

1-1-2012

I've Been Reading About Disaster Lately

Lisa Catherine McMurtray

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I'VE BEEN READING ABOUT DISASTER LATELY

By

Lisa Catherine McMurtray

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
in English
in the Department of English

Mississippi State, Mississippi

May, 2012

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2012

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Title of Study: I'VE BEEN READING ABOUT DISASTER LATELY

Pages in Study: 65

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I've Been Reading About Disaster Lately is a collection of original poetry which focuses on how identity and agency are shaped through personal and public circumstance, through the intersection of the human and animal, and through the development of language and personal mythology. This collection is preceeded by a critical introduction which analyzes how poets mediate public and private disaster. The introduction specifiially focuses on the eight poems written by Bob Hicok in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech Shooting, and examines how language, either in its presence or absence, functions to resolve the disconnect between pre-disaster and post-disaster.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the numerous people who have supported me throughout the course of this project. First and foremost, I would like to thank my family: my parents, Janet and Patrick McMurtray, who unfailingly encouraged me to write; my brother and sister, Benjamin and Lindsay, and Lauren Clark, all of whom contributed to my writing and my sanity. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation for Jannell McConnell and Jessica Temple, poets who have shaped not only how I write, but how I think about writing, and without whom I would not have finished this project. I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Catherine Pierce and Dr. Michael Kardos, whose work I greatly admire and whose guidance has improved my work exponentially. Finally, I would like to express my eternal gratitude to my thesis director, Dr. Richard Lyons, who helped shape my voice from the very beginning and without whom none of this would be possible.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The Language of Disaster: Mediating Public and Private Loss in Bob Hicok's Poetry

Octavio Paz writes, "The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips" (57). Yet after events such as 9/11, writers (both amateur and professional) flooded the market with public expressions of grief and loss. While many of these expressions were, at best, sentimental and premature and, at worst, propaganda encouraging a visceral, violent American reaction, several poems emerged from the disaster as touchstones. Ironically, the poem many turned to in the wake of September 11 was W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939." Auden merges the internal with the external, describing the outbreak of World War II both in the formation of German militancy and in the personal, psychological motivations toward war. While Auden's poem ends hopefully, the final two lines of the first stanza resonated with a mourning America: "the unmentionable odour of death/Offends the September night." What Auden does in this poem, and what many poems written after public or personal loss do, is avoid the natural instinct for closure and consolation. Wisława Szymborska's "Photograph From September 11" similarly denies the urge for resolution. This poem, preserving an image of the men and women who plummeted from the falling Towers, refuses finality. Szymborska writes, "I can only do two things for them—/describe this flight/and not add a last line" (17-9). What Szymborska does in this poem, and what Bob Hicok does in his poems reacting to the horror of the Virginia Tech

shooting is use language to acknowledge tragedy while understanding language's inability to resolve anything.

The motivations for writing poetry in the wake of disaster are varied. Eavan Boland argues, "If poetry does not address public grief in some way, it runs the risk of abandoning one of its greatest roles and one of its greatest genres, which is elegy" (1). Boland imbues the author with an ethical responsibility to react and record, asking "if there is not that compact between poetry and society, how can poetry resume and retain its old and hallowed identity as language-maker for essential human feeling?" (1). By irrevocably linking poetry and society, Boland establishes a paradigm in which poets must express both personal and public grief. Poetry, like the Irish tradition of keening which very publicly mourns death, becomes "a ritual that neither resolved nor diminished" public grief, but "noted it" (1). Because a primary goal of poetry is to articulate experience, poetry's role as a "language-marker for essential human feeling" inherently relies on language's ability to give experience shape. Martin Espada writes that "the poet not only restores the blood to words; he provides a vocabulary of communal grief" (1). Mark Doty explores this idea further, stating that, while the poet's job is to articulate grief and "thus give voice to a particular, collective pain," some things are "beyond the limits of speech. To name it is to diminish it and, in the process, come head to head with the inadequacy of the tools of poetry to circumscribe experience" (2). The goal, then, of public elegies seems to be one that does not seek to fully articulate or understand grief, but "to attempt [to make] some kind of sense" of it (4). Doty continues, writing that elegy is necessary "to confirm that loss is real, that individual disappearance matters; that the rupture in the known world is pointed to, held up for attention, shared" (4).

Poetry is not merely a method of consolation, but an extension of the search for meaning and language's search to convey it.

However, while poetry inarguably expresses the poet's personal response to public tragedy, some writers posit that writing provides a voice for the victims as well. Abe Louise Young documents the personal accounts of Katrina victims, writing that she wanted to "restore authorship and narrative control to people who had been assaulted by media images of themselves as criminals" (1). Young reacts directly to Raymond McDaniel's *Stillwater Empire*, in which McDaniel appropriates the anonymous accounts (which Young herself collected) of Katrina survivors as his own, weaving without credit their stories into the "found poetry" Young argues unethically strips these survivors of agency and voice. Young states that "poetry of witness is important...to bring attention to conditions of social inequality," but that because personal narrative is inherently tied to shifting memory and circumstance, "the primary storytellers must be involved in shaping the public presentation of the work" (1). Auden himself writes, "All attempts to write about persons or events, however important, to which the poet is not intimately related in a personal way are doomed to failure" (Ramazani 1). How, then, do poets react (as Boland argues they must do) to national tragedy? Pablo Neruda seems to argue for poetic appropriation, writing in "The Heights of Macchu Picchu," "I come to speak for your dead mouths...Speak through my speech, and through my blood." Espada, too, speaks for the voiceless in his poem "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100," the forty-three workers in the Windows on the World restaurant who perished in the September 11th attacks. Szyborska's "Photograph From September 11," however, mediates private and public response; she reacts to the photograph and yet does not go so far as to claim the victims' suffering as her own. By basing the poem

in an inherently personal response, Szymborska bridges the gap between the victim and the witness.

“The act of making a poem,” Doty writes, “is a movement from private feeling and perception, the inchoate stuff of experience, into the shared realm of language” (3). By basing his poems in an innately private emotional response, Hicok is able to merge the private and public spheres. Hicok uses his poems to explore personal, national, and universal grief, making the private public and the public private by speaking as a witness and as a recorder. Yet, Sarah Gilbert asks, “how do poets—aware that to mourn is to speak or perform grief—formulate public grief in a society that enjoins silence?” (2). Because language is inherently performative, poetry is inherently performative. However, Hicok acknowledges poetry’s powerlessness to conclude, to summarize, to resolve, and to restore.

Hicok explores the dichotomous necessity of language to process loss and its inefficacy to do so. He examines this problem in several different ways, focusing on the loss of language, its inability to convey meaning, the process through which it changes as well as the process through which it absolves, and the struggle to either restore meaning or create new meaning in the aftermath of tragedy. While this can be seen over the course of Hicok’s career, it is particularly evident in the eight poems written shortly after the Virginia Tech Massacre. The shooting, which took place on April 16th, 2007, shocked the nation as senior English major Seung-Hui Cho killed thirty-two people and wounded twenty-five others before taking his own life. Cho studied under Hicok (as well as other creative writing professors) and submitted violent writing that concerned the department enough to remove Cho from at least one workshop. These poems, collected in Hicok’s 2010 book, *Words for Empty* and *Words for Full*, highlight humanity’s relationship with both the written and

spoken word; language, Hicok seems to argue, is simultaneously halted and altered, and it is in the interstice between the past and the present that language must carry the poet through. However, Hicok refuses resolution; he does not “add a last line” to the grief experienced not only by himself, but also by colleagues, classmates, friends, parents, and a country looking for the words to express national shock and loss. He writes, “why do we say aftermath/when it never ends” (“Whimper” 40-1); for Hicok, loss is never over, merely acknowledged.

