

5-11-2012

## Seesaw

Caroline M. Povinelli  
*The College at Brockport*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng\\_theses](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng_theses)



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Povinelli, Caroline M., "Seesaw" (2012). *English Master's Theses*. 5.  
[http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng\\_theses/5](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng_theses/5)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).

Seesaw  
by  
Caroline M. Povinelli

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York  
College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
May 11, 2012

Seesaw  
by  
Caroline M. Povinelli

APPROVED BY:



Advisor

6/25/12

date



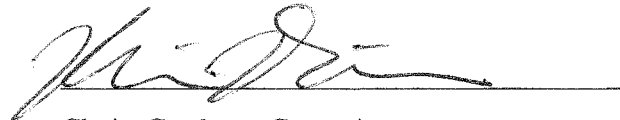
Reader

6/5/12



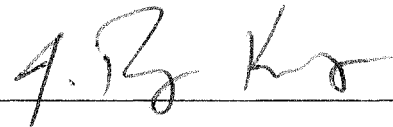
Reader

6/18/12



Chair, Graduate Committee

6/12/12



Chair, Department of English

7/2/12

“Don't leave me here all alone  
and the only one left is me.”

– César Vallejo, *Trilce*

For Dave Kelly

## Table of Contents

Introduction 1

### One

Ghost 15  
Loophole 16  
Tipping Over 17  
Lack Of 19  
Scout Night 20  
Splinter 22  
Equals 23  
Maple Tapping 24  
Pitching the Tent 25  
Carbon Copy 27

### Two

Kennedy 29  
Perennials 30  
Britton, Micah 33  
Divorce 34  
Third November 35  
Palindrome 36

### Three

Wadsworth	39
Anderson	40
Welles	41
Albright-Knox	42
Counter-Clockwise	43
Years Ago	45
Tokens	46
Bibliography	47

## Abstract

The twenty-three poems in this collection are invested in the examination of memories. The author's personal experiences and observations from childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood are thoroughly explored using original images and inventive language. Influenced by the works of César Vallejo, Kimiko Hahn, and Karen Volkman, among others, these poems describe scenes and relationships from the past in a surreal, non-linear manner. The result is a highly detailed and emotional account of people and places that have made a significant impact on the author's life. Themes of resentment, guilt, loss, and regret provide a tangible link from poem to poem. A critical introduction explains the author's stylistic preferences and literary influences. The poems range from one page to three pages in length, and are separated into three sections. Each of these sections represents a period of time in the author's life.

## Introduction

As an undergraduate at SUNY Geneseo, I had thoughts of being a psychologist, a librarian, an art historian, and a writer. This uncertainty is a familiar story for any college student; a trying, albeit necessary part of defining oneself. I took several classes in psychology and art history before timidly enrolling in an introductory creative writing class. At first glance, it seemed the course wouldn't require any skills I didn't already have, with the exception of a little boost in courage. Since middle school I had been scribbling in secrecy; trite stanzas full of angst and adolescent love, no different from that of any other teenage girl. Of course, it wasn't until this initial creative writing course that I realized my poems were trivial, or that there was more of a backbone to poetry than just the pleasure of emitting sounds and revealing emotions.

What I had always considered to be a solitary hobby soon flourished into a daily necessity. I obsessed over language and rhythm, syntax and metaphors. Later, I chose to major in Creative Writing because poetry offered me what nothing else could. When I wrote poems, I had ultimate control over the memories that were parading around my head. I could organize them, describe them, and pin them like trail-markers onto the time-line of my life. It was immensely reassuring to sort through these events in a way that made sense to me. By writing poetry, I could guide myself through the contents of my own memory. This potential to make a fractured history intact was, and still is, the catalyst for my passion to write.

As content as I was with the Creative Writing Program, I was also a restless, indecisive student. When I graduated from Geneseo, I planned to obtain my master's in Library and Information Science. It seemed the most natural progression for me; in addition to writing, I also thrived on literature. I began my graduate degree at the University at Buffalo, but withdrew from the program before the first semester was over. There was a romantic vision in my head as to what a librarian was: librarians quietly thumbed through each and every cherished book, wistfully returning them to



their proper shelf. The reality I encountered as a student did not remotely coincide with this artful daydream, and had far more to do with databases and digital media than with literature. I do not recount this in order to prove my dedication to reading and writing, but to merely express the disappointment and self-doubt instilled in me from that point onward.

After my first disaster in graduate school, I stayed in Buffalo for almost a year, working part-time at a chocolate shop and churning out poems late at night in my notebook, or on my greasy Royal typewriter. This was never with the intent of having anyone actually read my poems. Even at Geneseo, I had failed to comprehend the meaning of having an audience. I never wrote for the satisfaction of my classmates or professors. I struggled when it came to refining language, and I challenged anyone who told me my work was abstract. In my undergraduate workshops I was stubborn, and I did not want anyone else to suggest a better way for me to phrase something. How could anyone else know what I was trying to say? Obstinate as I was, I still lacked confidence, which caused even the most minor criticisms to seem caustic. During that year in Buffalo, the self-contained environment seemed to suit me perfectly. I could write freely without receiving the debilitating judgment of my peers. It was a tempting situation to be caught in, and I was on the verge of remaining an intensely private and isolated writer.

