

BENTON, EMILY A., M.F.A. Expedition. (2011)
Directed by Stuart Dischell. 44 pp.

As the characters in these poems travel, in search of a sense of purpose or belonging, so I invoke the reader by inhabiting voices and consciousnesses through the means of dramatic monologue and the epistolary form.

EXPEDITION

by

Emily A. Benton

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2011

Approved by

Committee Chair

© 2011 by Emily A. Benton

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my colleagues and teachers in the UNCG MFA Writing Program for their overwhelming support—especially Stuart Dischell, David Roderick, Jim Clark, and Terry L. Kennedy—and to my fellow graduating poets and fiction writers. All of you have taught me so much. Additional thanks to Cathy Smith Bowers, Julie Funderburk, Alan Shapiro, Rachel Marie Patterson, J. Eric Smith, Claudia McQuiston, and Lauren J. Moseley for their encouragement and close readings of my work.

I'm also grateful to the following literary magazines for which some of these poems, or parts of these poems, have been accepted for publication: *Kestrel: A Journal of Literature & Art*, *Cellpoems*, and *Marco Polo*.

Thank you to my family for their support of my transient decisions, and to Taryn Rimland for hosting me in her home in Italy, where many of these poems began. Special thanks also to Casey Clark, who has exchanged epistles with me for over a decade, and to my favorite stateside traveling companion, Spencer Kealamakia.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I	1
Spider Psalm	2
Dear Traveler	3
Cathedrals	4
Abroad.....	5
Take What You Need.....	6
End of Summer	7
The Prodigal Daughter Phones	8
Explorer's Inventory	9
Letter to Zenobia <i>Dendera, 1828</i>	10
Ippolito Rossellini Reaches the Temple of Ramses II.....	11
Letter to Zenobia <i>Nile Valley, 1828</i>	12
Letter to Zenobia <i>Valley of the Kings, 1828</i>	13
Postcard.....	14
Dear Passenger.....	15
Along the Via dell' Amore	16
What Are You?	17
Dear Visitor.....	18

II.....	19
The Farmer Before the Face of the Whole Earth Darkened	20
Frogs	21
The Sorcerer’s Doubt.....	22
Osiris	23
The Wife’s Apology	24
When the Farmer’s Land was Corrupted by Reason	25
Let My Little One Also Go with Me	26
III.....	27
Excavating with My Sister in the Backwoods of Our Memory.....	28
We Are Watching You.....	29
Ghost Walk	30
Unquenchable	31
Fire Ghazal.....	32
Memorandum of Understanding Relating to the Abduction on November 5, 1975 in Snowflake, Arizona.....	33
In the Language of Tongues	36
Palingenesis.....	38
Tattooed	39
Elegy for Snippy the Horse.....	40
Sasquatch in Love	42
Retirement.....	43

Tradition.....44

I.

SPIDER PSALM

O web, web that has held me
above ground
and so high for so many days.

You who let me balance between
rooftop and trees, let me dance and swing
and drop dive like the falcon.

I can pack you up and carry you with me.
My web of pattern, web of renewal.

For you have harvested when I was weak.
For you have seen my young
blossom like a balloon to the wind.

Web of beauty, web of destruction.

You who did not judge me
or what I brought home with me
to eat or to bed.

Web that held my dead, web that dropped them.

Without you, I would die.
I would be meat for lizard, frog, or bird.

Web that I leave behind,
flagging and frayed.

DEAR TRAVELER

the slow train took you north
through blue hillsides shells
littering the tracks as I drove south
as the road would take me until
seasons changed in the course
of a few hours after your arrival
you were walking on salted streets
a blizzard had hit when I was counting
gulls a hundred maybe two over
a landfill past the panhandle pinnate
leaves tickled the highway like
whiskers branches a blur you measured
the temperatures between us a vane
spun a wind I could have held to
my ear so far to go to feel it did I
mention I think it might be better
here I'm not sure can you hear the rain

CATHEDRALS

I was taught to think them too extravagant with their gold upon marble, silver and gold

Which is why, after the tour, I told the Catholic boy as much—thinking I was right,
evangelical, true—

Then he felt up the girl on the ride back to our hotel—the girl I envied, the one whose
hair curled like spiraled staircases, who was beautiful as the first rubied and engraved
goblet, as candles lit around St. Theresa

Later, I wept under the naked women colored in fresco—those dragged to hell on ceiling,
rising above all men, including the ones who painted them

I wanted such sanctity—sprawled out on walls or canvas, adorned or undressed, receiving
the prayers of the damned—

Who was to say I couldn't have parts of both worlds?

