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## The Lottery of Miracles

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The Lottery of Miracles

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Poetry

by

Amelia Cook

B.A. University of Minnesota, 2000

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## Introduction

I first discovered the silver-colored charms called *milagros* outside of the Cathedral of San Miguel de Arcángel in Tegucigalpa's main square while living in Honduras as a volunteer. On a piece of velvet near the cathedral entrance, pinned and hung by bits of red ribbon and string, they looked made by hand and perfectly imperfect. The woman selling them was old and weathered. She looked like she lived a hard life. By the way she received my coins in her hand it seemed more like I was making a donation than buying something. I left with a few dime-sized milagros in my hand—a moon, a heart, a hand.

I've continued to collect milagros since then. I've found them in the dusty side street shops of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico and bought them from street vendors in Ecuador. I've bid for a shiny lot of them on eBay. Now, they sit—all mixed together—in a silver dish on my dresser. I'm still drawn to their rough-hewn beauty, even though I don't always understand the mystery they hold.

When I happened upon a Lotería game in a Latino shop in Chicago, I was equally captivated. I recognized the colorful images from my trips to Mexico and found their bright colors and vintage aesthetics appealing. I bought the game without a distinct reason. I simply liked it and wanted it. I think it cost about four dollars. Once home, it slid into the small space between the tops of books on a shelf and gathered dust.

Fascinated and delighted by these treasures—the milagros and the lotería game—I’ve held on to them. When I acquired them, I wasn’t sure what I would ever do with them, but I knew I needed them for something. They felt magical to me.

This collection—*The Lottery of Miracles*—is that something.

Part one is “Lotería.” Literally “lottery” in English, lotería is a bingo game played in Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries. Instead of letters and numbers, this game uses colorful images drawn from a deck of 54 cards. The images are simple, painted in brilliant primary colors, and full of symbolism.

Outlined in black and filled by watercolor-like paint, the images on the lotería cards are inspired by both the everyday and the extraordinary. Some are drawn from the objects of daily life—the bottle, pot, boot, and umbrella, for instance. Others represent natural presences: the sun, the moon, the world, and the star. There are animals (deer and bird) and fruits (pear, watermelon, and melon). People, too, appear: a lady in her snappy blue suit, the stiff soldier, a stumbling drunk. Several cards portray more menacing images: the skull, death, and the devil. These cards especially have endless religious and cultural symbolic possibilities.

The name of each lotería card marches boldly below the card’s image in capital letters in a Helvetica-like font. Each also bears a number. The card with a painted image of a bottle of rum—LA BOTELLA—is number 8. On the reverse is a riddle. On LA BOTELLA appears “La herramienta del borracho.” The tool of the drunk. This riddle is answered by the image on the other side: in this case, the bottle of rum.

For the “Lotería” poems, I played the game in my own way. I first drew a card at random and translated the riddle on the back from Spanish into English. Sometimes the riddles were straightforward and easy to translate. Others, like LA MUERTE—“death”—were nearly impossible to translate. Many of them incorporate rhymes and puns that disappear in the English translation. As a non-native speaker of Spanish, my translations are based on my own interpretations; they are not definitive English versions. My own imperfect proficiency in Spanish was part of the game and, therefore, part of the poems here.

The poems in “Lotería” are acrostics. The translated riddle serves as a connective line for the poetry; it acts as the spine of the poem. For example, the poem written for LA BOTELLA is a five-line poem. Each line begins with the words of the riddle in order: the, tool, of, the, and drunk.

This constraint challenged me by forcing me to abandon some of my own rules about poetry. My palette now included “boring” words I’d have preferred not to use; “the,” “of,” and “he” appear quite often. What’s more, I had to *begin* lines with these no-words. This affected my content choices, resulted in line breaks: ones that often fell outside of my poetic comfort zone. It also put unexpected words at the start and end of lines, some of them those boring words that felt undesirable to me.

Mary Oliver—a poet I’ve loved for many years for her down-to-earth meditations on physical and spiritual life—writes in *A Poetry Handbook*, “The most important point in the line is the *end* of the line. The second most important part of the line is the *beginning* of it.” With lines in “Lotería” often beginning in a way that

was completely out of my control, I had to shrug off Oliver's wise words the way a rebellious daughter ignores her well-intentioned mom.

Fortunately, Oliver's influence isn't completely lost on this collection. The impact of her work on me as a writer can be seen more clearly in the second part of my collection, "Milagros." With a less stringent procedure, I was freer to emulate her plainspoken confessions, petitions, and observations.

In my final restriction for "Lotería," I must admit that I took some comfort, even if feeling guiltily lazy. While the poems were to be written in a random order, the final collection would be re-ordered, using the numbers on the card. The final order—so important to a collection of poems—was completely out of my control.