I saw many reasons for my withdrawal from the academic world of writing. The poetry I wrote in college eluded most people. My classmates failed to comprehend the poems I submitted for workshops. Most of the poems I wrote in college expressed the turmoil of my childhood and the lingering guilt I felt from my parent's divorce. I was devoted to exploring these complex emotions, and I taught myself to write about these feelings in an equally complex way. It made sense to me: complicated emotions needed complicated poems to explain them. A narrative poem wouldn't do justice to my psychological disarray. I hesitated to accept clarity as the only way to convey meaning, and still do.

I saw my childhood as a messy room where each time I entered, the furniture

and belongings were scattered, rearranged. In order to write about my past, I had to describe what I saw, even if it was something unfamiliar or strange. It was in this way that I could decipher and depict my relationship with my parents and my brothers. I strung these visual clues together, and insisted that they formed a whole. To the reader, it was almost never coherent, but to me, every image added up to a story that I understood very well. In fact, this disjointed style of writing allowed me to notice crucial details that I would not have, had I chosen to examine the memory in a linear structure.

The books I read in college also encouraged my peculiar writing practice. As a sophomore, I was almost exclusively interested in Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. There was nothing that enamored me so much as *Ariel*, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, or *All My Pretty Ones*. Their confessional sensibilities impacted me for obvious reasons. Anyone with the burden of a tumultuous or dysfunctional past will inevitably seek a way to explain, verify, contain, or obscure it. My writing fell into each of these categories. While my voice was certainly employing the confessional “I,” the surreal nature of my images did not visibly spring forth from my dedication to Plath or Sexton. My professor, Dave Kelly, was the strongest force in my reading and writing life at this time. He asked me if I was familiar with the Peruvian poet César Vallejo. At the time, I was not.

The connection I formed with Vallejo's work was both immediate and profound. To this day, I have not encountered anything I cherish as much as I do *Trilce*, the collection he wrote during his imprisonment. *Trilce* affirms my belief in my own poetry, my voice that is prone to valuing elusiveness over clarity, exuberant detail over sparse description. As an undergraduate, I was primarily interested in the faultiness of memory and the unconscious jumps the mind makes from one memory to the next. I saw my own perspective verified in the poems of *Trilce*. There's no question that these poems are of a confusing nature, but they never fail to impress the reader with their startling ingenuity. Vallejo's poems form a world that is illogical, one consisting of unfamiliar images and brashly inventive phrases that a reader would

never expect to encounter. It is this unapologetic absence of rationalism that demands and ignites an emotional reaction on the part of the reader. XXVII from *Trilce* expresses the artificial, delicate nature of memory, and displays Vallejo's characteristically jarring usage of image and language:

Stream that doesn't taste of how we're doing,  
fill me with dread, with fear.  
Glorious memory, I won't go near you.  
Sad, blonde skeleton-- hiss, hiss. (Vallejo, 15-18)

This stanza is an excellent example of pairing strong emotions with unusual language. Much like the other poems of *Trilce*, XXVII does not produce a coherent narrative for the reader to take part in. On the other hand, the poems do involve an element that serves to draw the reader in, which is the specificity of the details. It is of little consequence to me that I don't know why the stream is filling Vallejo with dread and fear, but I believe, or rather, am *convinced*, that this is so. His poems furthermore maintain an authority that makes it difficult to doubt the despair he hints at. There are strands of clarity that appear here, too: "Glorious memory, I won't go near you" (17). The ending is especially rewarding, with the appearance of a tragic skeleton making snake-like noises, "hiss, hiss," which expresses the violent or resurfacing nature of the past (18). What I admire most about Vallejo is his willingness to experiment with sounds and images taken out of context. In *Trilce*, we are complete outsiders; Vallejo thrusts us into an environment where skeletons are sad, blonde, and hissing, and all he asks of us is to play along.

My familiarization with Vallejo did not alter my writing in any direct way, but rather nudged me farther down the surrealist path I had already unknowingly chosen. During my junior and senior years at Geneseo, Dave Kelly encouraged me to continue writing via what he referred to as "associations." These associations were merely my habit of linking one image to the next by following the thread of my

consciousness. Although these associations did not always beget comprehension, the wild language and shocks of images were occasionally enough to sustain a reader.

Medbh McGuckian's *Selected Poems* was also instrumental to me at this time in terms of developing an acute sensitivity to the functions of language. I was in awe of McGuckian's subtlety, her rich and oftentimes bizarre descriptions, as well as her precision with metaphor. In addition to this, I admired the prevailing sense of calmness and serenity in her work. I had previously been representing grief in my poems as something chaotic and unmanageable, and McGuckian's elegant poems inhabited the other end of the spectrum. What was most surprising to me about her poems was how they granted the reader sufficient clarity without sacrificing the beauty of her language. The first stanza of one of my favorite poems, "Power-Cut," creates a powerful mood, mainly because of the interconnectedness of McGuckian's internal "o" rhymes:

The moon is salmon as a postage-stamp  
 over the tonsured trees, a rise-and-fall lamp  
 in a cracked ice ceiling. The cruelty  
 of road conditions flushes summer near,  
 as the storm seal hangs along the pier. (McGuckian, 1-5)

The sounds and rhymes in "Power-Cut" are reminiscent of Plath's *Ariel*, especially in the haunting tone they create. McGuckian's poem is full of original similes, "The moon is salmon as a postage-stamp" (1) and jolting lines, "a rise-and-fall lamp / in a cracked ice ceiling" (2-3). The latter is a gorgeous phrase, but is also incredibly opaque. After this surreal image, McGuckian grounds the poem with a very clear line: "The cruelty / of road conditions flushes summer near" (3-4). The reader is able to relax in the familiarity of the phrase "road conditions," even though she also uses the intriguing verb "flushes" to describe the onset of summer (4). McGuckian's poems are never too demanding on the reader, though they still harbor a great deal of

mystery. Her work is useful to me as a writer because of the balance she effortlessly strikes between clarity and opacity. McGuckian, along with Vallejo, Sexton, and Plath, remained at the forefront of my mind after college. Their influences on my poetic sensibilities were enduring.