To be bare, baroque—

ABROAD

The yellow flowers follow the sun's usual arc by the hour. Each time we pass them,
they face away from us.

I'm taking a tour with a group from the army base
a few miles up the road.

A man on leave already got drunk at the wine tasting, and his wife posed
in every picture with a Florentine straw hat
until it sailed from her head down a row of vines.

Before coming here, I had tired
of the view from my back porch, where small animals spend the day
reorganizing their nests—hauling ivy patches between
their teeth, dropping old leaves like teens
flicking cigarettes. Nowhere else to go,
they do what we always do: spruce up and clean,
hang new pictures to the wall.

I've moved the same print with me
through four apartments.

The Arles sky matches my four-piece
dining set, and there, too, are hints of dotted vineyards
in the ceramic wine stopper now wrapped in tissue.

I've heard Tuscan farmers
sew a new breed of stems to the used rootstocks
to avoid a skipped harvest, and some have replaced old olive
groves with sunflowers—the seeds brought over
from the Americas, centuries ago, in wetted parchment—to make oil
during the season of Lent.

At home,
my oil paints dry in their metal tubes; the easel leans, folded in a corner.

Ten years: The unpacked boxes
are just one state over, the squirrels no different
than those my father used to shoot
off the bird feeder.

When I get back, I'll have
learned only the youngest blooms turn where the sun tells them, and the older
ones choose to face the same direction.

But here—the landscape breathes like a sea before a storm,
and I am no part of it
any more than the soldier who will return
to his desert tent, or the painter
who worked from memory inside a locked room.

TAKE WHAT YOU NEED

Here are the weeds
Under the mailbox

The wing of the cicada
Bound to a stiff branch

After the body departed
What once was

The first movement
Of longing

Of boxes unpacked
Brooms & feathers

The books stacked
Beside the ash

The embers
In the fireplace

Tonight I find you
Left a wine stain

On the carpet rug
Now rolled beside

The tin trashcan
And then there's

The dust on
The ribbed lampshade

Where a moth visits
Until the moon is

The brightest
Light in this house

END OF SUMMER

Somewhere, I trust you
unearth life from your weathered bones,
as here the tomatoes go on

a week without water—
clay pots anchoring their drying stems
that still grow weighted blossoms.

Idle and ground-driven,
I've cast a hard glance in their direction—
same as the look you gave me

in a patient room, your eyes blue
as the curtains. Your veins
pulsed another story, lies

about medications. Doctors found no reason
to keep you in, and I saw the truth I wanted
in your thunderous face.

But now, I envy the buzzard
in her hovering state—She has
the better view of what survives,

circling from half-flight, and my sight
settles into the nets of August:
green canopies drown the skyline

until I can't retrace it. Beneath them: the streets
where I searched, not knowing where you'd rest.
The slamming of the storm door

was all I'd ever hear. But tomorrow,
I'll bury your key
under the Brandywine root.

I'll leave out vessels to catch rain.
If you think of me, look skyward:
There's the plane I'll take.

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER PHONES

We've had our share of rain here.
And I confirm the same.

The weather travels fast across
our separate, windy lanes.

EXPLORER'S INVENTORY

A deck of cards to pass
long nights in the cabin's
wake. The blanket to hold

you when no visible star
shines above. A spoon
for supper, a knife

nestled into its ankle
strap. Your tarp folded
like a handkerchief

until the hammering rain.
Matches for light,
but when they lose

their heads, a bundle
of toothpicks to spark
with steel and flint.

The compass clipped
to a clock chain: your
pocket's little anchor.

Quill, ink, and parchment
should you map
your way back home.