This offered me a new kind of freedom in writing and taught me a bit of confidence. I was discovering the order of disorder. I've always seen the poet as an adept organizer. Pulling from a wild mess of images and stories, she lovingly and carefully puts them down on the page. She fits them into their proper places: into words, lines, poems, and, ultimately, into a collection. My goal—in both parts of *The Lottery of Miracles*—was to have poems that could be read in *any* order, just like the cards that inspired them which could be pulled one by one from a deck. I trusted chance to work in my favor.

The majority of poems found in "Lotería" and "Milagros" were written in poetry workshops led by Bill Lavender, a writer, teacher, editor, and devotee of the procedural process. In his course syllabus, Lavender wrote that while procedures span from forms to schedules to limitations of content or sounds, procedures "always involve a



composition practice, a regular, weekly routine to which you must commit at the beginning and adhere to without fail.” He goes on to say that writer’s block can be blamed on “simply not having our lives arranged so that they are conducive to poetry.”

In other words, I could no longer make excuses. I had to write. Bill Lavender taught me that it’s necessary to “arrange [my] life so that [I] can be productive” as a poet. And using a procedure is one way to do that.

The experiments of Bernadette Mayer and Charles Bernstein are perhaps the most recognized and accessible examples of procedures, but any poem that relies on a restriction or form—from a sonnet to a haiku to an arrangement of found words—benefits from procedural process.

I’ve found using a procedure to be very, very helpful. It helps get the job done. With a procedure, the writing formula is simple. First, the poem must be written. Second, the poet must loosen her grip. Easy, right?

There were two parts to the procedures I used for the poems in both parts of *The Lottery of Miracles*: a schedule and restrictions. The schedule of a procedure helps a poet produce work on a regular basis by demanding it. It gets the poem written. She has no choice but to write. The restrictions of procedure deceive the poet into opening up. When the poet has less control, small bit of chance (or is it inspiration?) sneaks in. It’s in this small space of uncertainty that unexpected things happen. Unexpected, magic things.

“Milagros,” part two of this collection, also relies on a procedure of schedule and restrictions. My goal here was to explore the intersection of chance and inspiration.

How can we tell the difference between them? What happens when you look at chance through lenses of belief and hope?

The Spanish word “milagro” means “miracle.” Milagros are religious charms that are used throughout Latin America, some parts of Spain, and the Southwestern United States. Sizes and materials vary, though often they are smaller than a thumbnail and made of silver or gold-colored metal.

Closely linked with ritual and religion, milagros are sometimes pinned in shrines and offered to Catholic saints as a form of prayer or an expression of gratitude for answered prayers. Sometimes they are accompanied by a small note written by the petitioner. Milagros can also be used as good luck charms and may appear on jewelry.

Regardless of their use, these little bits of metal represent fervent hopes for miracles. To meet the needs of the hoppers and petitioners, milagros are made in a wide variety of shapes. Hearts, body parts, animals, saints, houses, vehicles, plants, sun, moon, and stars are just a few examples of commonly seen milagros.

Many of the shapes found in the milagros overlap with the imagery on lotería cards. The heart, star, hand, bottle, tree, deer, bird, and fish, scorpion, are seen in *both* parts of *The Lottery of Miracles*. Even within a handful of tiny milagros, images repeat: similarly-shaped, though not identical.

Just as the heart milagro is seen in various iterations—one with an arrow through it, another on fire, one bursting with veins—the symbolism of milagros is not consistent. A milagro may mean different things to different people. For instance, a milagro in the shape of a leg could represent a broken leg or hopes for safe travel. An

eye might refer to a search for wisdom or a literal affliction of the eyes. An ear of corn may symbolize hope for a healthy crop or simply for enough food to feed a family.

To write these poems, I used a procedure complementary to the one used in “Lotería.” Similar to drawing from my lotería deck, each morning I plucked one milagro from half of a dried gourd bowl I had brought back from Mexico. The randomly-chosen milagro was the centerpiece for that day’s poem. I kept it with me all day, pinned inside my pocket or tucked into my purse. I used it as a petition for inspiration: a prayer for a poem. Other than that, I had just a few other restrictions. I would write three poems a week, during my lunch hour at work. The poem had to be short—less than eight lines—so that it could, in theory, be scrawled onto a small piece of paper and pinned to an altar with a milagro.

While these poems don’t have type-able titles, these are not untitled poems in any way. Rather, they are poems titled with images instead of words. The milagro itself serves as the title of the poem. I maintained this titling convention in “Lotería” which, although it appears first in *The Lottery of Miracles*, was written one year after the “Milagros” series. In “Lotería,” the titles of poems are the lotería cards themselves.