When I began my graduate studies at SUNY Brockport, I was still unwilling to step outside of my comfort zone. At that time, I was reading the same poets and writing the same way I had as an undergraduate. For those reasons, my first poetry workshop at Brockport was difficult. I realized that in the intervening year between undergraduate and graduate school, my poetry hadn't improved at all. In the end, I chose not to blame my classmates for struggling with my poetry, which had been my former defense mechanism at Geneseo. Instead, I challenged myself by trying to answer the questions about clarity and accessibility that were raised again and again. While my writing will never be straightforward, my poetry has gradually come to acknowledge the presence of a reader. Many of the poems in my thesis demonstrate this newfound attentiveness.

My thesis is comprised of poetry written and revised over the last two years. Similar in subject matter to the poetry I wrote as an undergraduate, these poems often focus on my parents' divorce and the struggle to find a stable middle-ground between them. Each memory is described with uncommon juxtapositions of language and images. While I could easily transcribe these memories into straightforward recollections, I would rather keep them slightly veiled. There are reasons for this preference, namely that memory is such a subjective, shifting thing to begin with. In my mind, the images also tend to work together, assembling an alternate kind of clarity. While a reader may not have a firm grip on the actual story behind the poem, the specificity of language offers a concrete entrance into the memory. The first poem in my thesis, "Ghost," displays how these images ricochet and build off one another:

We set the table with paw-prints  
and oval lollipops.

I cannot rehearse how I grew up.  
 I cannot polish these haunting forks  
 unless you slap me,  
  
 tell me I am doing it wrong. (12-17)

The conclusion of “Ghost” is very straightforward and is meant to convince the reader of my devastation. To me, this poem has a very tangible through-line of violence and the need for acceptance. There are surreal moments, such as the lines, “We set the table with paw-prints / and oval lollipops” (12-13) or in the phrase, “haunting forks” (15), but there is also a reliable clarity ruling over the poem as a whole. The lines, “I cannot rehearse how I grew up” (14) and “tell me I am doing it wrong” (17) certainly afford the reader a palpable entry point into the poem.

In writing about childhood memories, Kimiko Hahn's poetry has been invaluable to me. While the poets I read as an undergraduate fueled my love of language, Hahn's work has encouraged my incessant probing of the past. The poem, “In Childhood,” from her collection, *The Artist's Daughter*, is both beautifully crafted and brimming with nostalgia and regret:

Where do the gone things go  
 when the child is old enough  
 to walk herself to school,  
 her playmates already  
 pumping so high the swing hiccups? (Hahn, 16-20)

Hahn's work is as complex as Vallejo's or McGuckian's, but unlike them, she focuses more narrowly on depicting memories from childhood and adolescence. She addresses mother-daughter relationships in many of her collections, particularly in

*The Artist's Daughter*. "In Childhood" is a perfect example of her tendency to use a very tangible image to represent grief or desperation. The visual of the girl's "playmates already / pumping so high the swing hiccups" is both potent and accessible (19-20). Though the image is straightforward, it is not bland or watered-down since she uses the unusual adjective "hiccups" to describe the squeak of swings (20). This image also serves to bring the somewhat vague line above it, "Where do the gone things go," into sharp focus (16). As I worked on my own poems about childhood memories, I admired Hahn's ability to write about the past from both a mother's and daughter's point-of-view, primarily using images to tell the story. She does so masterfully, without ever slipping into pure nostalgia or sentimentality.

In my workshop classes, the lucidity of my poems has been a constant subject of debate. While a handful of students may feel that the language is riveting enough to lead them through the poem, others point out the tremendous lack of accessibility and their subsequent inability to penetrate the content of the poem. I can only hope that the uniqueness of my ornate language is enough to suspend a reader inside the world I create. Prior to graduate school, it was of little consequence to me whether or not anyone could follow along in my poem. That's not to say the poem was composed of pure abstractions, but that there was indeed, very little through-line that a reader or listener could identify. My poem, "Scout Night," demonstrates my recent attempts at accessibility. The last three stanzas of the poem are characteristic of the movement I take from obscurity to directness:

Give me a reason not to leave you  
with the whirling ducks and library scissors.

The horse drawn on the wall  
was cornflower and exhausted chestnut.

I do remember it. (33-37)

Even though I may think that the line, “whirling ducks and library scissors” is beautiful or surprising or true, I must bear in mind that I am the sole keeper of the keys to this memory (34). The ducks and scissors will most likely not signify anything meaningful to an audience, so I must hope that the mood and the language are intriguing or sturdy enough to sustain a reader's attention. All the reader knows is that somehow, these objects and images were important *to me*. To my classmates, the extreme specificity of these details generally causes confusion, because the poem up to that point had nothing to do with ducks, scissors, or horses “drawn on the wall” (35). At its heart, the poem “Scout Night” suggests the impact of childhood memories later on in life, and of the relationships between my father, my brothers, and me. The details of our relationships are suggested with images throughout the poem, but are finally asserted as truth in the brevity of the last line, “I do remember it” (37).