LETTER TO ZENOBIA

Denderah, 1828

I am restless; the rattle of pans
and prayers tick away the night.
I miss the lull of the Arno outside
our window, the symmetry
of your brushstrokes by the bed.
Today, I found your lock nestled
in the spine of my book. Also,
a stale rind stowed in the bottom
of my knapsack. How could
you know what elation this brings
me? You sit knitting by a candle—
our children: a small empire
at your feet. Do not lower
your shoulders—this image will be
my banner upon return. Tomorrow,
we ride camels to where
warriors are carved like the saints
on basilicas, to where women who
now stir pots in the streets once sat
painted and perfumed on thrones.

IPPOLITO ROSELLINI REACHES THE TEMPLE OF RAMSES II
“*Giornale della Spedizione,*” November 1828

We laid our clothes like alms before the portico—
a jagged rock-mouth hidden in the cliffs, thin as the sail
that carried us to Alexandria. Everywhere, sand
cascaded like water. The Africans waited with shovels
ready, and watched our skin blend into the dunes—
our footsteps already erased on the horizon. They gave us fire
made from camel *dum*, tied ropes around our bare waists,
for we were the only ones willing to enter—no fear of being trapped
as we were already trapped by our own fascinations. My heart
was like a child breaking into a wine cellar. Champollion led me
through the narrow, and I followed him as I had his writings
when I was a student in Pisa. Inside, our lights went only a few meters,
and heat licked our foreheads; my papers curled. We stepped
farther down, and I rested my hand on a rock, then another, until
one became a pillar, then four, and we found ourselves
in a vast room—a room bigger than the Duomo. Figures appeared
on the walls: their small bodies like mine in the shadow
of Champollion’s lantern. I moved closer, mouth open. His eye
caught mine, and the eyes of those painted. There we stood:
almost naked, and I was tempted to drop my torch, to return to
the beginnings of creation, to start with nothing but that darkness.

LETTER TO ZENOBIA

Nile Valley, 1828

We traveled up the Nile, our thin boats
cradled between mimosa-coated banks.

Not since I was a country boy
had I seen such luxurious green.

Where there were villages, we stopped
for new guides and traded goods.

Children flocked: touching our hems
with curiosity, some begging for coins.

Their parents distrusted our hands
until we explained our purpose:

to recover what was lost, to document
what was born out of this river.

May our children never know such
sordid desperation.

Take them to the *orto*, let them pick
at the vines my father planted.

Tell them to watch for me
around the bend.

I will greet them with riches:
stories from our forgotten homeland.

LETTER TO ZENOBIA

Valley of the Kings, 1828

I've been tracing the figures of Seti
and Hathor from a tomb inside Thebes:

The goddess greets the pharaoh,
donning her headdress of horns

and a crown of eighteen serpents—
symbols of her wisdom and fertility.

Side-by-side the two face each other
at no great distance. All these years,

and still a slight charm in the turn
of her archaic mouth—Think of

Aphrodite's inside the Uffizi. Tenderly,
she takes Seti's hand as he looks

at her with the sadness of knowing
his kingdom is weak—The copper

in his mines is dwindling, a famine
looms as the river recedes. To console him,

Hathor offers him her turquoise necklace—
it plays a song guaranteeing his protection

and prosperity. I think of you and hear
your lullabies across the sea. I wear them

daily, close to my chest. My love, I hope you
know there is no myth in our exchange.

POSTCARD

On your first visit to Italy, sixteen and starved
for attention, the men would drop their forks

and grab a bottle of whatever they were
drinking to follow your swishing ponytail

down the cobbled streets, calling *Bella!*
Bella! and you would blush, and sometimes loop

an elbow into a friend's, your head bent toward
shoes laced tightly around your feet,

walking away quickly as you could, all the while
smiling, sure they would still be there

when you were ready to turn.