The poems in both “Milagros” and “Lotería” are situated in an abstract place. They fit into the space we go to in prayer, meditation, or in a dream-filled sleep. These poems reside in locations—real and imagined, literal and abstract—that are part of me, ones that I know intuitively.

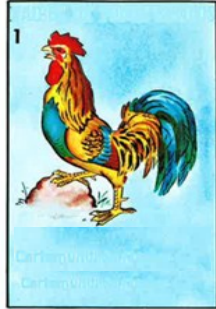
Of the two collections, “Milagros” is more outwardly personal. The poems are inspired and rooted in the immediacy of my own life. They capture a specific time

period: one where I was losing some of my faith in God while finding romantic love. They tell the story of a search—for God and for love—and are infused with a rough hope.

I see a connection between “Milagros” and a book I read in my early twenties: Rilke’s *Book of Hours*. Written over 100 years before “Milagros,” the poems in the *Book of Hours* were what Rainer Maria Rilke called “inner dictations.” They were his own sacred poems, deeply personal prayers. Like Rilke’s poems in his *Book of Hours*, the poems in “Milagros” are full of questions, simply-stated hopes, and a complex mix of eagerness and skepticism.

The poems in *The Lottery of Miracles* have been both inspired and affected by chance: a lottery beyond my control. Helped onto the page and rough-carved by my procedures, they aren’t perfect. Revision was intentionally minimal. Like the milagros I bought outside the cathedral in Honduras, they’re a little rough around the edges; they show the marks of being made. It’s also in those imperfections that they hold room for potential change. They leave space for hope and mystery and reflect a paradox of my own life: the interplay of chance and something more deliberate—a lottery of miracles.

## Part 1—Lotería



He smokes cigarettes, that boy  
who I now see on the screen,  
sings songs on the street  
for wine, paying  
Peter to rob Paul. I  
will not see him again,  
never see him with a yellow flower. Some  
sing to remember, write poems to forget. If I'm ever  
again on that beach, I will gather more shells.



Be careful of the little devil, so  
good in his disguise, don't be alone with him,  
otherwise he will feed you sweets  
the color of cherry skin and cinnamon.

Devil, stay away you naughty thing, I  
will know you when you ring, I will let you  
take my gold, as long as  
you don't steal my soul.



The windows are filled with dusty fans. A woman pushes her hair back. A girl prances in toothpick grass.

Down the block  
the children break the water  
main. In wet shadows of side  
streets, men sleep.





Fancy pants, dandy  
man, you wear your riches like a carnation  
on a black lapel. But let me tell you:  
the bearded vet on State  
Street is not shaking coins to delight. And she never  
wants to twirl her pretzel-dough body over  
to your lap, that dancing girl.  
Throw your money around some more. Throw it  
away, throw it her way,  
his way, my way. Peel the gold leaf from your  
cane, let us have a flake or two.



For those moments when  
the word loses meaning, and  
sun becomes black ink  
and a river winds a string of letters.  
For those moments when  
the thing loses its essence, when  
rain only exists in ringing rooftops.



Do you remember the ferry to Roatán,  
not taking Dramamine in time, how we  
let the ocean take over our bodies,  
the up and down quaking sea? We were  
mermaids out of water singing backwards  
songs, beached on the fiberglass deck. To  
make a voyage, to cross a wide ocean  
you need to sink, give in to the  
dizzy space between shores.

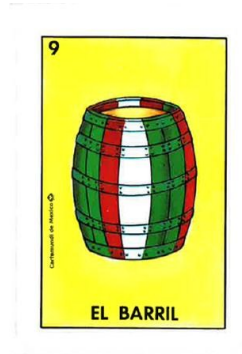


Climb carefully, you would say to me. I didn't like the way each step sunk like ice on a spring lake, changed by my weight. But I climbed every step while you held the ladder still.

You told me once that I was fat. I don't think you meant it, but I want you to know I believed you. To me, it was cruel. Now let me startle you. This was the worst I knew? Forgive yourself.



The rum we drank in Honduras was the color of a  
tool left in rain. We mixed in the fake flavors  
of paradise: mango, papaya and passion fruit.  
The real fruits rotted in the kitchen while we got  
drunk.



The fresh pasta bulged like work of a sloppy  
mason, but fell into my hands infused with air. We  
drank wine with windows open. It was  
so warm, that March,  
much more like May,  
that pleasurable taunt of early spring.

He chopped the garlic that  
ended up brown in butter, ended  
up changed by what surrounded it,  
like the way we are shaped by  
a warm evening, the air soft as an oak  
barrel and smelling of wet earth.