It has been a goal of mine in this thesis to keep the language vivid and fresh, but also to maintain an awareness of how much work I am asking the reader to do. That isn't to say that each poem aspires to form a cohesive narrative; they don't. I simply attempted to make the leaps from image to image or memory to memory less aggressive. Writing shorter poems was instrumental in this pursuit. I had never written poems that were less than a full page prior to last year. I preferred longer poems because I enjoyed taking as many “associative” detours from stanza to stanza as I could. The longer poems in my thesis are perhaps less accessible in this respect. But I do not think this necessarily makes them less successful, because they still capture the creative flair I have for language.

When I have any doubts about the capacity of language to carry a reader through a poem, I turn to Karen Volkman's *Spar* for reassurance. In my first poetry workshop at Brockport, Dr. Ralph Black assigned *Spar*, and I was promptly mesmerized by Volkman's brilliant imagination. Her poem, “Create Desire,” relies on a lot of intriguing images to lure the reader in:



What's six and six and two and ten?  
 Time that my eye ached, my heart shook, why.  
 Mistaking lime for lemon.  
 Dressed for cobalt, charcoal, thistle– and control.

If they had more they would need less.  
 A proposal from the squinting logician.  
 Seems we are legal, seems we are ill.  
 Ponderous purpose, are you weather, are you wheel? (Volkman, 5-12)

Volkman's poetry is unlike anything I have previously been confronted with. Her lines are both playful and enigmatic. *Spar*, which is mostly composed of prose poems, throws a wrench into our former ideas of the purpose of language. “Create Desire” is a favorite poem in this collection because it is full of mystery, and extremely refreshing to read. The patterns of images and rhythms Volkman creates are evocative, such as in the line: “Dressed for cobalt, charcoal, thistle- and control” (8). While this line doesn't make any literal sense to me, it does tempt me through the complexities of sound and meaning. The “Ponderous purpose” (12) in the last line seems to connect to the “control” (8) mentioned in the previous stanza, and both lines somehow refer to the first line of the poem, “Someone was searching for a Form of Fire” (1). In this way, I am able to form a semblance of unity. The vagueness of a cohesive story in Volkman's poem does not prevent me from grasping at and appreciating the colorful images and daring musicality.

My poem, “Kennedy,” displays my own skill for incorporating striking visuals and sounds into my writing. “Kennedy” is about the semester I spent as a nanny in St. Louis, just after I graduated from high-school. Isabella is the four-year-old I took care of, and Kennedy was one of her playmates. Through vivid images, this poem suggests a divide across time that cannot be forged, and a loss that cannot be retrieved:

Though all along, Isabella, hysterics erect me.  
 Wand by wand,  
 I have long forgotten how to skip home,  
 how to rub against the preschool scissor bricks  
 and make-believe fire. (15-19)

There are a handful of phrases in this stanza alone that suggest the closure of a relationship or the fear of moving from one place to the next, such as “hysterics erect me” (15), “skip home” (17), and “make-believe” (19). There is also a very simple line that alludes to the passage of time: “I have long forgotten how...” (17). For me, these memories deserve and require examination, as they are moments that I will never again experience. The constant overlapping of memories in “Kennedy” is wrought in the same method as many of the other poems in my thesis, which I believe is both a genuine and effective way to articulate and support the weight of my emotions.

While many of the poems in my thesis are concerned with exploring memories from adolescence and childhood, there are also poems that examine memories from my first years of college. “Wadsworth” describes a relationship I had when I was nineteen. More than just dwelling on severed bonds, this poem also aches for the comfort of old surroundings. The descriptions and images in the poem convey my emotions of doubt and regret. This stanza expresses my insatiable hungering and sorrow for the past:

Grapefruits, cats.  
 A percussion at the door.  
 I still dream of that gloved dusk,  
 of the sound-waves issued from historic church bells,  
 of the waterfall misting the village. (11-15)

The details in these memories are accurate, and I trust that lines like “gloved

dusk” (13) and “the waterfall misting the village” (15) will grab a reader's attention. “Wadsworth” refers to the name of the public library I worked at in college, which was right next-door to my apartment. Again, I could easily begin the poem by stating that Wadsworth was the library where I worked, but I prefer to keep the memory slightly out-of-reach and unsettling, as I begin the poem instead with: “It was another humble library. / I woke up” (1-2). I think this works well to set the scene before drifting into other memories of that time period, particularly that of a romantic relationship. To further explore the senses attached to this memory, the stanza also utilizes elements of sound: “percussion” (12) and “church bells” (14).

Every poem in my thesis is centered on a personal memory. The three sections of the thesis are arranged somewhat chronologically, beginning with my childhood. The poems in Section One are composed of memories from childhood, or of my family. There are many recurring characters in these poems, namely Ben and Marcus, my older brothers. My mother and father also appear in almost every poem. Section Two is rooted in friendship and love, rather than family. The memories I examine in these poems are from adolescence where I avoided and feared the people I claimed to love most. Elizabeth is a character in many of these poems, and a major component of this section. Poems that reflect on the loss of friendships in my late teens and early twenties constitute Section Three.