Of the many ways in which Hicok acknowledges this loss, silence permeates each one of these eight poems. The first poem of the section, “So I Know,” introduces readers to Hicok’s anxiety concerning language. He writes:

I don’t know what I could have done
something. Something more than talk to someone
who talked to someone, a food chain of language
leading to this language of “no words” we have now.
Maybe we exist as language and when someone dies
they are unworded...(14-19).

Language provides agency, but it also courts inaction. Before the shooting, Hicok and other members of the Virginia Tech English Department had voiced concerns about Cho, but ultimately were unable to stop the events of April 16th. Language, here, is shown as absent both after literal death and in the wake of such violence. Agency has been stripped from the speaker, and there are no words with which to voice his shock, grief, loss, and guilt. While the dead are physically incapable of speaking, the living survivors are psychically incapable of speaking.

This theme is carried throughout the remainder of the Virginia Tech Shooting poems. “Mute,” the third poem in the section, focuses entirely on Cho’s silence. Cho, described as shy and quiet by classmates and professors, spoke rarely if at all in his classes, and his recorded tirade shocks the speaker and forces him to confront the importance of verbal and aural communication. The poem begins, “Silence stood out...” (1). In the absence of sound, the speaker is unable to create corresponding images in his mind, unable to learn anything about Cho before or after the shooting. Hicok notes, “For sixteen weeks/he didn’t talk.../...his un-/saying has been said over and over” (6-10). While the speaker in “So I Know” examines his own silence following the tragedy, here the focus is on the silence preceding the tragedy. The shock of hearing Cho speak was revelatory to Hicok, that to hear him speak:

is to realize he lived tongueless
in me, the circuits
that work the tentacles of speech, how we reach out
on air, into the nothing between us
with the something,
the anything of talk...I didn’t feel,
until I heard his voice, that he was human. (17-27)

Hicok posits that human connection is forged through language, and the lack of verbal communication between Cho and the people around him lessened not only his personal relationships, but also his humanity. Silence, then, is the ultimate isolation, and any form of communication reassures humanity. However meaningless, speech provides an avenue for

comfort and reassurance. Hicok similarly examines this in the poems “So I Know” and “In the Loop.” The poem “So I Know” posits:

...Maybe sorry’s the only sound
to offer pointlessly and at random
to each other forever, not because of what it means
but because it means we’re trying to mean. (25-9)

The profusion of sympathy after tragedy allows for solace as it reaffirms human connection. Apologizing recognizes loss, even if that recognition is, as Hicok fears, “unworded.” He revisits the idea of language as comfort in the poem “In the Loop:”

People wrote, called, mostly e-mailed
to say, there’s nothing to say. Eventually
I answered these messages: there’s nothing
to say back except of course there’s nothing
to say, thank you for your willingness to say it. (5-9)

Consolation comes from reconnecting with other people, not from resolution. Hicok views language “as one of the ways to end a poem” (“Shorn” 46), not because it ends anything, but because it offers the writer the opportunity to try to make sense of the senseless. Because poetry is innately performative, writing fills the silence by “trying to mean,” and in some ways allows both the poet and reader to form a bond even in the speechlessness of catastrophe.

While Hicok studies how language is taken, he also examines how language shifts to encompass new meaning. The poem “Whimper” begins by noting that “fail means differently now/...dead/is not in our mouths as it was in the past” (2-4). Mirroring Octavio

Paz, Hicok writes that words hold new meaning, meaning inextricable from the atrocity of Cho's violence. The poem "Troubled Times," however, also argues that while words have been stripped of their previous meanings, the poet must redefine language in the process of coping with and subsequently writing about loss. Hicok emphasizes writing's role in creating new language:

...I left a blank space
behind me a moment ago, I had to go back
and write "diligence" where nothing was,

nor will I strike a line across the word
to suggest my doubt..... (19-23)

Again, Hicok recognizes the pervasive silence, but he also realizes his role as a writer. He must both rewrite what is missing and show his "imperfections" (24) in creating closure. By suggesting doubt, Hicok refuses to completely bridge the gap between the past and present. "I've lost/something," Hicok writes, "I don't know what, it suggests/_____, now I'll leave blanks" (27-9). Hicok admits his inability to articulate his own grief. He can no longer resolutely describe the world around him and thus can no longer infer meaning.

Hicok seeks to rediscover meaning through a stream-of-consciousness association of memories and words. By using "a food chain of language," Hicok is able to freely shift between concrete imagery and abstract ideation. The poem "Terra incognita" is perhaps the most physical of Hicok's poems, creating a sustained image of students playing Frisbee near Norris Hall (where the majority of the shooting took place) to counteract the larger concept of moving on. Hicok writes, "Life goes on" (8) before moving immediately into an image

of “the goddamned pizza with three meats/for \$11.95” (11-2). While Hicok’s poems often tackle huge, abstract concepts, particularly grief, guilt, and loss, he quickly re-establishes the physical. Even his abstractions consist of physical images: “...How do we not get down on our knees/and pray every second to the machine? Gears of trees/and tulip clogs, such a churning mixture of air and sex/and pizza...” (12-5). The poem ends by contrasting a ribbon-covered campus with an overwhelming yearning for closure:

...There’s him and hundreds
and thirty-two ribbons on the trees
and thirty-two flavors and I love
the abacus hour, the cornucopian field, the explosion
of bikes and kites and yearning still and always
for what we don’t know but are certain is over there,
under a treasured X, waiting to fill our lives
where the horizon ends. (32-9)

This is typical of Hicok’s work. Images transform seamlessly into abstractions, which work more often than not because they too are tethered by specificity. Hicok skillfully conflates the physical and the spiritual by allowing language to mutate ideas and images. However, his poems also allow the reader to visualize the frenetic thought process following disaster and loss:

...why ask that why

of the larger why, why did this happen, and why from that why

branch to the why am I alive why, there’s the why

are we here why and the why do we let so many questions
begin with a bang why and the why do we say aftermath
when it never ends. (“Whimper” 36-41)

Yet again, Hicok manages to balance potentially grandiose statements by providing the reader with “shapes/that excite our brain” (“Whimper” 9-10).

Hicok’s use of repetition also provides the reader with visual and auricular touchstones with which to move through the poem. The poem “Whimper” alone uses the word “why” twenty-one times. While the majority of these are compacted into the passage quoted above, Hicok threads them throughout the poem, revisiting the question frequently and reminding the reader of the importance of asking it. In the poem “So I Know,” Hicok cyclically returns to the word “chat,” evoking the simultaneous need and reluctance to talk after loss. Repetition provides stability and structure when articulating stream-of-consciousness. The poem “This day as a version of the last” is conversely devoid of repetition, deliberately disorienting the reader. This poem, mirroring the confusion of insomnia, does not process grief but attempts to float above it “until their dead returns” (10). The shortest of the section of eight, this poem refuses the attempts to restore agency as the others do. Hicok cannot avoid the events of the past, which invade his thoughts. Here, the repetition is not imbued in the words themselves, but the ideas so prevalent throughout this section. Even when trying to write a poem unrelated to the shooting, Hicok is unable to entirely remove himself from the past; he is irrevocably changed.

