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# 36 Yellow Fields to One White Rhino

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36 YELLOW FIELDS TO ONE WHITE RHINO

By

Sarah Bates

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

April 2017

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

36 YELLOW FIELDS TO ONE WHITE RHINO

This thesis by SARAH BATES is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of ENGLISH and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

36 YELLOW FIELDS TO ONE WHITE RHINO

By

Sarah Bates

*36 Yellow Fields to One White Rhino* which circles around the northern white rhinoceros facing extinction, interrogates a number of collisions including vulnerability and violence, silence and truth, ugliness and beauty, geography and home, misunderstanding and understanding, autobiography and the political, among others.

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- “Hunter.” *Dirty Chai*, Fall 2015
- “Why Some Animals are Sexier than Others.” *The Normal School*, Fall 2015

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## INTRODUCTION

### I. Forty Miles into the Seney Stretch

My first collection of poems, *36 Yellow Fields to One White Rhino* begins in the back of a '57 dump truck, its speaker on the side of the road gathering feathers in hopes of becoming the little bones of peonies. By page 59, our same speaker asks, “and isn’t it both the knowing and the not knowing... isn’t it the point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language and the unconscious meet?” In considering my first book of poetry, it seems best to consider this point of intersection, the worlds occurring in between the known and the unknown, how the poem takes place somewhere in between the Seney’s beginning and end. As we watch the speaker grapple with loss, love, beginnings and endings, we are given first hand access to this process of coming to know. We watch a writer’s own exploration of the page’s capabilities unfold in the middle of the Badlands, swerving to avoid a herd of prairie dogs.

My second semester at Northern, after taking my first poetry workshop, I signed up for a Nonfiction class with my now Thesis Director, Matthew Gavin Frank. I hadn’t considered notions of genre until Matt challenged me to question them, ultimately pushing my poetry into a world of its own. Working with longer lines and forms, I began to lean more heavily on research, becoming enamored with questions history had to offer, atrocities the world around me presented, contradictions that begged to be interrogated in the lyric. While my writing started out as confessional through its use of blank verse, it has transformed into a louder, more assertive, almost demanding voice through its experimenting with form. It was this exploration of boundaries that ignited a raw courage in me to disrupt the idea of sentimentality in writing, and ultimately embrace the power of vulnerability on the page. Although I didn’t begin with any specific

theme in mind, it is necessary to note at the end of the process the themes which emerged regardless of intent.

## II. The It Being My Heart

In her collected lectures, *Madness, Rack, and Honey*, Mary Ruefle asks us to consider beginnings. She claims “if you have an idea, a grid of intent, you are on the wrong path.” She says, “the more I think about theme, the more I am drawn to the idea that theme is always an extrapolation, a projection, an extension or expansion of an original idea, if such a thing as an original idea exists. To extrapolate means to arrive at conjectural knowledge concerning an unknown area.” Although I too resist going into a poem with an idea or theme in mind, this collection easily arrived at its own exploration of obsessions which occur and reoccur throughout. It was in my own resisting that I started to rely on certain images, ideas, and realities that quickly became in communication with one another. The collection interrogates a number of collisions including vulnerability and violence, silence and truth, ugliness and beauty, geography and home, misunderstanding and understanding, autobiography and the political, among others. It was then that I began choosing specific objects such as the red and yellow Phillips head, ivory tusks, and fields of frozen buffalo started to emerge, objects which didn’t necessarily exist independently of each other, but rather interconnected in unexpected ways, in order to drive these important themes. Looking back, it is the reinforcing conceit of making connections and disconnections between people, nature, and between the both the reasoning and emotional identity that I am exploring aspects of my world not just as singular artifacts, but in relation to the self, society, and place.