Cool in the still-dark day, under  
shade of fading night, water from my can  
covers the basil, soaks the terracotta.  
One tiny plant--the one  
that I grew from a cutting in my window--  
gets trampled by the flood. I bend  
near, scoop it up like  
a fallen robin, tuck roots back into  
good, wet soil. A miniature  
tree, its licorice smell on my fingers.



You always had a cantaloupe on the counter,  
giving off a musty smell that reminded us where  
it came from: the wet ground of fields. From earth  
to orange triangles that seemed to  
me like felt cubes soaked in sugar water  
or wet cotton candy, slightly effervescent in my mouth.

You always cut it too close to the rind, the green  
taking me by surprise with icy firmness.  
It smelled stronger later, thrown  
away. A whole moon shaved into slivers.

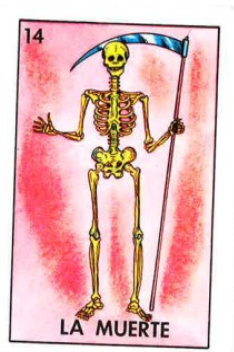




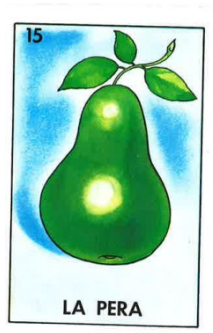
Why run from when you can  
run at them? So, sharpen  
away your knives and pencils.  
Coward and cowering are the same  
when the one in the corner is  
you. Blood on your hands doesn't  
have to mean murder, red is  
a cut beet, a broken pen, strawberries so  
good and sweet. Sugar-coated fingers,  
dagger wrapped inside.



Put every tiny hope into  
the organ-pipe tubes of the yellow  
bonnet, like drops of nectar.  
On waking up from  
the dream of another  
baby--hair like seaweed  
so fragile, spun sugar curls--  
we try to keep from shattering.  
Don't plan too hard, it's like trying to  
catch a log full of morels in a  
cold spring that started so warm.



La muerte means death.  
I cannot translate  
the rest.



Those nuns sing for Sister Joan  
who died. I hide in the choir loft.  
Wait for God and you will find him.  
Despair not, the priest says.



Green hasn't bled into grass, still  
white-stained from freeze. The sky is grey  
and I walk through ruts with mud on my boots.  
Red tulips will march in next month if we're lucky--  
the translucent buds exploding into bright  
flags, perfectly lined against brick sides  
of apartment buildings, bright waves of  
soldiers, now reluctant in frozen trenches.



The square fills with  
mariachi men, children and their games of  
Simon Says. His tamale  
is filled with green pork. The band is  
playing an old song,  
his song, the one filled with the  
big dreaminess of  
mandolin and fallen corn husks.



It is something I almost forget: I  
grew up with a cello in the living room, pushed  
up in the corner, denting carpet the color of rust.  
To get it to school, I hauled it on my back, walked  
the six blocks shuffling side to side, hoping the  
sky wouldn't fill with clouds and let loose  
and that there would be no patches of ice  
since it was rented from the school and if I broke  
it my parents would be mad. The curve of it  
wasn't soft, but like bony fingers poking my knees.  
A red-haired lady taught songs from the Suzuki on her  
violin. The fingerings are the same. And wouldn't you know  
it, I can still play Twinkle Twinkle and even the Wish-I-  
Had-a-Motorcycle version where you play each note 8 times fast  
to get really good at moving the bow over the strings, watching rosin  
become dust on the golden wood. I may have forgotten how to play more, but not  
a worn place in the carpet where a  
cello once stood.



On my computer screen I read  
the poem by Tennessee Williams. The  
other afternoon, I laid at your  
side. Through the curtain, the blue  
of February, the color of sea glass,  
the light that does not stay, the  
river that never stops moving.

There's a valentine on  
my desk for you. It doesn't matter if  
sand wishes to be still. The grains leave but the  
bank is always there.

Where we are is no longer yesterday:  
my hair in curls, heart-shaped cookies on the table,  
honey in your morning tea. Strange thing that never  
sits still, but is strangely constant! Tomorrow, I'll be  
with you, slurping noodle soup on  
a Hallmark holiday, broth running down your  
mouth. I will not forget to touch your hair: soft  
like things we fold away,

a tender flash of the downy  
brown feathers of the  
heron.

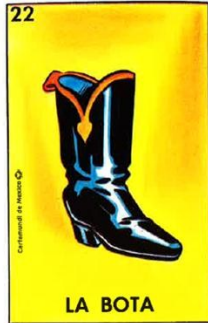




You told me about the meteor shower,  
made me stay up late, the cold covering  
me like fine mist. But I never saw the  
flutter of falling stars. Clouds covered the sky  
like curtains. When you ask if there was  
a sky full of embers, I will say: I am a  
bird who crashes into glass  
on instinct. I don't know what  
a reflection is. I take the bird I see from the  
branch as flesh and feather.