Besides Ben, Marcus, and Elizabeth, there are many other characters that make their debut in these poems. It is certainly not my intention to confuse the reader by inserting mysterious names into my poetry, but rather to indicate that these people are simply another facet of the memory. The poems never offer any explanation as to what my relationship is with these characters, because I don't think that such knowledge would necessarily enhance the poem or make it more understandable. Furthermore, I do not think that my feelings on this matter are unfounded. Vallejo's *Trilce* mentions specific names in nearly every poem, never granting the reader the right to know who the person is and why that person has entered the scene. To me, it does not detract from enjoyment of his poems. I simply understand that the characters

are a part of Vallejo's life in one way or another, and that their presence in the poem just provides another link from memory to memory. The anonymity of these characters is not only intentional, but a significant factor to the strength of my poems.

The balance I have struggled to achieve in my relationships is mirrored in the title of my thesis, *Seesaw*. Not only is this title appropriate because so many of these poems are invested in recounting childhood memories, but also because the seesaw as an object connotes feelings of displacement and a loss of equilibrium. The instability of memory is furthermore the inspiration for all of these poems. For the reader as well, my poetry offers very little sure-footing. The success of these poems depends on the reader's ability to make leaps between time and place. But much like Vallejo's *Trilce*, or Volkman's *Spar*, I hope that my language will ground readers in this particular world of mine. I think that these poems, like Vallejo's or Volkman's, can be read individually, but tend to work best together as a whole, since similar themes weave in and out of each poem.

Despite the inherent complexities that will always persist in my writing, I am determined not to compromise my penchant for vibrant language and original images. The themes of loss, regret, guilt, and resentment that appear over and over in these poems are not exclusionary. I can only trust that readers are willing to abandon the usual comforts of logic and reason in order to dive headfirst into the unpredictable waters of my poetry. Even though I may be the only one fully able to follow the precarious trajectory of my memory, there is plenty of room in these poems for individual interpretation and endless curiosity.

One

## Ghost

I lived in a laundry room.

It's true, we had nothing but soap  
and coils of linen.

You made costumes for the library spiders.

I was committed to glitter.

You placed me in front of a mirror  
and tugged on my seashore braids,  
pinched my velvet into place  
and ignored me. No wonder

Marcus pummeled Ben with aluminum  
until he went blind.

We set the table with paw-prints  
and oval lollipops.

I cannot rehearse how I grew up.

I cannot polish these haunting forks  
unless you slap me,

tell me I am doing it wrong.

## Loophole

All of the inches taken.  
My mother strains  
over the breakable cows.  
At Easter we butter and starve.  
And my father: king of Louisiana.

I am here because there are only  
these jump-rope days left.  
When I tore my knee and blood  
wept across my stockings, my brother  
pulled me down Pearl Street to school.  
I begged the children to kiss me.  
I sharpened their pencils with my eyes.

I have built the silence into  
the shape of a peek-a-boo turtle,  
and when the moon is full  
of dire magnetism, I am the size of a seahorse,  
walking home through bayou gloss  
with tender jaws.

## Tipping Over

Shocks of glass on my neck,  
wedged in my elbow as if danger had kissed me.  
The sore crunch of goodbye  
like fault-lines of sawdust.  
Comets, thumbs.

This is it: a trail of items.  
In the Adirondacks, there is the tense star  
we cut in the snowbank,  
pines, swirling violins.  
Ben's masked tremble; her birthday  
shattering into pastel delicacies.

I'd still like to think we survived  
the cuneiform of death  
with our tumbling puppets, our pact.  
We must have,  
we were brother and sister, colliding,  
protected at last.

But I don't remember correctly.  
Our mother retraces the Equator for us.  
Already, the scene has gained momentum:  
a wilderness drips on quaking Marcus,  
my teeth wither to black,  
anniversary pearls.  
The injured world halts, hobbles



out of focus.

Two forces need a third.

Look, my brother, this is us:

braced for impact,

you holding fast to my arm,

like a vine.

Lack Of

Hold on.

January, the cat is always mewling.

No more oatmeal,  
no more calamity apples or harpsichords,  
perfectly sewn.

I shudder up to Vermont,  
take the Hudson back, skating.

I dream of my quarrelsome brothers,  
of lamplight, aggressive ice.

But wait.

I follow Laura Leigh into her tidy bedroom,  
quivering cherries and a golden puppy.

We brush our nails with passion-fruit glitter,  
pneumonia rose, navy moon,  
too much.

And my hardscrabble cowgirl boots,  
and my gymnast lust.

When my mother was poor, when hideous John  
interrupted our summers,  
when I was mute, young,

I was a sweetheart. I let you borrow everything.

## Scout Night

Try to calm down.

Will you kiss Matthew's roughhouse cheek  
if he ever comes back? I will.

In the meantime, I've heard dusk thunder;  
I've sung a hymn or two.

Octopus, Octopi.

Say you were in the kitchen.

I was in the kitchen.

I was pouring myself a drink  
and kneeling down.

I've played duck, duck, goose until it became  
a game only understood by me.

What's darker than a church basement  
of candlelit handkerchiefs?

Nothing. You've earned your badge.

Now I am twenty-three:

I've winked at brassy fields of dandelions  
with unsteady hexagonal nerves.

I've tasted iced cherries and mended  
orphan soccer bones.

Swim into the wall;  
come up for air.

No, no, no. Do it over.

Ask me if I'm tired. I am tired.

In the wisteria bedroom,  
we clamped our shameful faces into sock-puppets  
and kicked whimpering moccasins off.

Did we look at each other?

I dare say we didn't.

Calm down, will you?

Give me a reason not to leave you  
with the whirling ducks and library scissors.

The horse drawn on the wall  
was cornflower and exhausted chestnut.