DEAR PASSENGER

winds teased the wheels but I steadied through
the lanes with gloved fingers you held
a map and checked numbers against metal signs
like lottery tickets it was our game a scavenger
hunt if we could just make it there
radio couples spoke a survival manual for
seven-year itches pitfalls train wrecks
all of them but we remained strapped in a few
hours arrested in the yellow lines and pine
trees guarded the shoulders and medians I don't
know what it was that made you unbuckle
your teeth like glass against my chin turned
toward traffic then an exit opened finally
you said but we could have kept going until
we reached a coast what's a destination anyway

ALONG THE VIA DELL' AMORE

The iron gates and metal nets
covered with small locks
constitute handheld journeys—
But with no space left

to tie a new link, couples turn
to cacti jutting from cliffside
rocks: They remove thorns,
pull blades from breast pockets,

mark unions into the calloused
leaves facing a roaring seaside—
Even if they could outlast
a season worn to rain and wind,

I'm fine leaning against
the handrail, not attached to
a living thing, unable to shackle
another lock into the rust—

WHAT ARE YOU?

For we have found ourselves on the topic of lineage.
For he has asked.

My answer is obvious, but I turn over the ways
I could make it as interesting as his.

For he will say he was born out of the Pacific.
For my mother will call him *exotic* in later conversations.

For she told me we're Irish, as he could guess
from the way I'm downing these whiskey and tonics.

Admitting this makes my pale cheeks redden.
For blushing is a sign of good circulation.

I've also been standing on this shadeless patio for over an hour.
I wish the tan on my knees

was from the Mediterranean, for I spent
the summer there, on the coasts of France and Italy.

But my ancestors are not Mediterranean.
Rather, I've heard they're from further inland,

in Holland, but that could be wishful thinking.
What are you?

I am no one. I am lost.
For I am a colony of the untaken.

Move closer: Find me shaken, skinned by the idea
that I am worth tracking beyond

these years, beyond this moment.
Remember me here.

DEAR VISITOR

there was the dry spell
then rains that filled the gutters
until they overflowed
with too much water always
too much or nothing at all
that was the summer before you
moved here and asked about
the weather I wanted to tell
you something constant like the geese
carving across the sky but even
they seemed lost one night we were
sweating a month later shivering
in nineteen degrees you said is this
what we should expect from now
on the next morning you left it started
to snow and I said it wouldn't cover
the grass but when you came knocking
in the evening it was inches stuck
to the roof your shoes the sidewalks
and I was so happy you stayed
long enough to see it all
land and shift and disappear

II.

THE FARMER BEFORE THE FACE OF THE WHOLE EARTH DARKENED

Exodus 10:15

I'd spent the night awake, my knuckles white
around poles as our tents and cables shook under

fists of rain and lightning soared from black clouds
loud as jackals, muffling my children's screams until

morning when the hailstorm finally ceased. My wheat
bowed, my corn bent. Ice melted in their ranks.

I gathered what was left with my son, taking sickles
and raking away the ears, pummeling with pestles,

winnowing up the chaff, and ground grain to flour
for bread, leaving what bushels remained out to dry.

We traded our small yield for an adz, new batteries,
and flashlights. My wife reminded me we had more

mouths this year than last. I counted our seeds, the days
left in season, and knew soon the beer and barley

wouldn't be enough. Then a wind stirred up from the east.
First, I heard what sounded like a propeller then saw

a dark mass moving on the horizon. One grasshopper
landed beside me, then another on top of my boot. I reached

down, tore off its wings, gave the rest to my son to eat.

FROGS

As a girl I'd scoop them out of garden
pots and cage their bodies
with my hands. I'd tried to save them
from the drying hour, from skin
coarse as yesterday's bread.

But after the river turned red,
how they fell and jumped
on my roof—how they banged
like beggars at my door.

The rain that night was so thick
I dreamed the water rose
into my bed. From my chest,
an army's drum beat.

The radio streamed the same static
report, so I prayed to Heket
for protection, for my son's
health under her care.

I held him close—his green
eyes shiny as the Pharaoh's
ring beside the oil lamp.

At dawn, we found petals scattered
in the courtyard, dented cars, and a filthy
stench from the leaping, now dead.

Again and again, I had hoped
he'd see the lotuses bloom.