The hand that we're given, the hand that we're dealt, the hands of time. What is the difference between criminal and culpable?



One cowboy  
boot swinging, his lit cigarette, the  
same splash of whiskey, alone  
as a single word on a line,  
the letters like wire barbs. His  
other boot, still against her leg.



The lake is a window on a darkened  
lighthouse. I've been hearing groans  
of ice in the night lately. We walk through driftwood,  
those soft and fragile bones, washed  
in by melt. Broken glass is now stone.  
Love and water are sometimes the same.



Land no longer exists. Just snow. The sun is a dead parrot, a bright lie. There is ice inside the windows and the truck hasn't moved for days. I don't talk much. We play game after game of Chinese checkers with tiny marbles that slip from our fingers. Winter has caged me, shut me up with cold black cloth.



I don't go to the bars on State Street,  
can't stand to feel as old as the back bottle of schnapps,  
put up with the kids in Greek-lettered hats  
up to no good, prowling bleary-eyed girls,  
with condoms in their pockets. Don't think  
that I haven't been there: out until the sky glowed,  
drunk on vodka sours. But not  
anymore.



He was called *negrito* by everyone who knew him, except for the Americans he ate *baleadas* with. Brown or white, we're all the color of sugar.



Don't use the word love. Don't miss your bus. Don't call me. Don't call me honey. Don't break my heart. Don't clog it up. Don't tattoo my name next to I LOVE. Don't tell me you will. Don't put sugar in. Don't come home drunk or get back too late. Don't leave the light on. Don't lead me on. Don't go out the door. Don't forget the truck. Don't listen to me. (Good luck.)

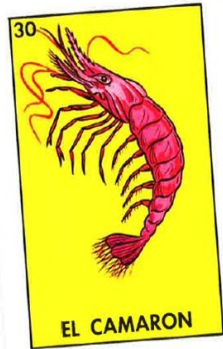




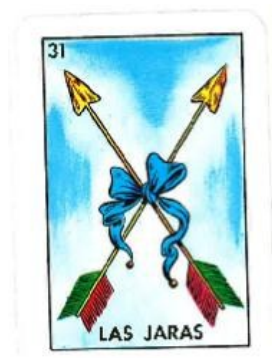
His shirt open down to his  
belly, the fruit seller once  
was the boss of this town.  
Full on wine, he will tell you  
of the difference between water and  
watermelon.



Don't beat too hard  
get out of hand  
wrinkled skin  
old as land  
leather shoes  
because they last  
I love you still but  
want the past  
you talk too loud  
for me to hear  
a doorbell ring or  
drum beat clear.



The men at the shop with their boots stained from tide water, teach me how to pop off the heads. One takes my hand in his, pinching my fingers around the top of one, cool and soft. It costs less for head-on shrimp and so I sway into work of women before me who spent afternoons with hands full of the sea, the fall of heads and shells sounding like flashes of rain,



The thorns stick into skin like tiny  
arrows, hands are full  
of warm berries,  
the grass bends underfoot.

Indian mounds disappear into  
land, now only seen from the tower  
where tourists with cameras wonder if  
they're getting the  
shot right.



The boy wanted to be a musician, writer, artist. Nouns with histories of verbs. Now, his guitar is full of writing, but his plastic sunglasses are mutes in a trumpet, holding him so no more craziness can pour out. The longer he dreams, the less he sleeps. He wants to write down every nightmare, to turn demons into D chords, to play it all out, become empty as a guitar case. For now he wants to become a boy. Sing me Rocky Raccoon one more time.



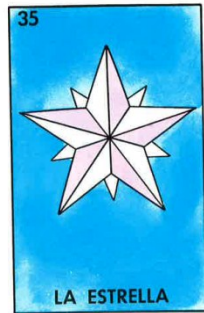
Stun me. That's what you did.  
It is no longer you  
with cheeks red from tequila. The  
blows of things I understand—  
but can't tell you—now  
keep your face bone-colored.

It is your fault, I say as you drive  
away. The web you wove  
from invisible thread has caught  
me. I brush it off my skin.



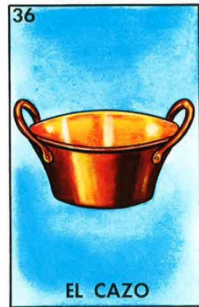
One small stone in a mouthful of rice.  
Two drops of food coloring  
and the dough grows pink.  
Three and it's the color of coral.