I do remember it.

## Splinter

I was there, too.

If you say it was fair,  
you're a liar. It wasn't.

I adjusted my binoculars,  
I saw the lamplight tremor out.

For shelter, there were geodesic domes.  
But you knotted plaid over my throat,  
shoving me across the bridge  
into deceptive tesseracts.

Don't worry, there's enough of me to go around.  
Take us to the rusty jungle-gym  
and leave only me behind,  
slipping into the tint of daguerreotypes,  
the task of being their sweet nuisance,  
their sister.

Please don't ask me which diamonds I found,  
how physically I carried the angular tools,  
how easily I stumbled  
when my brothers swarmed.

Equals

The telescope she viewed me through.  
All afternoon, I've cartwheeled  
around the obstacle course,  
trampling her hydrangeas,  
her treasured ferns.

Peel back the vivisection.  
Yes, I remember the embalmer's knuckles,  
the synchronism of cat's cradle,  
the fear of paralyzed dolls.  
Admit it.

How I wanted to follow the choreography,  
how I dreaded those tectonic nightgowns, those  
hobbling magenta elbows.

What a mirage it was,  
waiting for you to praise me.

## Maple Tapping

Snow, cough. What I can't allow you to do anymore  
is pry the calligraphy feather from my hand. Penmanship

is never honest. I was fearful of separation, of steaming  
Pangaea. Mother's scorn was mathematical

as we cowered: one, two, three. We belonged to Wednesdays,  
to ceramic veterinarians and black locks.

Ingalls and demure sugar. She designed the porcelain fable,  
I illustrated pen-and-ink candles. Are you dissatisfied

with my interpretation? It was prairie hardship: lavender firewood  
and calico bonnets. From syncopated lakes to Rhode Island,

I still cannot make amends.

## Pitching the Tent

How strange.

Those elevators remind me:  
there was beaded taffeta  
and a shimmering window.

I held my girlfriend's wrist.  
Jupiter turned clockwise in the sky  
with elegance, with those tiptoe storms of August.  
We watched each other breathe.  
Afterwards, I limped off to Missouri.

My father was always sewing on badges  
and hollering into cotton.  
There was time enough for anything,  
for the charring blades of therapists,  
for our confessions to embroider the wall.

In the forest, we chiseled totem poles,  
sent loon calls to Saturn.  
You whittled fresh spearmint  
which I ate from your palm.

Little Dipper, kindling.  
A battle was taking place around me.  
I didn't know. I blinked at the world  
in my peach bathing suit,  
waiting for the storyteller to begin.



But you were only a kidnapper,  
forcing that neon salamander into my hand.

## Carbon Copy

After the frost,  
my fingers have not been holding what they touch:  
wine glasses, translucent castles.  
Watch: there I am in the igloo,  
wading into a makeshift thaw.  
My mother tucks in the missing dolls,  
aloft as pocked Io.

Shear it off.  
Look: there is no room for my tumbling apricot hair.  
February is stern, burrowing  
with a threadbare lung.  
No, I have never been better.  
And my sister, now entering her blissful tenth year.

Two

Kennedy

Even Halloween is over,  
even those sudden crayon pieces of sleep.  
Everything: napping in my floral snowcoat,  
bottling the Midwest princess milk.  
On Mondays, we were psychologists.  
Art wore stumbling, museum feet.

When Micah gasped peach, I inhaled sycamore.  
I couldn't read the melancholic slate  
nor the vaporous, bossy answers.  
Discipline was a playground  
where we tossed each other wooden candy.  
Every morning I multiplied hypnotic daises.  
Aberdeen was a yawn; rhythms were a tug-of-war  
choking on yawns.

Though all along, Isabella, hysterics erect me.  
Wand by wand,  
I have long forgotten how to skip home,  
how to rub against the preschool scissor bricks  
and make-believe fire.

## Perennials

It's clenched in the letters of his name,  
wadded in the clay of my faraway jaw.

Now what?

Retrace your steps.

I can't pretend that her falsetto apple  
didn't pucker my blood vessel gems.

I can't.

We look in the mailbox for evidence.

There it is. Take it out.

His shriek was a liquid funneled in the treble clef.

Finally I have come down from the woodwinds  
of the toyshop mountain.

There were times when I was held for ransom,  
pressing each robin on its forehead  
until a chromosome opened up.

I hibernated, watched my half-life sail down the hourglass.

I organized Rebecca's marigold polishes, bottle by bottle,  
until a weak Star of David formed.

Hand over hand, arabesque.

Don't tell me you didn't faint  
when my sister mistakenly leapt off the balance-beam  
into a cacophonous shock of air.

The strawberry of her glitter,  
the wrench of arrhythmic muscles,  
the chalk puffing from a pair of dipped braids.

My words tore into confetti.  
My gasp piped stock-still  
into the metallic gymnasium.

Even when you think it's over, it isn't.  
When Matthew shoved me down  
I took the treatment well, I deserved it.  
Wake up, cedar eyes.  
It's instantaneous; teardrops cascading into  
bandit alphabet-blocks.  
But some people lose their turns,  
even so.

This is what happened:  
as I slept, dream-molecules formed me.  
In Boston, my pollen ghosted from the window  
and buckled into cobbler's shops.  
Then I was awake; guilty helium rifting my feet.  
I locked and unlocked the stamen of my own tired spine.  
I beckoned the morning into the room.  
I looked it in the eye.