Because poems written in the aftermath of disaster often vilify the perpetrators to the point of caricature (particularly poems post-9/11), Hicok’s poems are also successful because they domesticate the heinous. By humanizing Cho, Hicok avoids absolutes and thus

can rise above them. Underscoring Cho's humanity heightens the senselessness Hicok struggles to articulate; if Cho were merely a monster, compartmentalization would be easy. However, Hicok portrays Cho like himself, human, fallible: "He put moisturizer on the morning he shot/thirty-three people. That stands out. The desire/to be soft" ("So I Know" 1-3). By noting such an innocuous detail, Hicok firmly aligns Cho with his own sense of humanity. He revisits Cho's softness, contrasting it sharply with his crime:

...You did not
do enough, I write to myself, about the kid
who turned in writing about killing
a few buildings from where he killed.
With soft hands in Norris Hall killed.
This is my confession. And legs I think
the roommate said, moisturizer in the shower. (7-13)

Hicok combines concerns about his own humanity, and his guilt, with bald reminders of Cho's actions and his own vulnerability. What could be depicted as a monstrous crime denies such an easy classification, and it is this problem from which Hicok's anxiety primarily stems. The poem "Mute" examines how it was easy to make Cho inhuman when he didn't speak, but his recorded ravings forced Hicok to acknowledge "that he was human" (27). By proving to be complex rather than simple, Cho was "still taking us/out of ourselves" (31-2). The poem "Shorn" mentions Cho by name, and while the other poems directly discuss him, naming him humanizes him.

Hicok also allows for the heinous to interrupt his own sphere. While hypothetically shopping for grapes in "Whimper," he will:

...sense a parent some states away
dropping to the floor as I imagined
a moment ago, with no image of the face and the body
really just a cloud, it's the action
that's distinct, the cause, the erasure
of the daughter or son who went off to college. (24-29)

The violence of April 16th intrudes on this domestic scene. Hicok shows the parents of the murdered students, but is unable to give them definitive faces or identities. By merging the domestic and the violent, Hicok highlights the inability to escape the terror that accompanies unclassifiable brutality. One of the things that made 9/11 so horrible, and for the same reason the Virginia Tech Massacre so horrible, was the shock of such violence intruding on the domestic. Hicok forces the reader to acknowledge the immutable connection between the domestic and violent that Cho forged.

The heinous does not simply exist as Cho's physical, visceral violence; memories become as real and invasive as the actions themselves. Like the scene in the grocery store, Hicok cannot escape the memories of that day, writing, "I'm a theater of these short films / of people I don't know falling down and being broken. why / do we think answers will help" ("Whimper" 34-6). Memories are intruders, both unwelcome but necessary. Hicok tries to avoid reliving April 16th in several of the eight Virginia Tech poems because he knows that it has tainted how he sees the world: "I don't want his face/behind my eyes, it's too easy to let him be/how I see the sun" ("Troubled Times" 17-9). He recognizes that he has already changed, that his perceptions are irrevocably altered, and that avoidance is counter-productive. Hicok writes:

I remember just now I don't want to feel

what it suggests, I've been here,
at this point of failure, about to picture him
in the hall, in a room, and refusing

that presence in my life, though I can't go back. ("Troubled Times" 6-10)

Hicok creates a self-conscious tension between wanting to escape the past and acknowledging it with every written word. Hicok notes, "I can never remember... /...how to unmind what's in mind.... /...disgusting what I know" ("Troubled Times" 40-5). Poetry, as a medium, necessarily integrates intangible memory with tangible written words.

Remembering becomes an exercise in writing and, consequently, articulation:

...I'm writing about the shootings again.

I don't mean to. I don't mean to write
about writing again, but the mind, shorn of object—
object of the poem, object of the bullet—doesn't exist. ("Shorn" 3-6)

Hicok merges the memory with the physical, mediating past and present through the poem itself. The present is an extension of the past; the two are inseparable, and what is remembered still happened and still affects present actions. If the past is unavoidable, Hicok must recognize it and must attempt to articulate it to understand himself.

Hicok also displays a startling self-awareness of how the past and the present collide by manipulating form-content relationships in his work. The poem "In the Loop" acts almost as the *ars poetica* of the eight Virginia Tech poems:

Because this was about nothing. A boy who felt
that he was nothing, who erased and entered
that erasure, and guns that are good for nothing,
and talk of guns that is good for nothing,
and spring that is good for flowers, and Jesus
for some, and scotch for others, and “and”
for me in this poem, “and” that is good
for sewing the minutes together, which otherwise
go about going away, bereft of us and us
of them, like a scarf left on a train
and nothing like a scarf left on a train,
like the train, empty of everything but a scarf,
and still it opens its doors at every stop,
because this is what a train does,
this is what a man does with his hand on a lever,
because otherwise why the lever, why the hand,
and then it was over, and then it had just begun. (10-26).

Hicok addresses his seemingly arbitrarily linked style of writing directly, arguing that it allows for time to be folded into itself and molded together. Hicok uses the vehicle of the poem to reconcile the past and present, and while he displays anxiety regarding memory, he also notes its necessity. His primary concern seems to be his own struggle to bridge the gap between the past and present. Language is necessary, but it also falls short. By writing these poems, Hicok is able to do what he cannot verbalize; he is able to stitch together before and after.

Hicok ends the poem "In the Loop" by articulating in print what emotions cannot handle. This sentiment is prevalent throughout Hicok's work, underscoring his anxiety concerning his own ability to process and eventually cope with the shooting. In the poem, "So I Know," Hicok writes, "almost going forward is the direction I am headed" (34). Each of the eight Virginia Tech poems moves Hicok, and consequently the reader, towards a precarious reconciliation and stability. While Hicok seems confident in eventually restoring sanity, he also undermines himself in the poem "Whimper," writing, "...not knowing / in our direction what our direction is, how things / get decided undecided, lost if you need to find us / is where we are" (48-51) Hicok is painfully aware of the seemingly constant confusion and sense of loss that grief creates. Even as he moves towards equilibrium, he writes, "I am here / but here isn't here" ("Troubled Times" 46-7) and argues that grief causes "so many problems [for the survivors and witnesses of trauma] because we know we exist, / let us not know we exist, let us be blank" ("Troubled Times" 36-7). Hicok simultaneously seeks normality and pushes it away; nothing can exist as it once was in the wake of disaster. The tension lies in Hicok's resolve to reassemble the now disparate parts of himself, to create wholeness out of the chaos of grief. The poem, "Terra incognita," from the title itself, connotes how changed the world is post-tragedy. Hicok cannot recognize the world immediately after the shooting, but also cannot recognize a world that is renewing itself. The poem begins, "And on the seventh day, as if someone said, / "May the healing from the refrain / 'May the healing begin' begin" we have Frisbees" (1-3). He goes on to write, "Life goes on' is also painful/to hear, to see in truth that we have to get back" (8-9) to the quotidian. While Hicok yearns to move on, he also acknowledges the difficulty in doing so: "[...] Move on: sure. Sounds like / advice. like buy sell low high: kiss the girl / and make

her cry: he's got a gun, run" ("This day as a version of the last" 13-5). The startling final image epitomizes the anxiety between articulating and embodying the steps necessary to cope with grief, loss, and change.