The first major theme that emerges immediately in my first poem, *Forty Miles into the Seney Stretch*, is a consideration of my own emotional identity and by the poem's end, my own resistance to it. *Forty miles into the Seney Stretch, I threw it in the back of a '57 dump truck.* The it being my heart. By page 24, the speaker apologizes for this act. "I threw it in the back of a '57 dump truck. Called this rationale: more choices." It's as if the speaker is attempting to talk herself into this resistance of vulnerability, as if finding the right language to follow this act of destruction will justify the damage, the body blistered, the bleeding heart. *There wasn't enough room, so I did.* Yet, all parts of the poem leave us with a sense of unrest, the hardness of water, and a burnt sun. It's as if the speaker means to dispose of the heart yet at any minute, burn everything in order to save it. It is here that we feel an immediate anxiety to choose, to make love less, to do it anyway. I chose this poem to occur first in the manuscript because I believe it to be one of the most pivotal in the completion of this project. While we watch ripples from the West, we too try to stop the bleeding. We relate to a speaker who tells us forty miles into the Seney Stretch, *this doesn't feel right*, and then does it anyway. We encounter a speaker whose own perception of identity transforms with every poem, every line. In one of my longer line poems, "Why Some Animals are Sexier than Others," our speaker starts off by telling us, *this is not a poem about feelings... this is not a poem about how sometimes my feelings are wrong.* We are immediately let into a literal resistance of emotion, a speaker who uses repetition throughout as if convincing not just us, but herself as well, a speaker who claims, *this is not a poem about people finding hope in poems.* Instead, *it's an essay about the times they don't.* Yet, somehow throughout this collection, we encounter a narrator who seems to be moving relentlessly towards something, a narrator who searched the internet for the nearest bear in white, drove three hours to the Columbus Zoo, and went straight for Polar Frontier. We stand with her in front of the handprint

covered class. We read the sign, “Exhibit Closed for the Season,” and suddenly, we are in the Heart of Africa, the heart of a narrator trying to give up, but doesn’t know how. Not only does this piece introduce us to the major theme that drives the rest of the work, it lets us in on the importance of physical place and movement for our narrator’s process as we experience more experimental language while the narrator moves through the landscape. Forty miles into the Seney Stretch, we encounter a narrator who burns apathy and airplane, but by the collection’s end in “Bloodroot,” she is killing herds of prairie dogs in the Badlands.

### III. John Ashbery in the Badlands

From my earliest interactions with poetry, I was always drawn to those which situated themselves in nature. I found an old book of poems by John Ashbery the summer before my junior year of high school and this morning, I can still remember my first encounter with “Some Trees.” It was the silence already filled with noises, a puzzling light. Then *that bird ignoring us, pausing in mid-flight to take another direction*. And years later, one morning in the fall of starting my MFA, it was Ashbery again, *somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you, at incredible speed, traveling day and night, through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through narrow passes*. It was the question ending the stanza and the way the sun reflected on a felled tree as I read, *but will he know where to find you, recognize you when he sees you, give you the thing he has for you?* It was this question and the sun and the felled tree and the Upper Peninsula’s unique landscape that inspired my first collection of poems. My work relies most heavily on landscape in order to access the vulnerable. It is as if the silence found in nature has allowed a space for the speaker to not only be creatively inspired by the physical movement of self, but also to be able to process on the page what is being interrogated internally.

I never wanted to write nature poetry as a celebration of landscape, but instead, I wanted to pursue the questions which occurred between narrators and their environments, specifically the ones which emerge from the feeling of displacement.

The collection begins in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan on one of the longest straight stretches of curveless highway east of the Mississippi. While this poem was written a year after moving to Michigan, its emotions, chosen objects, and use of language originated the year previously when after fourteen hours of driving, I made it to the Seney Stretch. For years I had dreamed of the Pacific Northwest. Of taller mountains, an unknown coast, a view of the Puget Sound at night. I had been planning to move to Seattle months before making my decision to come to Marquette, so by the time I made it to the stretch of jack pine, so much of this collection had become driven by loss, desires that felt postponed, and at times, never to come. The poem following, "Plastic Wolves," seems like an immediate commentary on this very loss, a meditation on this new place I spent my first two years resisting. Through this literal resisting, I made more risky choices on the page, in terms of both form and content. When I think back to my beginning in Marquette, my first few walks to McCarty's or hikes up Sugarloaf, I feel a weight to my experience as a person and as a poet. Moving here came with so much heartache and loss that my goal soon became to stop the bleeding. Which at the time, meant stopping the feeling. Over the course of the collection, we encounter a narrator at war with herself, her identity as female, all in relation to the physical landscape she comes in contact with. While the first poem brings us to the side of the road in Michigan, we are soon taken to the bending bark of the tallest trees, a narrator trying not to think of white rhinos when something comes on the news, the *I* refusing to tell the you in the poem how she feels. We travel back in time to Crater Lake during the Two Bulls Fire, then to Yellowstone National Park and a field of frozen buffalo. We

encounter a literal change in landscape, the language used, as well as the narrator's interaction with both. It is in this first book of poetry that I comb out the feelings of displacement I experienced in moving to the Upper Peninsula by physically leaving Marquette and then being able to process while both away and returning.