Dare me to. Someone plucked the tiny harps  
of my safety fists open; someone touched the color-wheel.  
His heft trespassed my ballerina equilibrium,  
suction by suction. Finger by nail.  
On that morning, the material of my velveteen body  
was whipped in the dormant grid of city-streets.  
I was the flaw

but it wasn't my fault.

Yuri Avram Stone.

Britton, Micah

Not anymore. You would think I'd be susceptible to that memory,  
but I make a loop of fog with my hands. Watch.

I compare: kiss to kiss. It depends on the month  
and the bas relief is seasonless. So is the quarter-moon portico.

Tresses that echo shorter or longer. Wait for the scritch of hieroglyphics,  
the condensation chilling into a C.

He licked my kneecap. Where were my soccer gloves, my teeth?  
Mint by mint, I exercised. My pose was surefooted, held into a vase.

I opened his steady biceps one after the other, pulsing trust.  
*Nevermind*, I said, and fastened them with a stitch.

That was another honeycomb boy. Twice phyllotaxis, twice fiber.  
And a rasping mother; and a swift Van Gogh pity note.

To you across the pulsars, I cursed the nuisance of California,  
Maine. I dwindled chimneys. Sleep, I twisted into a broom.

And then it was over. No one made a sound. Bliss was  
sound. Desideratum was pretty; sound was *Tera Storms*.



## Divorce

How long before the fresh air expires  
into crickets?  
I have corrupted March into May  
on stale heartbeats.

We once patted mud chipmunks  
on the picnic table.  
Night after night,  
the girl and I dried our slim, hemp dresses  
in the clay fields.  
She tied me down and brought slices of mid-morning  
to my nightmare lips:  
storm tendrils, mulberry clouds.  
Cakes are cakes and  
lightning is mint.

Take a breath.

There I was in the rink,  
following Elizabeth.  
We were perfect, tracing a figure-eight,  
that cursive equation of grief.

Third November

I took the room apart to look for you.  
Girl in a bluebell dress,  
that shawl of vagabond hair  
and a misplaced comb.  
A butterfly, swimming.  
I'm not the librarian,  
I'm the knife-grinder's granddaughter.  
Elizabeth, tell me the difference.

Sleep arrived on stilts.  
We exchanged sandals, farewell daises.  
Your woodland throat puffed clarinet breath  
into campfire. I stood by the piano,  
pressing middle C.

Fathom it. I can't.  
The tiger lilies we clipped for your mother  
are still billowing with chlorine.  
Fold my arms, unfold them.

Love, you held the Povinelli knife steady  
while I whimpered, off-center.

## Palindrome

You've got a chameleon belly  
that weighs an ounce.

Well, well.

Dawn healed my bicep  
into an old-fashioned *fleur-de-lis*.

Your pulse is a moist pond of Romanian tea.

I'm not worried;

I'm filing my nails with Irish charm.

Don't you know I'd give you permission  
to suck my Eskimo voice up with a straw?

It's an astral January, and we have lost  
our evergreen pigments.

How I wish it were never six o'clock,  
never seven.

I awoke tethered to her ghost.

My azure girlfriend's palm was in the shape  
of November.

Our bicycles donated their wheels to sleepers,  
back when I knew the glass lobsters too well.

Was my windpipe a tinsel rose?

She once thought so.

The secret is: I'm still keen on that trembling edelweiss.

I'd still lick narcissistic Italy across its forehead.

I can't keep those piano keys

from powdering into lopsided notes.  
It was always this way,  
or worse.

If I ever see those daffodils again,  
I'll eat them.  
My petals will have the texture  
of sweet icebergs  
and the flavor  
of a premonition in reverse.

Three

Wadsworth

It was another humble library.

I woke up.

There were slick, horseshoe leaves  
and gashes of autumnal crops.

So what?

We were nineteen, I reminded myself.

Dustin carried the humid pumpkin soup  
all through October.

Beards and hands ghosted down the Geneseo street.

Saturday, townspeople.

Grapefruits, cats.

A percussion at the door.

I still dream of that gloved dusk,  
of the sound-waves issued from historic church bells,  
of the waterfall misting the village.

Once, I existed in sleeves of amethyst  
and breakfast coal; fierce wishes for permanence  
and his arrival of minor notes:  
the fictive meal in a storybook cauldron  
nourishing the peasants forever.

Anderson

Tuesday's lesson.

In the studio, oils glottal as the damper pedal.

My brush fumbled iridescent  
as Peter scraped the aerial rooftops of Prague.

Articulate your self-portrait.

Here is one version of the artist:

notice the angle where she is welded  
butterfly, flannel.

Watercolor passersby enter the scene,  
cuffing smocks and pouring coffee.

Spatters of brick; foggy lithographs.

My appetite soared out-of-tune,  
my eyes flourished goldenrod and silver.

I haunted wallpaper with alizarin shadows,  
crimps of viridian hair.

All spring, my handiwork stalked me homeward,

reciting omens of nine o'clock astronomy:

a teal Cassiopeia interior and that decorative  
Polaris heart.

Welles

What if it was years ago? It was, and I am still weak-kneed  
from those hopeless wolves my teacher hung.

Over his shoulders, silver blue-jays hatched  
into crescents. Afternoons, we drizzled homeward.

In a circumference, nothing compensates for anhedonia,  
for lost Takashi and thrumming Rob. I once knew

how a parabola batters solace. With negation,  
with omission of seasons. Where tactility is not love,

it becomes sufficiency. By the time you no longer remember  
our numb woodcuts, you will have forgotten me.