Hicok mediates public and personal disaster by giving a "voice to a particular, collective pain" (Doty 2). By articulating loss, even on private scale, Hicok is able to show how language functions in the process of moving on. While language is imperative to being human, it is also incapable of expressing difficult emotions. Doty writes, "I understand the human need to say something, to give shape to grief, but surely the first response to such a rupture in the fabric of the world ought to be a resonant, enormous silence" (2). Hicok responds by illustrating both the crippling silence and the overwhelming need to fill it. He makes the unsayable sayable. In a more overtly political move, he writes, "I'm a phantom of the body politic / if I don't speak, I'm required to, freedom's / a tending dream, a public mapping of belief" ("Watchful" 74-6). Speech is a necessary function of agency, but it also fails to mean:

...Saying—speech, the rivering of sound
to reach, enter, join, touch—is not real.
And with that loss we disappear, who are only speech,
as a cheetah is only speed, as the sun is only a burning
that does not singe the sky. ("Watchful" 104-8)

Speech is not tangible, but poetry, and any form of writing, can fill the "resonant, enormous silence;" Hicok explains, "Let there be light' / is how we see the word, / and in that phrase is the code for language=/sight" ("Mute" 43-6). Poetry is able to straddle the line between articulation and silence. It bridges the gap between before and after, and can both reawaken

the past and erase it. Past and present and public and private overlap. Hicok calls out to the reader:

Come with me from being over here to being over there,
from this second to that second. What countries
they are, the seconds, what rooms of people
being alive in them and then dead in them.
The clocks of flowers rise, it's April
and yellow and these seconds are an autopsy
of this word,

suddenly. ("So I Know" 35-42)

Each of these eight poems becomes an autopsy, not just of the speed with which everything changes, but the process through which mediation between the past and present occurs.

Hicok merges the private and public loss of language:

When I thought of life
as a race between words
for empty and words for full,

I was at the end of this poem. ("Life" 39-42)

The paradox cannot be resolved. Despite the inevitability of reconciling these two disparate notions, Hicok attempts to restore meaning to language and language to meaning. Hicok's poems act as a bridge that allows the reader never to fully comprehend loss, to understand that solace is not easy, to know that words can only provide the process, not the solution.

In response to Sarah Gilbert's question in which she asks how poets are somehow supposed to write in a society that enjoins silence in the aftermath of disaster, Jahan

Ramazani writes, “poets have made of poetry a privileged space for mourning the dead, in resistance to the widespread suppression of grief and mourning in modern Western societies” (1). Hicok is not the only poet to privilege the dead on both a public and private scale when dealing with tragedy and disaster; Yusef Komunyakaa writes about his experiences during the Vietnam War by publicizing the private on a very national, political scale. Gerald Stern, in his poem “Soap,” domesticates the heinous by literally merging a bar of soap with the mass-scale murder of the Holocaust. Stern pulls the reader in impossibly close to bear witness to the commodification of murder, showing how the death of one person is used so casually by another for routine, quotidian purposes. Stern conflates the public and the private by compressing large-scale horror into something so inherently personal as bathing that the reader is almost implicated in the events of the poem. But public tragedy isn’t just the product of violence; Natasha Trethewey surveys the ruined Mississippi coastline after Hurricane Katrina in her work, writing, “You can get there from here, though / there’s no going home” (“Theories of Time and Space” 1-2). Trethewey provides a voice for the survivors and a voice for the witnesses, but argues that all are irrevocably changed. Mark Doty also writes as a witness, writing about the loss of his partner, Wally, to AIDS in 1994 and subsequently becoming representative of a community ravaged by the epidemic. Doty contends, “I think what the poet must do is pay attention to the nature of subjectivity, to the experienced, lived hour, and trust the paradox that if we succeed in representing that, we may approach speaking to our fellow citizens” (4). For Doty, the public is personal first and the poem, by its very nature, makes the private public. For all of these poets, and indeed the entire history of poetry, language allows the poet to navigate between public and private loss by attempting to make the unsayable sayable. While poetry, and really any form of

communication, frequently fails in its attempts to restore order in the aftermath of tragedy, Hicok argues that simply the act of “trying to mean” is all that really matters.

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CHAPTER II

THE POEMS

What is American about this poem?

Does it pulse with the hot sun?
Does it ask, how many ways
can I say the word *suck*?
Does it put its face to the ground,
walk barefoot, eat glass?

When you lean in, it smells like black pepper,
like asphalt, like someone barely legal.
When you lean in, it will lick the bruise
from your neck, and it won't bite down.

Every moment of this poem is domestic.
It will clean your car, your clothes.
It will cook for you every day.
When you leave for work,
it still wears pearls. Its lipstick never smudges.

This poem is a paper doll
and each layer is another kind of naked.
It is discreet, but it will moan for you.

Look, it will undress itself for you.

How It Is

I learned how to have affairs from my mother,
how, before she divorced my father, she just wanted someone
to talk to. How she had three kids and wanted to get out of the house.
How it wasn't about love, how it rarely is.
How knowing yourself is knowing your body.
How she still wanted to know that she was beautiful,
that she could walk into any room,
that she could have anything.

But here's what I want: I want drinks. I want absinthe
on my tongue, sugar on my wrist. I want dark eyes
that you could fall in. I want to wear little black dresses,
and I want them to be cheap. I want to walk barefoot
in your house. I want to follow you to Ireland,
to kiss you on the mouth, to know where your silverware is
because I want it easy. I want coffee every morning,
and I want you to get it for me. I want to go to the antiques mall
on 3rd street to buy oriental rugs, shadeless lamps,
ceramic birds. I want to decorate my own house,
but I want your nightstand when I take off my necklace.
I want you to call me every day. I want you to stop smoking,
but not because it's bad for you. I want you to know
it isn't about you. I just want to be warm.
I want to forget who I came with, who I left with,
your middle name. I want to collect numbers
like that is what I was made for. I want whole nights
missing from my memory, but I want to remember
the feel of your beard against my cheek,
your legs against mine. I want you to call me pretty
like I know it. I want expensive gifts,
and I want to meet your wife. I want you to give
until I tell you to stop.

Every Story Begins With an Apple

Yes, the garden first, but what about the black forest?
What about basket after basket,
red coat, pale hands? What about old women polishing
orb after shiny orb? What about step-mothers?

In fairy tales, I was always the one falling
into thickets and dark lakes. I was perpetually asleep.
Last night, I dreamt I was in your blue house
brushing my hair until it parted beneath your hands,
the table in front of us like a diagram
of how to follow children into the woods,
how to eat their youth one year at a time.

Had you told me a story, it would have been this:
Once upon a time, there was a beautiful woman,
the end. Once upon a time, there was a woman
who killed her step-children, the end. Once upon a time,
there was a woman whose bones were buried beneath
a juniper tree, who birthed birds out of murder,
who still has stories about her.

Here's how the story really ends:
I remember thinking
how happy I was
when you miscarried.
I remember every single one,
your body's failure its own gift.
Once upon a time, there was a woman
who never had children, the end.

But sometimes I wonder what my brother
or sister might be like had they made it out.
Would you reabsorb them into your body?
Would you eat the heart or the apple first?

How to Unmake a Housewife

Write the body first. Sublimate
one need for another:

Vacuum the dirt from the half-potted *mysotis*, forget-me-not.
Dust the vase turned counterclockwise, twice, to face the wall.
Clean the shower, the mirror, your hands.
Become this method of washing and letting out.

In the afternoon, take lunch on the patio.
Eat small sandwiches cut on the bias, the thin membrane of cucumber slipping out.
Drink cocktails with silly names, Cosmo, Diamond Fizz, Pink Lady.
Imagine yourself as a drink. What would your name be?
Gossip behind napkins, behind hands, behind large sunglasses.
Never talk about yourself. Instead, talk about your husband,
your kids, your new toile curtains.

At night, take off your clothes.
Stare at your husband, propped against the hand-carved maple headboard
and imagine yourself as a blond. Undress slowly:
your cotton dress, your jewelry. Kick off your heels last,
first one foot then the other.
Shake your hair, but not too much.
When he takes you, his arms above yours, his chest above yours,
you think about your kitchen, about the press of your ass
on granite countertops, stainless steel, about your sweat in his lunch as you cook.

But imagine, if you will, anything but your children, your house, your junior league.
Imagine walking naked through your backyard, singular, and own it.