#### IV. Six White Rhinos and the Misunderstanding of a Mixtape

I think it was a Saturday night. I was walking home somewhere between High and Hewitt. I remember trying to explain the itch to a stranger. To old friends and new. *Maybe it's dry skin.* Someone recommended lotioning. I called my mom and tried talking about the rain. How it never rained here. I'd been trying so hard not to feel that I had gotten shingles. On the third or fourth night of the itch, of tossing and turning in between floral and flannel, I googled "the saddest things happening in the world right now." As of October 2014, there were only six white rhinoceroses left in the world. I was suddenly thinking less about loss and more about floating ivory. *There are none known to be left in the wild,* I read to the front yard's oak. *On Friday, rangers found the northern white rhino lifeless in his hut.* That's when the loss became extinction. This new place the lifeless hut. Then the fear of it never arriving. It was Matthew Arnold who believed that poetry attaches the emotion to the idea and that the idea is then fact. Suddenly everything I felt, everything I feared and longed for had everything to do with the northern white rhinoceros and the fact that it was going away. The symbol of the rhino became a vital part of my identity not just a writer trying to make sense of the world around me, but as a person trying to come to terms with a world that could lead a four ton animal to its end. On a

train from L.A. to San Diego I counted thirty-six yellow fields. *Remember the symbolic theme of the rhinoceros: things are not as they seem.*

After the rhino came the whooping crane, the world's tallest bird versus a two hundred pound beaver. Then little foxes on a footstool, Isle's Royale's last two wolves, and too many caribou. As I began considering how humans were the cause to the white rhino's nearing extinction, I started to think about my own interactions with humanity and how they had shaped my identity, and especially, the way in which I viewed myself. When I started my MFA three years ago, I had only recently come to terms with abuse I had experienced as a child. It was something that started happening at nine and it wasn't until age twenty-one that I accepted it. It is my belief that this was something that occurring in the part of the brain that serves the not knowing. In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson introduces her chapter on psychoanalytic theory by claiming that in fact, "it is our not knowing about a problem, not realizing when it is influencing our behavior — that gives it so much control over us." It is my belief that the suffering I experienced at age nine is what led me to a world on the page, a world where I might know and understand why a red and yellow Phillips head was there to watch. By year two, I wanted to carve a space for it in my poetry. "Old Milwaukee" was the first poem, written looking out windows into this new world of language. Somewhere in between Milwaukee and Marquette, *for months I avoid stairs. Instead cut out Billy goats and killer bees, you on top a red and yellow Phillips Head calling nine seventeen.* This poem became more and more meaningful as I started to consider not only its role in the healing process, but also how much going into this space, letting myself feel and process, affected my way of processing on the page. First came the animals. The red and yellow Phillips Head. I wasn't ready to articulate the feelings that came with the abuse so I began to rely on

certain objects, images, that started occurring and then reoccurring in other pieces. With the re-occurrences came the worry. I worried it wasn't something I should write about. I worried I was writing about it so people would feel sorry for me. I worried people were thinking I wrote about it just so they would feel empathy for me. I worried when I started to write the second, "Ten Sleep," how *in my dreams the Mother of the Forest watched him pour his restlessness and tobacco into fields until they became the biggest black hole in Appalachia*. I worried when I killed that man. *How I searched my mother's jars of grapevine for the old scent of archives, but all I could remember were how many bees I'd killed that spring*. I worried because I stopped thinking about God. I worried until the worry transformed my writing into research based lyric, worry that inspired me to live out the questions on the page. T.S. Eliot believed the progress of an artist to be a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality... the man who suffers and the mind which creates. I worried he was right. I worried it wasn't just the northern white rhino going away. I worried the more I wrote about the things I wanted to forget, the more I would become floating ivory, the red and yellow Phillips Head. As I became obsessed with certain emotions, certain losses or loves, the more the objects would appear. I was worried I was using the same language every time. I was afraid the only kind of poem I would ever write was a sad one, a poem about the time he took me upstairs and showed me the absence of oxygen and light. *That's when I started walking around like lilacs glazed over, just eggs yolks over countertop sound, some bouquet of wreck.*

It was during this time of worry that I started to rely on the animals in order to incorporate vulnerability into my writing. In my second poem, "Plastic Wolves," the speaker talks of remembering herself in parts and at the same time, remembering nothing. She asks,