THE SORCERER'S DOUBT

When the man's staff turned into a serpent, I showed Pharaoh I could do the same. Choosing a black asp to battle a cobra was my only mistake. And after they claimed the water changed to blood, I laughed. I thought it was nothing, just the usual clay. But when Pharaoh spat out his wine a second and third time, I knew we had more than poisoned grapes. Our wooden buckets and stone jars ran dry, fish bounded the banks—something had to be done. I spent hours whispering spells, burning incense, swirling tea leaves in cups. I wished them gone. Still, Pharaoh stormed the temple, looking for answers. To please my king, I made a bigger rod, gave its neck a scarab amulet, and pointed it skyward, toward Sopdet—the goddess in his favor. But when the stars mapped a famine, I bit my tongue.

OSIRIS

O verdant god
born of the sky

son of the earth
giver of crops

to you we send
our prayers

clouded in dust
our eyes wet

the arid soil
what did we do

to lose so much
built by hand

palaces & temples
fields guarded

by your crook & flail
our brood sprouted

from such wealth
we call out to you

benign protector
shepherd of our land

O silent lord
idol of youth

king of the living
judge of the dead

THE WIFE'S APOLOGY

The flies are worse than gnats, worse than frogs.
The switch doesn't keep them away, nor do

my locked doors. I toss in sleep, then stomp
through the palace court—not that anyone is listening.

The sorcerers are worthless; they simply hold up
their mirrors and wait. And my love? He never

budges—he just watches from his hushed perch.
One afternoon, I slammed all the cabinets, looking

for our prescription ointment. When I couldn't
find it, he took a hammer to my mother's china plates,

stepped right over them like nothing had happened,
and called for his slave. After that, I changed tactics.

I bought new lingerie. I even poured perfume into my hair,
prepared to lower my nightly crowns, but he ignored me

to watch the news, then fell asleep with the TV on.
Over breakfast, we discussed the growing swarm,

and I suggested we let our slaves go—to *give us some*
peace, I'd said—but then he rattled my bracelets;

he bruised my arm. Some women worry about pleasing
their husbands, but I've got bigger things on my mind.

I can't help but hear through the repeating buzz
a chanting of: *forsaken, forsaken*. And if I can't produce

another son, I fear it won't be long until we're all
underground. Sorry kingdom, I've done all I can do,

and there isn't a facet of his anger that I can subdue.
The flies are our omens—we're not like this holy Moses.

WHEN THE FARMER'S LAND WAS CORRUPTED BY REASON

Exodus 8:24

The tails of my horses swatted without
stopping, their tired tongues dipped into
puddles rippled with wings. My children—

their stomachs also humming—blinked from
behind their mother's shawl, tears crawling
down their quivering chins. I rested from our fields

and made a bonfire to smoke out the swarming;
I roped the calf I'd hoped to fatten and barter,
then slit its throat behind the tool shed.

The flies mobbed inside the cavities before I could
drain it, and although we devoured it straight
from the bones, the insects still landed between

our teeth. I stayed by the fire throughout
the night, feeding it whatever scraps we could
spare. But I must have dozed off because

I woke with a start, tasted blood running down
from my ear. The embers smoldered beneath
a starless sky, and flies covered the ground—

all flightless. I heard a bleating from my neighbor's
yard, made out in the early light the calf's mother:
Just out of the barn, she fell to her knees—

with sockets gouged and gashes blanketed her ribs.
Stroking her hide, I milked the last offering she had
into the pail, then noticed blue and purple knots

tracked along my arms, blisters forming around
my wrists. My youngest began to wail from across
the dusty lawn, and under my breath, I called upon

the powers of Sekhmet. Still, no curing arrows
came to our defense. I should have known we were
out of our luck—The sun rose again in a fiery red.

LET MY LITTLE ONE ALSO GO WITH ME

Exodus 10:24

I carried him in a cloth sling down to the river
ten blocks
that day the crocodiles smiled beside glass bottles on
littered banks
as if they knew Osiris would come soon for all of us
don't think
I didn't consider hiding him in the wicker water basket
let him drift
downstream to another land where the gods were not
negligent
but I thought if he were to be king then maybe Horus
would rise
from his earthly nest to reclaim vengeance for all
this death
coming from the water the sky the dust the air and
so I waited
for some rebirth before we climbed the steps again
but we missed
the bus we could've taken I wish we had maybe one
day I will

III.