Confession for Those Who Don't Know How

When I was young, I swore as loudly as I could. I wore sunglasses even when I slept. I said fuck, shit, goddamn. I said I had tourette's. Had narcolepsy. Had low moral character. Once, I dropped a brick on my foot and saw bone. I broke my right hand three times before I was twelve. I've lost feeling in only the most important organs, but I can still feel my spleen.

I am the master of singular living. I take every story and call it my own: I've lost every job I've ever had. I have one lung. I tracked a guy down to the Ninth Ward just to get my phone back. I've been to every strip club in Mississippi. I went to Catholic school. I've been married. I've been divorced. I've watched tornados tear through downtown Alabama. I've told my child, *everything will be okay*.

Letter to Age Seven

When you forget your homework, lie. Your teacher doesn't care. In several years, she will be arrested for possession, and you will not wonder, "of what?" When you find a note on the floor, rewrite it as if no one exists. When you find a flower near it, crush it. When you fall, everyone will be watching. Laugh first. When you forget things, blame it on the angle of the sun, on age, on a Tuesday. Lying is a game and you can win win win. When Andrew pushes you, push him back. When he falls, stand still. You will go to the office. Wipe your mouth with the back of your hand and look defiant. Arch your eyebrows. Don't smile. In Science class, you will learn that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Test that theory. When the firemen come for the assembly, volunteer. When you buy your lunch, always get the chicken. Learn to dance. Write postcards and slip them into people's mailboxes. "Hello from Wine Country!" Wait by the mailbox. "Greetings from the Big Easy!" When your mother tells you to do something, anything, collect molted leaves, board game money, coin-shaped rocks. Try at least one new thing each day. Your English teacher will tell you to always be becoming something else. You will spend the rest of your life trying this. When you fail, keep talking. When you talk, talk about nothing at all. When your mother comes home, drunk again, stumbling into the half-lit house like some sick moon, be quiet. When your father doesn't come home at all, do nothing.

Collide

1.

My mother told me, once, that they slept in different beds.
That one morning she woke up to find an endless expanse
of cool sheets illuminated by the pale November light,
that she searched, fingers groping, for a distant warmth.
My father had only moved two doors down the hall
into the dusty guest room meant for grandkids.
She said that when she asked him later, over breakfast,
he shrugged, all shoulders. *You snore.* And he got up
and emptied his coffee into the sink and left.
She told me this at my uncle's funeral,
as we stood and leaned in increments over the hole
in the frozen earth, lasting only until it is filled up again
with dirt and something not quite living
but alive in the two people bent into the sun.
She told me that the morning she woke up alone
and looked at the empty space beside her, she wondered,
was anyone ever here at all?

2.

On Sundays, my mother drove to church two towns away.
I sat in the back, a child stuffed into starched dress and tight shoes,
and stared into the blank space of the passenger seat's
smooth faux-leather sliding over the curves of the back.
My father stayed at home in a white tank top and boxers and a robe
so tattered that my mother tried weekly to throw it out,
but he collected it from whatever shadow she had hidden it under
with a wink before shuffling back to the den.
She would sigh, then, and putter around the house,
hands collecting automatically
purse, gloves, coat, and hat,
dragging me out with one last longing look to the door
growing smaller and uneven with our movement.
I could hear the dim sounds of our 14 inch black and white
still tapping in my heart and I held the beat there
with a Bible pressed to my chest, later, in the renovated church,
remodeled until all traces of history had been removed, cleaned,
and covered with whatever was fashionable.
I mouthed the words to my mother's hymns and wished
that I could live Sunday morning
and not sing to it.

3.

In May of 1971, my father left for three months.
I did not know, then, of the peeling away to corners of the house
to hide until morning came and breakfast.
I did not know of the whisper-fights or worse, the silence.
I knew *Tiger Beat* and short shorts and sitting
under the heat of the summer sun until I melted
into California and became noticeable
to no one but Bobby Johnson and his scabby knees
and glasses and I wished that he was like my parents,
absent. I knew Donny Osmond was One Bad Apple
and so was I when I swiped the single from the corner store
and lay on my stomach, legs up and crossed, and
dreamed of marrying him.
When my father came back, he had a beard and a suitcase.
When my father came back, I asked if he had gotten
anything for me on his business trip and he looked at my mother
standing in the doorway and handed me
two bottles of travel-sized shampoo
and a tiny sewing kit.

4.

An almost accident, a near hit, is headlights like a sparrow flying
into your soul and throat and spreading its wings across
the gray folds of your brain blocking everything, everything out until
you are one breath, an inhale, caught in the shaft of light stretching
across the dark road. And it's over then, and you are an exhale waiting
for the false bottom to drop from the ground and plummet you
into pieces of windshield or plastic.
You keep driving and when you get home you pause only for a moment
before opening the door and closing it and
putting down your keys and going to bed.
An accident is a flipped car, wheels spinning.
It is shattered glass reflecting headlights and a swarm of people asking,
Is he okay? Oh, God, Oh God. Someone call an ambulance.
An accident is a man sliding one tire over the other into the
black ice and folding around a tree like cloth until the roots
push out through the back window and try to suck the foreign object
into the wet ground.
An accident is sometimes death and sometimes,
it is calling a woman a widow in her separate room.

5.

It was an old joke that settled like a weight
around my shoulders.

*What do you get
when two ships collide?*

I couldn't remember the punchline, but in
the hollow space of it, that pause before the laugh,
before the *I've heard that 1,000 times before*,
before the folding lines around my father's eyes and
his grin that pulled the skin tight across his jaw
and widened impossibly, he would laugh
after a beat, or two, like a starting bell.

Go, go, go.

It was okay to laugh, required even, and it
wasn't about the joke at all but about
that circle of faces smiling, of hands rising up,
of being able to laugh and waking in it.

The Effects of Speaking Loudly

In the 80s, my family celebrated with an air raid
of hairspray and like a hill-top city, it was ever growing,
an unceasing testament to the power of *bold*.
My mother told me then that she was closer to God this way,
and laughed, mouth opened in a factory of teeth.

When I was eight, I tumbled from a tree like
a planet, limbs curled in and rolling through
branches until I hit the ground.
She pushed the hair from my face and told me
to climb up again.

After one forgotten holiday,
we stood, my mother, aunt, and I, around a
full sink and a stack of dishes. A treaty of soap
swam before us, pulling spoons like sails
across the plasticine water.
Arms buried in and out again,
each time the smooth white circle of a plate rose,
held between slick fingers.
Even then, my mother's eyes were turning,
body turning, slightly, smiling, to my aunt
and spoke. What was it she said then,
speaking over watery ovals and the scent
of oranges? I remember leaning into the coolness
of the porcelain sink and slipping
under the horizon of water until all
noise drowned out. My ears were bruises
in an ocean but when my mother pulled me out,
she held my shoulders and stared at me,
briefly, and her eyes stopped and her hands stopped
and her voice stopped, only for a moment but I
could breathe better than I ever had.

In college, my hair was full of wishes
and I never took her phone calls.
Occasionally a box would come like
a ceremony. I sat it under books,
stacks and stacks of them pushing off
the expectations like water.
In college, she sent me answering machines.
She filled them with messages like an aviary,

her mouth full of birds.
Thirty years passing brought me back here;
Thirty years and a wig and a half-smoked cigarette
compressed against a glass bowl.
It was thirty years and a crumpled napkin,
a tissue, a white flag waving soot and blood.
It was a supine malaise and my mother,
dressed in a floral housecoat and thinness.
It was crossing the threshold
of a red door into a sea of carpet and bad lighting,
to see her back, bent into a shell around itself.
It was quiet like I'd never heard.