The little boy becomes a  
soldier, but the girl  
goes from mountain  
to small stone.  
The soldiers fill the  
barracks like rice in a pot.



The tarp pulled off on a hot night, wind  
guides the sway of trees, the reluctance of  
of falling asleep beneath a sky full of stars, like  
sailors leaving, their last glimpse of green.

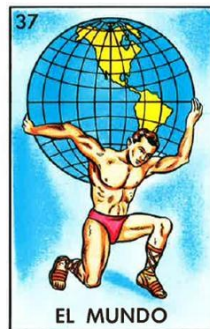




I pull out the pots, the ones we  
don't use much, the ones that  
pay the price of luxury with wages of dust.

Much of our lives are spent hidden, our  
attention drawn inside like curtains pulled  
to keep winter secret from a warm kitchen.

You fill the pots. Inside them, water and grain become beer.



The song went: he's got the whole world in his hands. But earth is a sloshy mess, slippery like a hot potato, the bean bag or ball, so heavy in small hands.

And how come we didn't worry he'd drop us to scratch an itch, or slap a mosquito? Singing, we were the fool. Crying, we were the wise.

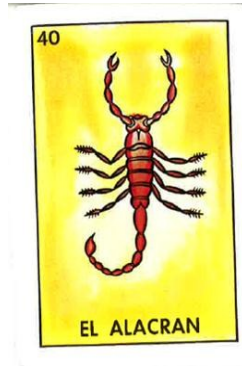


So  
many choices surround me like  
thugs, squinty-eyed  
with melting tattoos,  
pants hung low. Mean  
and wearing steel-toed boots. I'm in  
sandals and a sundress.



Which of us loves the other more?  
everyone wonders. I worry he  
will start to  
notice my spines  
when his skin is stretched smooth against me.

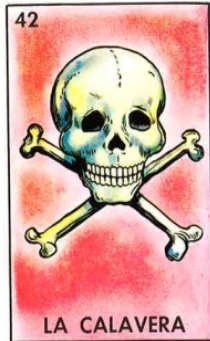
He's  
got to say it first for me  
to say it back lately. The wait is bitter, but I still  
eat each word like a sugared blossom.



Bites of pineapple, fiery  
with tartness, sting my mouth like  
a scorpion's  
tail.



Rose is what she chose, that  
little girl with no middle name,  
rose like wilted flowers,  
rosy as her cheeks in winter.

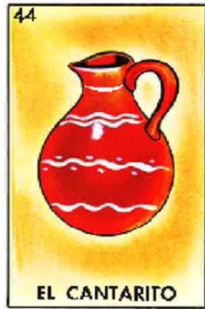


Walking to the square  
through cool adobe shadows, past  
the hidden courtyards, past the  
cemetery with graves like tables,  
I smell the steamed sweet potatoes,  
find the man selling them, pouring  
a can of condensed milk the color of a  
skull, over soft orange.

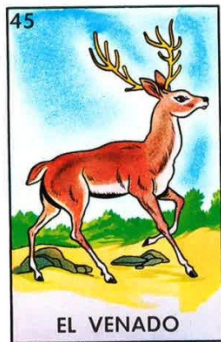


The parts of a bell are named for the body: a head and a waist, a shoulder, lip. To ring it you must bend down, crawl underneath, into its mouth.





The surface of milk in a pitcher. Stone goes wet in humid air. Rivers run to hot, green places. The miracle of water is all around.



The hunters speed by in pickup trucks, dead  
deer hung over the beds. An eye that no longer  
sees looks at me,  
nothing.



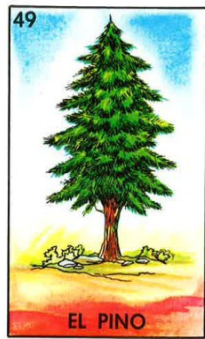
The night is cold, your  
blanket made of scraps, sewn  
of thrown away things. But  
the day is warm. Being  
poor means having even less.



The queen wears a cap of black, a thick wig of cloth. Here, only kings wear crowns.



Row, row,  
row your boat we sing  
sitting up front, baby  
in back, screaming. He's  
your baby, just yours now. This  
little car is a sinking  
boat.



Fresh watermelon, not as  
sweet as it looks,  
smelling of sun and pines  
and the sweat of machetes.  
Beautiful, dirty hands  
at the table reaching for it  
all open and ready for better  
times, a swallow of cold fruit.



Here, we  
climb pine trees since it's true  
that there are no  
palm trees in Wisconsin, only stories about the  
tree, how it was imported from somewhere else.  
And I remember misty London, the  
pluck of palmettos that grew there, surprising  
me with their resilience. I don't know where it's from, really,  
a palm tree, but I've lived under their branches, slept in  
good shade, drank water from a  
coconut from a plastic bag on a hot bus.