EXCAVATING WITH MY SISTER IN THE BACKWOODS OF OUR MEMORY

Go back to the land of dented knees, to where we met the sound of a crow's caw with belching and laughter. To where we whittled on sticks then hid our names below the poplar trees. Remember the kitchens of acorn hors d'oeuvres and pinecone suppers. Remember the penciled-in orange skies, the clouds as good as any television set. When mud was a bath and grass a blanket. O dirt canvases, twig brushes. Back to rainy disillusion and dog days, before wet hair unpinned earned tangles and fingernails reclaimed white edges. To when we owned our small scrapes, when we didn't mumble but screamed louder than the blue jay. Before we heard the voices of men like coyotes' cries over the ridge. When life was a small, wiggly thing. A burning point at the center of a magnifying glass.

WE ARE WATCHING YOU

in the vacant dark
when you have rested
from your slow insolated

rotations and worry
scurries beneath
your eyelids we move

into the open catch
and carry
what you waste is ours

crumbs follicles
the lost fibers and torn
half-moons shucked

each day they are
for the taking and we are
nimble dexterous

we know
you've seen us
along the baseboards poised

on the claw-footed
tub ceiling dancers
tender-bellied soldiers

we try to stay out
of your way but can't
you see we

like you were made
from the earth
and this is our land

you built we did not
arrive
but were already here

GHOST WALK

Charleston, South Carolina

As dusk arrives, we search for a light
to add to our imaginations. We walk through alleyways to witness
a Confederate's promise to stand by an inn's window,
to find a plantation owner's eyeball once dropped
beside the cotton mill. Though traffic presses in, we strain
to hear what faintly lives beyond: the clatter
on cobblestones of horses running from judgment,
a girl's billowing moan outside
Phillip's Church. And in the air—a whiff of faded perfume,
a magnolia's bloom, smoke from a restaurant's grill.
We'd like to trust in the gestures
of these trees sagging, in the music of these lapping waters.
Yet something tells us we should not
believe everything we hear. Still, we waste
whole rolls of film for a small chance the machine
will see what we cannot rule out.
Maybe tomorrow, we'll find a picture dipped
into the afterlife—a shadow, some dust—showing us
we're not alone, that someone's watching from above,
if only dangling by a thread.

UNQUENCHABLE

The color was called Berrylicious—something a child would want.

I didn't notice its name in Walmart, when lost among the shades of pink. I carried a basket of aftershave and mouthwash,

but dropped the tube in my pocket like it had been there all along. I clicked it open, closed—open, closed in the check-out line—but the alarms made no sound. Later, it was a pack of cigarettes from a purse

at a party. The stale tobacco stayed hidden in my coat for a month.

Then my wife found the lipstick in the laundry—I wish her forgiveness was enough. It's never the things I need—never things

I can't afford. My drawers hold key chains with strangers' names, gas station packets of intimacy enhancers. My glove compartment—a grave for Tic-Tacs, Scotch tape, rings of ponytail elastics.

There's too much to count now. What I have, I must throw out.

The farmers at the market tip their hats at me, my children smile when they look—It's not people I mean to hurt, but the big wheel

that moves them—each clink a new cut in my brow. My maker knows. He is the camera that sees the back of my head, the sweat in my palm—He is the fire in the ditch.

FIRE GHAZAL

I asked you for a light. You raised a stuttering flame to my lips.
If the story begins with a match, you know it will end in smoke.

When I was a girl, I pressed my head to the bus window: the bridge,
the dam below. *The river's on fire*, I said, mistaking fog for smoke.

The danger in leaving is this: a song on the radio, an absence in bed.
Better to disappear like a ghost: a light turns on, not a hint of smoke.

When the night air is thick as a workman's glove, we sneak out.
We move into the open patch behind the millhouse. We smoke.

I heard she hopped a train from Jackson to Chattanooga. He waited
for her at the end of the line—his lungs puffing like locomotive smoke.

Room of benign strangers, we rarely get what we want. He'd said,
When I die, send me up like Elijah—alone, in a pillar of smoke.

I hear of a desert city blast from across the ocean. I turn up the radio.
On the television, children are running. I can only see the smoke.

He'd found her in the hallway at 3 a.m., a burning look in her eyes.
She hid everything from him. But on her breath, he smelled smoke.