Guide to Healthy Living

We move from room to room each night.
We stay spontaneous.

Here's how:

We make new names
and call each other by them.

We become taxidermists in Mississippi,
palm readers in Jackson Square.

We inhale everything:
streetlamps, blood-orange, a darkened bruise.

We smoke, but not too much.
We drink, but not too much.

We are quiet for days.

We find new ways of dying:
car crashes, a lump, one long sleep,

twin heart attacks.
We die each night like this

and are born again,
new tastes in coffee, in fruit and cable movies.

We only read books that start with the letter T.
Tender is the Night. To the Lighthouse.

We dye our hair and stain our hands the color of a cough.
We change our clothes every day.

We grocery shop at night.
We buy food the flavor of a tongue.

We rename each loss invention,
each night a holding in until rebirth,
each name ours, wholly, unconditionally.

Home Remedies

“Concentrate on an object, any object, and know that you will be okay. You will overcome them soon.”
—*Old Wife’s Tale*

You told me once of your mother’s
home remedy for hiccups:

Do not put sugar on your tongue.
Do not swallow breath after breath.

Do not bend or hop or stand upside down.
Simply be distracted.

Be distracted by the slice of the un-dusted fan blade.
by the vintage lamp.

Be distracted by the newspaper dated Sunday, November 5, 1959,
by the six dead flies at the edge of the fireplace.

Be distracted by the slightly crooked oil painting of a blue vase full of marigolds,
by the alphabetical arrangement of books, including *a, and, the*.

Be distracted by the faded paisley curtains curling in the breeze,
by the chair in the center of the room draped in a houndstooth coat.

Be distracted by the open pomegranate full of seeds,
by the towel on the floor, the empty rosewood teacup, the folded cat-eyed glasses.

Do not think about your diaphragm jumping.
Do not think about your body.

Instead, become something else entirely.
Instead, become breathless. Bodiless.

Found Objects

It was 1985 when summer hit.
You stood under the milky sun
and pressed Magnolia buds to my chest.
I was there with my glass eyes and doll's legs.
The river had dried up by then,
but we swam in dirt holes
made by our fathers and uncles
and stared through foggy goggles to the forest.

Your smooth wet face pointed north
like a compass, a sharp-shinned hawk
without his wings. It was our weekly thing
to comb the city for forgotten objects.
On Sunday, with the world asleep,
we walked the streets.
I found a bingo token buried
underneath rotting magazines and coffee filters.
You found a Triton's shell,
a swirl of patterns in pinks and cream.
You saw a hornet's nest and palmed it.
We traveled back with heavy bags
and swept in more: a bright green feather,
a starfish, a broken model airplane.
We brought out wedding photos
and cancelled British stamps
and garden spades.
We made a trail
like torches into darkened trees,
and hid our prizes under rocks and straw.

Here, we were king and queen of rubbish bins,
feathers in our hair. I in a jaguar's mask,
you with a bright blue egg in your hands.

I've Been Reading About Disaster Lately

The half-gone steps, the weeds growing through them,
the stacks of siding and sign posts and brick,

the approach of one shoe after the other and a cap
pulled so low as if it was its own shadow,

the sound of the air just before everything drops,
or rises, the taste of oil, of sea water,

the ability to become wordless.
Everywhere I go I see the missing.

It's getting hard to tell what was here before
and what is new,

the split of it halving *here* from *same*,
that moment when you misjudge the weight,

lift something up and marvel in shock
at its lightness.

Once

Which is to say it always starts with *when*.
When the fire happened, I could only count
in fives: 25, 2005. That January became
a splitting off, the flat spade of the lung
where vessels divide the sum from its parts.

Afterwards, it was hard to tell *when* controlled *what*,
this before *that*. Did the wind blow through you
before or after? Did you know the words pre- or post?
Disaster, it has been said, *creates new language*.

In the wreckage, every fifth word said this:
the end the end the end. Every fifth word said,
your chest is just a way of opening. From above,
it is hard to see rib from flesh, wood from wall.

But once, I stepped through a fissure of ash.
Once, I could burn books by walking backwards.
I could puncture glass with each breath. I could
create whole rooms full of girls undressing themselves
to pure bone.

Every fifth word said,
Once, I could show you a spark
and call it daylight.

Fire Eater

I've always wanted to swallow fire,
to feel the deep ache and burn
on my molars, my tongue,
the snake cavern of my stomach.

I want to inoculate myself to heat,
to divide hell from fear,
or combine them. Heaven is just
the creation of separate.

In a dark field, I will feel the lick of smolder.
I will feel the settling smoke and learn
to breathe with it. From the tree line,
I'll look like I'm rising.

There are 14 Million Diseases in America

and I have every one of them.
The internet tells me it's epilepsy,
the way my pulse stutters, how
my feet move when I dance,

it's selective mutism, the way I catalog
my heart beat for hours, how my breath
catches when you tell me
we are all approaching death.

The internet tells me it's hallucinations,
tells me I'm blind, tells me it's narcolepsy.
The internet tells me I'll die in my sleep,
tells me to hold my breath every day.

The internet tells me it's cancer,
the way my fingernails turn pink
in the cold, the way I cut my eyes,
how I know my body.

Beneath the plane of the skin,
my bones are in rebellion.
My cells divide to make space
for something rising.

This must be how we go to heaven.
The process begins on the inside:
Every part of me hollows out
to become weightless.

Plate Tectonics

Driving back from Moran, WY, I asked you why so many towns
are named after mountains: Olympia, Denali, Columbia.
I wanted to know how the earth pushed against itself
and collapsed outwards. I wanted to know how words become cliffs,
how to stand them end to end to form a fishtailed range.

You said, dormant is just a matter of degrees. The earth is constant
motion. We can't wait for what is already happening.

You said, your pulse is its own mountain. Your voice peaks.
The way you sign your name contains its own accent.
Geographically, I can find you anywhere.

You said, words mirror the natural world,
the rise and fall of each careful letter, each syllable.

You said, the only difference between a mountain and a volcano
is what's underneath. The ocean floor sinks every time,
pushes 6,000 years of rock out in a slow seep, moves
aside for what is rising.

You said, think about it,
the force of your teeth through your gums,
the mechanism for breathing out.
Everything is always about to erupt.

Postcard to Centralia, PA

Centralia is a borough and ghost town in Columbia County, Pennsylvania, United States. Its population has dwindled from over 1,000 residents in 1981 to 10 in 2010, as a result of a mine fire burning beneath the borough since 1962.

When you say there is a fire burning in you,
you mean it. You show the years on your face.
You yawn carbon dioxide. You cough coal.
You have the ability to swallow cities whole,
but you don't abuse it. When you asked
for company, we gave it. We stayed
by your smoky hills. We stayed
in your churches, your meeting halls.
We liked it warm. We didn't buy coats.
But when you stretched your jaw,
we kept our children from you. Like rabbits,
we reemerged from your dark holes.
When you say you wish we were here,
you sign your name in the dwindling
numbers of your zip code, your population.

Poem Addressed to the Gulf Oil Spill, 2010

When they call you marsh-footed,
you raise your skirts above the trees.
This is too easy, to skim from one bank
to the next. The tar-soaked birds call you
by more than your name. You are
submersible, a tide of gas and water
in the subsea. Below yourself,
you are looming. You are a spigot
of moonlight. You are encroaching,
kidney-like, ready to balance out everything.
The news calls you a *transocean cemetery*.
You, who count what you kill.
You, who burn for days.

Designation

The earliest mountains discovered
in the Rockies were products
of promiscuous thinking.

The desert and fields
smelled like ginger, like blackberry.
The river could eat anything.