Touch does cling, but it does not touch.



Albright-Knox

Baroque, October.

We met on the museum steps.

Libraries, the reassuring palms of my hands.

I was twenty-two,

a still-life, a curtain of slush.

Hanging turtle snowflakes with twine,

I spread pioneer quilts over hissing ice.

No, I didn't. I never did.

I set truffles down onto crackling wax.

Calendars, weary aprons.

Sculptures tiptoed through our room like kittens.

Candy was marble, helium was pink,

so easy.

Listen: this is how you feign clairvoyance.

You rearrange the facts.

## Counter-Clockwise

Give me a hand, won't you?

I awoke

on the brink of flavor.

There's a teaspoon of my dream in the icebox;

there's the illusion of mother's brine.

All I need is a dollop, I've heard

a little goes a long way.

I hadn't enough accuracy

to describe the man's fingertips.

That doesn't mean the crust of pain went unnoticed

as I wept over sulfuric Venus,

as his arthritis levitated

and conducted the black shirts to march onward.

Until I painted Vuillard's salted wall,

I was nothing better than a mute washerwoman.

It took many failures to swat Amy's trolls off the balcony,

to step inside the carnival mirror

and stop arguing at the party.

When I spoke,

I spoke with the poise of doilies, and still aim to.

Give me back my caked parabola of fossils,

the starfish crawlspace, the knapsack of tearful bluebells.

I could have filtered you into a Grecian flute,

I could have jellied you. Even Heather said so.

The shame of it  
is still shameful.

Let's backtrack among the tomatoes.  
Between the X and Y axes  
I can still taste the sheep dust  
scaling the asphodel.

If you say it didn't happen,  
then it didn't.  
In the morning,  
less is more.

Years Ago

There was a town stretched into  
a monarch butterfly.  
My house was made of pillars and bricks,  
an Avonlea trellis  
and a séance doorbell.  
A cat flashing an emerald collar.

Then the village became the set of a play.  
We were given props: blindfolds  
and saucers of hunger.  
My brother was the astronaut,  
tender as ozone.

Kites erupted from the stage.  
And I was just another greedy character in the valley,  
I was a furious raincoat, a daughter.

Neither one of us was going to wake up.

Tokens

How can I do anything.

Some remnants:

typewriter ribbon, a manatee wrapped  
in lullaby paper.

Forget seduction.

I've had heaps of copper kisses,

whole rooms washed

in turtle ovens, vowels.

Texture of Saturdays, Sundays.

I miss everything.

## Bibliography

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Animals in That Country*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1968. Print.
- Berryman, John. *The Dream Songs*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969. Print.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Dreamtigers*. Trans. Donald A. Yates. Austin: U of Texas P, 1978. Print.
- Brautigan, Richard. *In Watermelon Sugar*. New York: Dell, 1968. Print.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1995. Print.
- Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*. New York: Picador, 1998. Print.
- Deulen, Danielle Cadena. *The Riots*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2011. Print.
- Dickinson, Emily. *Collected Poems*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993. Print.
- Glück, Louise. *Ararat*. New York: Ecco, 1990. Print.
- . *Averno*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Print.
- . *The First Four Books of Poems*. New York: Ecco, 1995. Print.
- . *Meadowlands*. New York: Ecco, 1997. Print.
- . *The Seven Ages*. New York: Ecco, 2001. Print.
- Hahn, Kimiko. *Air Pocket*. New York: Hanging Loose, 1989. Print.
- . *The Artist's Daughter*. New York: Norton, 2002. Print.
- . *Earshot*. New York: Hanging Loose, 1992. Print.
- . *Mosquito & Ant*. New York: Norton, 1999. Print.
- . *Toxic Flora*. New York: Norton, 2010. Print.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Toronto, ON: Broadview, 2007. Print.
- Kelly, Dave. *Filming Assassinations*. Ithaca, NY: Ithaca House, 1979. Print.
- . *Talking to Myself*. Brockport, NY: State Street, 1994. Print.
- . *When You Tell Them About Us*. Bedford, NH: Igneus, 2003. Print.
- Kinnell, Galway. *The Book of Nightmares*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1971. Print.
- McGuckian, Medbh. *Selected Poems 1978- 1994*. Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest UP, 1997. Print.
- Neruda, Pablo. *Extravagaría*. Trans. Alastair Reid. New York: Farrar, Straus and

- Giroux, 1975. Print.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. London: Faber and Faber, 1965. Print.
- . *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper, 1971. Print.
- . *The Colossus and Other Poems*. New York: Vintage, May 1998. Print.
- Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Print.
- Smith, Betty. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. New York: HarperPerennial, 2006. Print.
- Torres, Justin. *We the Animals*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2011. Print.
- Vallejo, César. *The Black Heralds*. Trans. Richard Schaaf & Kathleen Ross.  
Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review, 1990. Print.
- . *The Complete Posthumous Poetry*. Trans. Clayton Eshleman & José Rubia Barcia.  
Los Angeles: U of California P, 1978. Print.
- . *Trilce*. Trans. David Smith. New York: Grossman, 1973. Print.
- Volkman, Karen. *Crash's Law*. New York: Norton, 1996. Print.
- . *Spar*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2002. Print.
- Waldner, Liz. *Self and Simulacra*. U of Maine: Alice James Books, 2001. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Harcourt, 1981. Print.
- . *The Waves*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2006. Print.