He catches the perch and is the one who must peel skin, rip bones, while it dies on a slab of plastic—fingertips covered by scales like sequins or the miniscule petals of a flower—while a mouth waters in the other room.





If they close the borders,  
you're still there inside,  
born in the place you died,  
a cypress tree in a clay  
pot, a swallow in a glass shot.

You heard the song lyrics wrong--  
will you still love the song? It  
never gets better, a flowerpot cannot  
leave. But they're ready:  
the shoes set in the brick  
hallway, an extra set of keys.



My muscles are taut as piano strings. I told you our  
mother's secret and now  
in this steakhouse, it's become one of those  
laws that aren't obeyed,  
old fashioned novelties. I am staring, heavy as a  
harp, at your mouth, crescendoing the word  
*no* in my head. You can't keep silent any  
longer, but I still  
can tell you what it's like to  
be holding an instrument that cannot be  
played.



What a day to be reading a list of symptoms. Don't jump to conclusions or off your apartment's roof. Your sister told your secret and it took a day to get pissed. Once upon a time, there was a princess. Seeing the information on the Mayo Clinic website, you feel green (but not with envy) as a frog and cold--very, very cold.

## Part 2—Milagros



I've tried  
to keep them close  
as skin, rebuild each one  
in poem. These are the  
darkest prayers  
I own.



I am touching the burner to find out if it's hot,  
plotting another pour as I hold a full, cold  
glass of Sauvignon Blanc.

I am searching for a book of poems in the hardware store,  
reading personal ads from faraway cities,  
and hearing the only song I ever wanted to hear  
as I drive away from the concert.



This morning,  
looking for a barrette—  
the one Allison brought me from New Orleans—  
I found a key that had been my grandfather's.  
I don't know if it opened a door,  
or a box, or a piano.  
There's no way to know anymore.



The silver wing fell from my hands.  
I plucked it back from the carpet.

Who would have found it?  
Would they have found it a miracle?





These things were once carried,  
once loved the way you love things  
you know you must leave behind.

They are not alive, but they are not dead.  
How do I explain the in-between-ness of everything?

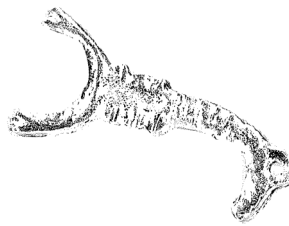


Everyone is fading from me,  
dissolving like cubes of sugar in hot tea.  
My sister lurks around the house,  
darkness tinges her shoulders.

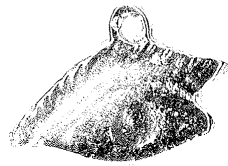


How is it that sometimes I have plenty of friends,  
phone messages and emails sprouting up  
all at once like mushrooms in spring.

And other days,  
when my phone's ring is a shout in a foreign language,  
I have too few?



It comes flashing pincers  
swerving tail from folds  
of sheets salty with life  
still damp shoes  
hidden by shadows  
of the ceiling fan  
light dark light  
dark light  
dark



Let me look more people  
in the eye, closer, close  
enough to see the line  
of black that rings the  
color the way ash falls  
from a dropped coal.



If I owned a hatchet,  
which kind of person  
would I be?

Would I smell of fire,  
wear my hair long,  
plant sunflowers in the yard?

Or would the chickens fear me?



There's a song I've been listening to.  
One of the lines is about a mother  
keeping her baby as warm as a hen.

We pull the ones we love  
into nests made of scraps,  
surround them with hot, damp feathers.

What is warmth?  
What is suffocation?



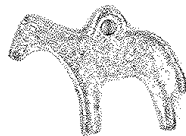
I grew up among waves,  
tides of seasons,  
the crashing of wind  
against dried stalks,  
yellowing pearls of kernels,  
and cornsilk the mermaids would covet.

I loved the ocean before I knew it.





I shipped all my books  
from Tybee Island to  
Wisconsin. One box at  
a time from the little  
post office. But do you  
remember the day I left  
for good? Drove away  
in my Mazda, windows  
filled with things, so I  
could not look back.



In Honduras,  
I woke up to find a loose horse  
outside my door.

He didn't notice me,  
just the spot of sweet grass  
and the wind  
that smelled of fire and pine.



Last night hail fell,  
an army pounding on the roof,  
coming to take me, desperate  
for my capture.  
Everything shook.  
I saved two pieces in the freezer.  
They are perfect  
full moons: round and cold.



I am eating spaghetti with meat sauce  
when I find a bit of bone. It's the color  
of the sky today, a sky that hints of snow.