Can a fire erase mistakes? What's left is rubble. When you're done
with me, you should just light a corner—Let it all go up in smoke.

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING RELATING TO THE ABDUCTION ON
NOVEMBER 5, 1975 IN SNOWFLAKE, ARIZONA

Saucer disc, you were a pretty thing strung up like Christmas.

How could I not be lured
by your blinding beams?

For a moment, I was fearless; I thought you were the brightest

casino I'd ever seen—a gateway to
a winning streak—a hovering billboard directing me
out of this deserted place.

For many times after I'd thinned
the forest scrub from six-to-six, I looked up

into the patches
of bluebell-tinted night,

framed by scraggly pines,

never imagining anyone besides Orion
peering down at me—
and I could have remained

in that simple life: flannel shirts, no ties,

and three Bud Lites on Tuesday's special.
But that night, you opened my days

like an advent tree.

You removed the sutures

of my grounded world,

touching my organs
with hands like curious sticks, probing me
with instruments I couldn't comprehend.

Piece-by-piece,

I was a man turned

inside your spinning—

unable to see where your turbines journeyed.

Then you dropped me
back to this boring town

where I crawled like a wandering dog
to a payphone booth.

I had one quarter, only one

number to call, and I landed
on my couch with a week's worth of theories on my whereabouts
circulating through every pool hall.

When the sheriff questioned me, and I stood by
your authenticity—

I filled in the blanks on my missing report, kept my words consistent
down to the lines on doctors' forms,
polygraphs, and newsprint.

My story was the hottest jukebox jingle ever
this side of the Vegas strip.

But now, the media bytes are on slow repeat—no longer interested
in my testimony
of your little, gray, fetal bodies.

My brain's a Polaroid fuzzy as the morning mist, my memory:
a waterlogged microchip.

My mirrors are splintered; I can't draw your face
except through therapy and hypnotic states. And since you won't

capture me again, I figure
there's no harm in asking this:

What was it you saw in me?

I'm just a tree-ring
inside your forest of galaxies.

IN THE LANGUAGE OF TONGUES

I.

One starling's descent
can make a bush
flame & talk

just as a child's cry
over a garden wall
brings a crowded street
to a halt

There's nothing you can do
but listen—

II.

It's the same when we
dream in fluent Japanese

tell our waiters *arrivederci*
instead of *merci*

& use our thumbs
to count
the number of apples we want—

III.

We know what we mean but
we're lost in symbols
vowels
vibratos—

IV.

What was it I confessed?

All I know is
that night

a wire thrummed
in my throat

& words
fell around me
like small fires

PALINGENESIS

Down behind the church I go, my feet inside the wheeled road
that ends at barbed wire and broken wood. Thorns scratch
where socks don't reach; stems transfer their ticks and burrs.

I walk where the laurel seeps, part their leaves—careful

of bees that sink into the speckled blossoms. My shins pinch
with each step into the creek bed; my ankles totter
on slick stones. I follow the sound of water at the bottom of the hill,
moving farther from the humid afternoon. Then I do the thing

I never did before: lift the shirt above my head, unbutton the cut-off
jeans, let the fringe slide down my legs, tuck socks into the
mouths of boots. The rush of falls call me further in—the current gentle
as a mother's hand. I don't fear being seen, but I look for

signs of others: a beer can decorating a branch, charred coal circled
in rocks, cigarettes in the sand. I level my chin with
the surface, then dip beneath its reflective green. A cardinal flies
with no concern. Everything I wait for drifts away.

TATTOOED

It's the impermanent I wish to keep—
The line of hair you had leaning over me,

ten years ago, now gone in a tussle, or the bitten
crease along a collarbone brought to quiet a monster

in the shadows. Yes, I want the watercolor
splotch of hues sucked to surface below a rib—

that which I wore silently beneath opaque
layers of cotton, uncomfortable as lingerie.

Give me the shades of your freckled shoulder,
the earthy oranges of a giraffe, rising

from a white cloud of pillow in the morning.
I choose the invisible soreness of fingers

held tightly around jaw and ear, the pink
thumbprint that cannot be seen underside.