Red rock arched into antlers,
into long dappled bodies.
Breathing started from the ground up.

Earth, I am getting back to you,
every day a moving closer.
Earth, I will call you by your given name.

Un-Rapture

May 21, 2011

The division between
pleasure and salvation
is the distance of a communion line.

Do you feel the flesh in your mouth as a gift?

On Hegenberger Street,
signs discard themselves empty-handed.

When you go home,
do you drink your wine or celebrate it
or both?

Disguise

Take the skin of the Other.
Swallow down the fur
to warm your hands, your lips.
Part the hair on your arms
all in one direction, then the other.

Dissect all your food with your fingers.
Feel the meat in your nails, feel
the whole, clean bone.

Scissor up your rib cage
and pull out a name.
Call yourself *Wolf*.

This is how you stay speechless.
When you open your mouth,
show your teeth.

Dark Tide

1.

Always look for a landing-place like an island,
verdant and so hot you feel your bones
shiver. Here, you can move from shore
to shore, move from country
to country, disembark yourself from your tongue.
Here is always a coming to.
Edward, delivery is only a method of removal.
Keep the gold to yourself. Study your teeth in the shine
and gleam. You are alone even when you are not
alone. You have a bird like the setting sun,
like an inhalation, collapsing in on itself every dawn.
When you cross yourself before you wash your hands,
your face, you loosen each rib
until your whole body dissolves.
This is what keeps you awake at night,
not the sound of fire, not the rocking boat.
Oh Edward, always enter
with your hands out. Always raise the flag
like a peony last. Always center yourself
in the middle of the ocean. Let your beard guide you.

2.

Blackbeard, you give yourself your own name,
and with it, erase your own history.
It is commonly believed you were a sailor
or schoolteacher. Did you teach yourself to read
and write? Did you bite gold with your teeth
as a baby? When you arrived in Jamaica
you were a changed man. You were all voice,
all hands and leather. You must have tasted
like the sun itself. Here is what you learned first:
Attach the shackle to the clew. Unfurl
the mainsheet. Pull the halyard and tighten.
Raise the mast, push the boom out into the wind,
turn whichever way the wind blows.
Move away from the horizon each day.
When you rose through the ranks,
you left Edward behind you.

“I Can’t Believe He’s Back On the Horse”

I have heard this all my life.
Not the surprise, but the even call

to move on or up or over. In America,
whole phrases are lifted and re-inflected.

The shock comes from the laugh,
the half-dead bird, the weight of the empty rind.

The line between what is literal and what is
a re-appropriation is the early sun

pulled into another kind of setting.
We emphasize the separation: *barely-legal*,

like new, *near miss*. Milk becomes milk,
heat becomes fire. Here, the horse

is the dark room. Here, the horse
is the miles and miles to go.

Dissemination

In the summer, only buy fruit.
This is how the list goes:

Buy Apples, buy Oranges,
buy Strawberries.

Buy Pomegranates, Peaches
so soft the skin rolls over the windblown
pit, the blood-orange flesh.

Buy Tangerines,
Kumquat, Kiwi, Pummelos cut open
until they're speechless.

Buy something smaller than
your thumb and forefinger making a circle,
buy something round.

Buy only what you can carry
in one hand. Buy a watermelon
and fill it with holes. Drink from it.

In the broadest terms, fruit is
defined by the seeds.
Juice divides them into two camps.
Which was born from a flower?
Which is served raw?

Speak

1.

The processes for breathing and speaking both originate in the larynx. This is what it means to live, to speak between inhales, as if the air itself might break apart into noiseless molecules. Splendid lungs, the space between syllable and sound shrinks every day.

2.

To anyone who has ever said the voice is its own instrument, you're wrong.

3.

The Indian Ringneck Parakeet is known for its clear speaking voice. Like children, these birds learn through osmosis: the surrounding environment eventually lends its own accent. In the South, our birds move as slowly as we do.

4.

Mute, by definition, lacks the power of speech, lacks the ability to sort itself by rarity. Mute is a pack of dogs.

5.

Watching Alfred Hitchcock one night, you told me about a doll in the shape of a duchess, a mouth in the shape of a box. How we always put things in boxes before taking them out, methodically. How we open the throats of dogs and rearrange them into something like my own tongue. How we always try to make everything human.

Animal Noises

“Genetically modified cows produce ‘human milk.’”

The pause before *human* is an interstice,
defined as *a space that intervenes*.
When you describe language, you say it is
the separation between us and animals.
That order comes before everything else.

But who decided subject comes before verb,
I before *write*, *we* before *speak*?
Who decided our tongues were for talking
in that dark cave ages ago? Who loosened
their lips to say *fire*?

What we are is a series of sounds.
Meaning is what happens in between
the intervention of *we* and *are*,
between *series* and *sound*.
Here, the space is for breeding.

Picture this: a cow, a hundred cows,
the empty field at night, the field
at night spotted with black or white
or both. From here, it looks like
a milkmaid. From here, it’s
apostrophe.

Waning

1.

Astronomers measure the length of days
by the tilt of the earth. The light spills in
at an angle. When the sun begins to rise,
the cycle begins all over again.

2.

Natural hunters are built with mirrors in their eyes.
The *apetum lucidum* collects light like a razing tongue:
coppery feathers, dead weight.

3.

Birds tell time by their wings. The bend
and curve of the wire calls for dusk.

4.

The sun led to the snake,
led to a grove of the deepest stone.

5.

In Indonesia, lying on train tracks
cures cancer. The process is simple:
bow your back to the wood.
Touch each hand, each foot to the rails.
Line yourself up with the horizon
until the length of you
creates its own perspective.
The shock, I've been told,
restarts your blood. It stops strokes.
The difference between well
and better is just a matter of degrees.

6.

Animals that cannot see their own reflections
see, instead, clawed feet, sea grass, midnight.

7.

Nyctophobia is only common after the age of two.
Before then, the film of night is like the womb.
Every evening is a returning to.

8.

The suggestion of light comes before anything else.
Standing on slick sand, an island, a thousand islands
stretching from the shore. In the center,
a lantern wavers. Do we define the shore
or the ocean first?

Cardinalis

“A genus of cardinal in the family carinalidee.”

When cardinals sleep at night,
they dream of cicadas and a plunge of red.
They dream of a song flitting like fireflies
pinpricking patterns into the darkness.

When cardinals sleep at night,
they dream of flying.
They are clouds, are summer rain,
are waiting on a thin-stretched line somewhere,
a sort of evening settling.
They are all straw and all air,
made of paper and nothingness.

When cardinals sleep at night,
they are all flightless orders.

When cardinals sleep at night,
they simply are a medley of feathers and bone,
a system of stymied breath
becoming air, becoming breath.
They are flattened rib, all muscle, all balance.

When cardinals sleep at night,
they are all just a differing shade of red.

Somnambulisma

*“Without this bird that never settles, without
Its generations that follow in their universe,
The ocean, falling and falling on the hollow shore,
Would be a geography of the dead.”*
-Wallace Stevens

You collect rabbits in your sleep,
and we could not tell one white hand from white fur,

from one red eye, one breakable neck slick with blue-black blood,
one quivering pulse like an arrow dissecting muscle and flesh.

You pet it with your cheek, your fingernails,
your hair. You only wake when it suicides into the brackish night.

You gather stray cats. You name them
Airplane, Elephant, Look Out.

You let them crawl through the nave of your window
before you scoop them up and scatter them through the house like candles.

You catalog bats, and mice, and spiders.
You accrue animals the same color as your sheets,

your veiny eyelids, your favorite sweater dress.
We find bird bodies in cereal boxes, coffee cups, in plastic ziplock bags.

