that crust up like dead skin? Or these gullies gorging through the bottle green valleys, marking places where water has sought lower land? I always lose words to moments like these when I try to catch a cloud with cupped hands, when words, like truth, are defined without words, when the pull of the fall is met with the pull of the cord, when I finally surrender to life's invisible claw as it wrenches me back up into a sky polluted with ultraviolet light.

No Book of Blood

1

Rain-streaks slit across the skylight. I slip into a porcelain bathtub,
slide under a membrane of foam, drown out radio nonsense.

What voices come here to me tonight? Old ghost winds
sweep through the backyard, rattle the bars on my windows.

Thunder shakes loose a rusty drawer, quiets a barking dog, its quick
noises crashing against thick movements of wind, reducing its vibrato

to low hums and particles of static electricity. I know that cloudbursts
and man's psyche can be charted on graphs, explained away with data

and statistics the way my fourth grade teacher explained away
the afterlife of animals, the way they become nothing, voided,

no judgment, no lions lying with lambs, no book of blood. I toe the radio
closer to the tub's edge; a little further and I'm a roasted marshmallow.

2

I am with my mother one Thursday night watching the Grammys,
sitting Indian-style on the couch and studying how she holds her

Virginia Slims between two fingers, two sinewy chopsticks, how
she chuffs out toxic gas, cloud after cloud of it, and the fumes do not

irritate my eyes because it smells like her and is her, really
and truly—not the woman she smudges on in the morning,

but the puffy-eyed, splotchy faced, delicate shouldered creature,
who, just now, crushes a half-smoked cigarette into an ashtray

cradled between her legs. On TV, a performer takes
to the stage with grunts and moans and gavottes.

3

Smoke's lacy tendrils coil around my neck and pull me closer
to our images transposed over the singer's on the screen whose voice

bleeds, shouts that we are the dead ones, that she has finally come to
reclaim her lost kingdom, coarse voice meeting long crescendo, her hair

swoops upward toward light fixtures off camera. Years later, I will mix
her face up with a mother I could not understand then and will understand now

that maybe we do deserve judgment after all, maybe only
the animals deserve the balm of nothingness I've come to crave

late at night during my extended baths. Here, in the tub, the boy I was
would find me funny, himself but not himself, floating

like an inflatable raft, debating the Gospels, contemplating
buoying myself up, in a few minutes, just above the surface,

just enough for my nose and mouth to peek through,
as the rest of me raisins into an old photograph of my grandfather.

4

At times, my mother could play a Donna Reed so well, a convincing performance
that spirited her out of the bedroom, even when it would storm like tonight.

One Halloween, she is a gypsy with blue bandanas and gold hoop earrings,
and I am a werewolf, though, as we both admitted, looking more bear than wolf,

but I didn't care, we were two twigs spliced together then. Brother Scott called me
her pet sin, a pebble placed in her shoe, punishment for late nights in a Skylark.

Her tight-armed embraces, her side-kisses, the slack in her smile, her body language
echoed his pronouncements. Make no doubt, they said, I know I deserve the curse of
you.

5

As a child, I went through about six dogs: the first one cried all the time
because we took him too soon from his mother's nipple, and finally it

gave up, eating rat poison right in front of me on a clear Sunday afternoon.
The Rileys gave me the last one, a mix between Great Pyrenees

and Komodor, who learned to mimic her cold stare every time
I went to her: The What-do-you-want-now look.

On our way to school, we found pieces of its pink brain scattered
on the roadside. Mother cried out when she spotted its bulky frame bent

backwards and bleeding like a smashed watermelon. With shaky hands, she scooted
me
out into the rain to cut off its collar. I found the animal's eyes held neither an
expression

of peacefulness nor of pain, but a look of emptiness I discerned
to be both beautiful and seductive, like I was watching a secret fire burn.

6

Buddhists must have it wrong, too, all of it wrong. We, secretly,
don't want anything to do with nirvana; rather, we covet

the existence of a bloodless flea. We let heavy typewriter plunks
of rain lull us into something final, slowly sinking our bodies

further underneath a thin film of soap. Our hair fans
out around us into the tentacles of an octopus, and there,

from a hidden grave in our collective memories, our buried mothers
rise, the ones we came from, the ones we can never return to.

First, their vague silhouettes augment behind a rising veil
of wind-swept dust, and our makeshift temples tremble under

their bare feet. Soon after, their skin, once frigid and muted,
softens into flesh more russet than rotten apple peels.

Then, we notice that their eyes do not glare at us, precisely,
but through us, through bone and blood and magma and mantle,

through the revered busts of demigods they had sculpted with their
own hands; we know to gurgle their names but cannot because,

by now, they are no longer our mothers, they no longer come for us. No,
they only come to make love to sand and dirt, carrying with them nothing

but the plucked eyes of crocodiles and their own savage lips that kiss to bite.