Darling, I wouldn't trade ink for your scratch
along my thigh or the lump from a limb thrown

into night walls both hard and cold. Which is why
this open landscape is more than I can bear.

And of the seventeen bruises on my legs,
not one of them is from you.

ELEGY FOR SNIPPY THE HORSE

*“ALAMOSA, Colo.—An autopsy of a horse, believed by its owner to have been killed by inhabitants of a flying saucer, revealed Sunday night that its abdominal, brain and spinal cavities were empty, the pathologist who performed the autopsy said.”—“Dead Horse Center of UFO Theory,” *The Evening Independent*, Oct. 9, 1967.*

Snippy, our Lady, how long did you suffer?
We came looking for you when our bell

went unanswered, when we whistled and heard
no whinny upon the hill. We feared lightning

had struck you mute. But when we found you,
your jawbone was white as the sun’s lurid glare.

Some thought you might have run through
the barbed-wire fence, but your flesh

wasn’t shredded; instead, it laid in precise
cuts too delicate for a coyote’s mouth, too deep

for an accidental jump. We saw no tools, no tracks
left behind—just a perfect circle of singed grass

a few yards from your upturned legs. O that you
could have kept your feet on this ground,

that you could have fled from this valley’s eclipse.
Remember how fast those striped hooves once

carried you up the ridge—how you’d wobble
as a foal toward your mother’s teat? Now,

your saddle rests on its rack; your harness
drips from a rusty nail. Your carcass is

a carved fruit bowl, and you’ve been drained
as we will one day find the Rio Grande.

But even in your butchery, we knew
it was you: the same Appaloosa eyes

mottled across your skin, stark as the San Luis
sky against its argentine and shooting stars.

SASQUATCH IN LOVE

How he pines among the needles and firs
for the nudist he once saw bathing by
the waterfall. For the moment she turned,
when a finch left the brush and her tame eye
almost caught his. How he wanted to reach
out and touch her, tuck her lilywhite hair
behind her ear, feed her blackberries he'd
plucked, gift her honeysuckle from his beard.
But she is gone, and she did not see him.
For he is left to roam with plants alone.
Thus he sulks in the vastness of his den
and in his remote woods. *If only she could know*
I exist, he thinks and paces and leaves
big prints in mud: small hopes that she'll believe.

RETIREMENT

after Louise Bogan

To the country I'll return willingly
after a life
spent among a hive's whirring needs:
too busied and annoyed.

In a cave of trees you can find me.
I'll nest alone,
no eggs to keep. My corner will be
quiet. Uncoiled,

I'll lie in bed. I will not stir before
noon or rush
to the robin's call. Imagine me wrinkled,
a crumpled piece of foil.

There and then, I'll be a shadow of my
former self: clipped
of ruffles and paint chipped-free, dirt
under my nails.

Let me rest in this thing they call no work:
laundry, the tended sheets.
I'll patrol the grass and guard the pots
before they over-boil.

TRADITION

This leaf-cutter ant species is all female and thrives without sex of any kind—ever—according to a new study. The ants have evolved to reproduce only when queens clone themselves.—“Save the Males? Too late for Mycocepurus Smithii” National Geographic News; April 17, 2009

Of course, we missed them when gathering the trash,
 having someone around to fix things, lift leaves a little closer to the sun.
But it was we who carried our young, who held their white hearts like pearls
 passed down from our grandmother, our arms doing most of the work.

From her broken wings, we saw the beauty of perfection. Her antennae: our guide
 to a land without angry mounds, brown and soft
like the earth we were born into. She told me my father, one of the last,
 led a march from field to forest. He found a rotting vole
under the barren oak tree. She said: *Survival can't have distractions,*

can't have doubts. I've heard the doe huffs for her buck when he's fallen
 to the shot, that she flies over the creek bed with more gallantry
than a gun. In the morning I wake to the dove in her roost. Even in sorrow,
 there are things to be thankful for. At day's end, my six limbs
will have shared the weight of a thousand pounds.

For I am part of a whole, and my daughters will know of tradition. They will
 know love is as constant as the crickets, as comforting as the dusk.
We keep moving, our mouths loosening the dirt.
 We eat our way to the center. We find our way back out.