We find feathers like hailstones fingerprinting the laminate.
When you wake up, you say you’ve been collecting your nightmares.

You’ve recaptured the wild. You’ve discovered night vision.
When you wake up, you look at your palm and see in it one small skeleton
and no flesh.

Recipe for Fortune-Telling

If you hold the spleen of a goat in your palm
and cup it against the curve of your ear,
you can hear the name of the man you are going to marry.

Love is about getting your hands dirty.

I cut the tongue out first.
In a half-cleaned kitchen, I cooked it in olive oil
and cloves. I could taste clenched jaw, dead grass.

I sliced from chin to chest all the way down.
I put one hand and then the other into the open cavity
and pulled out the stomach, divided the lungs

from the sternum, from the heart.
Felt the weight of breathing on my hands.
I discarded everything but the core of me,

tipped the heart until each ventricle was clear.
Bent down. Tongued the aorta.
Licked the blood from my fingertips for a happy life.

Sea-Hare

The best kind of secret is transformation.
Go underground three times.
Sink yourself to the sea.
When you wake, fin up to the dirt
like an egg, bloom into the grapefruit
skin of salmon. This place
will breathe for you.

Rabbit, you have scales in your eyes.
You wear fox in your teeth.
Rabbit, when will you make the world?

Poem in Which I Imagine Myself into a Picture Book

I will always be the one
with my hands up. I will be the girl
covered in scales, with the thick tail,
with leaves in my hair. I will be the one saying,
come here, have a drink, stay the night.
When the sun goes down, I will be under
the bed. I will be rowing a boat to a distant island.
I will be waiting to see you
one last time.

Girl with the Wild Hair

She walks across a flat-tongue of dust,
my sister, in a bold, black-striped shirt.
She is barefoot and her toes, brown with dirt,
shift up into tan legs and a thin slip skirt.
She wipes her hands all along the sides
of her hips, and her hair brushes
over her small shoulders as she ducks
into the small wooden chicken coop.

Here, my mother tells me, is the country.
Here fills the eyes up.
I think of these words as she reappears
with a hen in her hands,
all red and orange in the light,
and for a moment,
she stands in a spot of sun long enough
for me to remember her this way:

She is still bracing her body against the wind,
against the flapping wings and an armful of feathers.
She is still gesturing with a sharp elbow
for me to go into the coop to retrieve
the one small egg nestled on a blanket of hay.
And me, I am sliding the delicate shape
like a smooth stone into my pocket even now.

When I came out of the coop,
the sun was blond on the ground,
and my sister was turned away from me,
looking out to the main house
where breakfast would be ready soon,
where my mother was at the sink
washing her hands, pulling out dishes,
where my father, already in the barn
with the cows and goats, was bringing home milk.
Or she could be looking beyond even that,
to the hills that stretched half a mile
before sloping in creek bed
or the trees dotting the horizon.
The bird was still in her arms
as if surveying this new light.

Here, my mother tells me, you can never starve.
Here everything slows just before the moment
we turn back against the sun, return to the coop
or the house or the hill.
Here is always just about to happen.

Frida

I stand between beach and swirling green,
my feet boats with full sails sagging.
This is where I always am:
straddling the two planes that divide the earth.
The blue sheet of shifting waves and
the gray grit wrapped over the tight globe.
Over this, the moon is a distant bus,
a headlight piercing holes into our hearts' hollow space.

It was 1925 when an accident
caught me between twisted metal, auburn sky
and stabbed me clean through.

It was 1925 when my second life began,
my knees pressed against abdomen and metal.

I carry with me a knot of pink scars
and specters of empty clothes
that grow bigger with each passing year,
small dress and then plaid skirts, white shirts.
They are my ghost child with one hand
reaching to brush my sleeves,
touching tan skin and my own
paginas en blanco, my lost children.

I was an empty glove ballooned,
filled by the white hands of doctors
bending over the puzzle of my bones.
I have been rebuilt in my old image.

But this morning was a flood of sun,
of faded blue vans, of taxis,
of dirt-caked buses rambling over
dusty hills past crumbling terminals
brimming with seats.
I watch hot sand stretch on for miles
through small windows buried under rosaries.
I tough my own, my Catholic piety.
A series of thin limbs
under small skirts, thick cut cloth,
I ride a flag-striped car to the horizon.

Hunters in the Snow

after Brueghel

I am one of the nine men in wool caps
standing on the white, yawning hill.
We are flanked by dogs with rabbit ears
and dusty coats. They are men's muscle—
They wait ready for us to give them
the vowels needed for dogs to howl.

I turn and I turn as if into the teal treetops
and red roofs. I'm bent against the wind
as we cross the milky, cataract eye of ice.
I'm always paused just in the moment
before sinking into the soft snow.

The afternoon coat covers us—
we, who walk among the devil's dogs.
We, who have thirteen birds between us,
each strung into a sanguinary picture of flight.
Here, between the sky and the ground,
is a battlefield. Here is teeth and feathers,
growls and shrieks. Wings and throats are equal
when there is too much traffic for conversation.

I am forty and full-bearded,
but I have only one dog and one broken bird.
I am forty and hungry.

But am turning back and already I see
a hundred crowded houses
with small wood windows, splintered fences.
Curls of smoke rise like ether from brown brick.
My wife, my sister, these women of ours,
burn furniture black behind us—
a signal fire for dusk.

We know our way back here.
Back to our muslin wives,
back to plates and bowls and tables,
back to our cabins stacked with firewood.
Over us, the cloudless sky darkens.

The mountains rise.
It is too soon for stopping.

Things You Need In Order to Stay Happy

I can only tell you what you don't need,
a handful of bills, a darkroom.

It isn't so much that photographs capture your soul,
as you've already lost it. Picture this,
a girl half-turned, the long line of her body,
the relief of rock at her back. This could be taken anywhere.

Off-camera, she has a list of all the men she's slept with
in the last five years. She has bruises on her hips
and a baby. This is what it's like to remember smoke on your tongue,
your parents' couch, everybody's name.

Off-camera, she will leave a message on your phone
asking you to pick her up, to take her anywhere, who you are again.

How to Write a Poem

First, search for inspiration in the pitted skin
of an avocado, the threads in your sheets.

Pick up a newspaper, a pen, a grocery list:
buy lemons, buy charcoal, buy a muzzle, a radish, a goat.

Stare for hours at your feet, your hair,
your crooked floors.

Look at your most recent internet searches:
apocalypse, bikinis, how to make iced-tea.

Ask a neighbor for a typewriter
so you can hear the sound of working.

Find a doormat to lie on.
Sit in the fireplace.

Walk into every room backwards.
Carry salt wherever you go.

Try to write a ghazal,
a sonnet, a resumé. Try anything else.

But write at least about lace islands
off the coast of Venice.

Write at least about Neil Barrett's
drunken hair.

Write about how a duck
traps air in its feathers and floats.

Write about lesbians,
please, write anything about lesbians.

Write about just how many steps
it takes to walk from one roof to another.

Write about the nine bodies
found frozen in the Ural Mountains.

Write about how you can taste your heart
on your molars every single day.

Write about the smell of pumpkin
or pomegranate or burned plastic.

Write about every person you see
in the street, but only on Tuesdays.

Write about a collection of anything:
conch shells, fake teeth.

Write about every postcard you've ever received
from an unpronounceable place.

Write at least about how to open a book,
to point to each word, to tell the future.

Paternoster

Night is not universal;
it moves horizontally.

For instance,
in New Delhi, the moon is rust-heavy,
a recitation of beads. One weight leads
to the next.

It is easy to define alignment
as an act of arrangement, the moment
before everything goes dark
or rises up.