We all are made of meat and bone, but we hide it  
beneath glowing skin, eyes like the first  
raindrops still carrying the heaviness of winter.



Soapy in the shower,  
I am slick as a newborn.  
Stretching my arms wide,  
I am strong as a tree.

Let me love my body.  
Let me find beauty in its soft heft,  
the tornado of my bellybutton  
swirls into my core.



The scars  
underneath my breasts  
are not stigmata,  
they are not  
wounds from war.

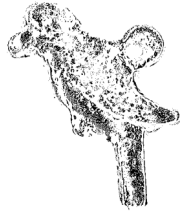
It's just that sometimes  
miracles  
leave  
marks.



I've been  
pretending to be unhappy  
for everyone else's sake.

I hold my joy inside,  
in the darkness between  
muscles, organs, pulsing veins.

My skin is starting  
to ache.



There are lots of poems about birds,  
but this one is not  
about a bird.

(Don't tell anyone, but I haven't yet  
discovered what this poem is about.

I do know that I am learning to love  
the white sky  
of the page.)





Deep footsteps lead  
from my door through the snow  
that swallowed my house  
all through the night.



She comes to the poor, the low—  
baby shadowed in her robes,  
roses at her feet.

I do not always stand tall, I am not rich—  
but am I low enough,  
poor enough?

I pray that I do not fall  
into the darkness of the middle.



I've reeled in large-mouth bass  
in northern Wisconsin.  
In Honduras, eaten ones fried whole,  
with eyes that stared at me judgmentally.  
Slurped fish soup in Ecuador,  
piles of squeezed limes filling the table.

I am not sure if I believe in god anymore.



On State St. they sell  
bars of soap with the  
word FAITH  
molded in all caps.  
And faith gets washed  
away, the letters sink,  
but you get clean in the  
process.



Can you pray  
if you do not believe?

Can you believe  
if you do not pray?

Is it too late for either?



Copal incense, snow in April,  
if these aren't miracles,  
what are?  
But Jesus on an underpass,  
burned into a pan?

My mom asks if he's a  
Christian. I wonder if  
I am. I just want to tell  
her about all the miracles.



The valentines are kept in boxes,  
precious and painful  
as shards of diamond.

This year, may all the boxes break,  
be smashed open,  
so that paper hearts  
fall all over the place.



Before I began it, I knew  
this poem would be about you.

But if you asked to see it, could  
I show you? Or would

I hide it away like the cloves in my purse?  
The small bottles in the back of the cupboard?

I want all my poems to be about you,  
even when I am not sure who you are.





He's been writing about  
Barzun, Kahlo, Equiano,  
trying to answer his own questions.

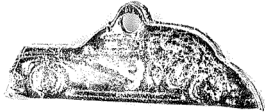
But I want answers to my questions:  
the ones that sit untouched  
like painted eggs,  
too delicate  
to crack.



You show me the loose connection on my iPod and all I can think about are hands. Our hands. And how when I was sixteen and in love for the very first time skin became magnets and I marveled over the science of it in a van after midnight parked two blocks from my house. And how I'd forgotten those tiny beams of energy until right this very minute.



We watched hawks circle over the lake.  
The sun was out. You called it August  
in April. We spread ourselves under the  
sky like stretching cats. We walked through  
the trees, stared up at pyramids of falling  
rocks. I asked for this day and received.



I haven't told you  
how grateful I am  
for you

for the way you  
see a car that looks like  
mine and think of me.



When you drive up  
I hope I stand out  
in the train station  
crowd like Pound's  
wet petal on black.



The lighthouse keeper longs for a ship.  
Sailors dream of land.

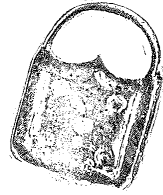
May I be content with what I am  
and what I am not.

And may I be filled with hope—  
like light in a lighthouse,  
overflowing onto the sea—  
for what I will be.



I look up to see the sky  
filled not with clouds,  
but with birds, black on  
gray, darkened pixels.

We are going home,  
we are always going home.



It's becoming clear now:  
anything that can be locked  
can also be made to open.





I go to bed tonight  
dreaming of miracles.

I'm certain they exist.

I am just learning  
to recognize them.



A question:

How long does it take  
to write a poem?

The answer:

My poems  
take my  
whole  
life.

## Vita

Amelia Cook was born in Appleton, Wisconsin and earned her Bachelor's degree in English from the University of Minnesota. After spending her twenties exploring warmer places like Honduras, Ecuador, and Tybee Island, she returned north and is settling in to her third decade of life in her home state. She is pleased to have been able to pursue her long-neglected love of poetry as part of the University of New Orleans' low-residency MFA program.