*why should I tell you every little thing*, and instead tells us to *ask the animals*. Without knowing, I began to consider animals as beings without a voice, much like the nine year sticking stained hands into the second engine. While animals are able to communicate with one another, we as humans can't understand them. I started to feel more and more like an animal as I began thinking back to the times upstairs staring at the red and yellow Phillips Head, and again on the other side of the stall, knowing the you on the other side, the you in so many of pieces, didn't love me back. All at once, I was both the predator and the prey, the lion and the little fox, North America's tallest bird and the two hundred pound beaver. I was processing my feelings of being backed into the corner by obsessing over the image of a whooping crane crushing eggs on purpose. What would I say then, finally, when the dentist shot Cecil, when the second time I saw the little fox it was on a leash, what language would help me escape the upstairs room after I'd went home to Virginia for the first time in months and my dad had forgotten to take his medicine.

In his essay *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Gaston Bachelard asks, "what is the source of our first suffering?" It was his belief that this suffering lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak... that it was born in the moments when we accumulated silent things within us. When you encounter my first book of poems, you also encounter my first moment of suffering. The first time upstairs staring at a yellow and red Phillips head trying to make sense of the world around me. The animals encountered from start to finish, Frank the billy goat, Josephine and Pete, Nola and Masamba, the bear and its mouth by the tub, while voiceless, are what have given a voice to these moments of silence which accumulated. Finally came the theme I wasn't planning on, the theme which required the self-sacrifice, this continual extinction of personality. Finally came my informed engagement with female identity, specifically in

relation to the male. Whether in conversation with the first man who took me upstairs, my father who suffers from bi-polar disorders, or the many you's who did not return my affections, the speaker flows from poem to poem in search of a voice, with the intent of finding the right language to be able to say the things men have done to her. On page 11, she tells us of the he who dragged her clothes from the dryer, how she stopped thinking of God. And on 17, the he who feels bad about having her drive him to the airport, how he wasn't going to stop her from coming to Oregon. And then finally on 27, the he who under fading ceilings, chandeliers breaking, the he who tells our speaker to go to hell. We are let into moments of violence, heartache, a speaker trying to come to terms with both. Moment after moment, poem after poem, we watch her use of language and tone shift as time goes on. We experience the becoming of a voice and then get to watch the smallest voice become more and more concise and less worried with language. In "Every Morning I Used to Bury the Wind," we watch from fields away as she finally kills the man who believed her body was only meant for listening to wind, and in the second to last poem, we finally see our narrator put into words what this first act of suffering did to her. We see how sometimes it takes 57 kinds of fish, or in this case, poems, to heal the first act.

FORTY MILES INTO THE SENEY STRETCH

I threw it in the back of a '57 dump truck.

I watched ripples from the West  
and bled North. Make love less.

To be the little bones of peonies,  
you have to gather feathers.

I listened to the hardness of water  
to stop the bleeding.

And when I saw my heart long enough,  
I thought *burn everything*.

There wasn't enough room,  
so I did.

Burnt war, burnt sun,  
burned apathy and airplane.

Saw my body blistered,  
said *this doesn't feel right*.

I did it anyway.

## PLASTIC WOLVES

I remember myself in parts. November morning without snow. Dusty footprints, no brakes. I remember nothing. Why should I tell you every little thing. There should be music, jumbo universe, a desperate tongue, more banging inside. My heart in the magazine, it says I ran through the train. Ask the animals. This is my heart at the table, this is the night sky making no sense. I was covered in blisters. I burnt with a soft voice. Did you hear me? I said my body, it was covered in blisters, my body at the top of the river watching, my body a river knocking over plates, my body a spine eating eggs by itself. When I start with mirrors, I end with dark room. She said, you're starting to look fragile, in between how do we measure broken limb box and children playing with bees, that's when I started walking around like lilacs glazed over, just egg yolks over countertop sound, some bouquet of wreck, this is where I ran away from leaves changing. How I'd go over plastic wolves, paper feeling, all the pity inside. I'd go over this place like a scratched door locked in its jaw. My body in its own mouth, so then my heart asking for sea, the absence of a predator, and a world without the moon. I became this place of circling shore, a cleft of the rock. I talk to my heart just like nine volt dirt, you see my heart like little foxes on a footstool, here is where I tell you every little thing

## WHY SOME ANIMALS ARE SEXIER THAN OTHERS

This is not a poem about feelings.

This is an essay about six white rhinoceros. Six white rhinos and the misunderstanding of a mixtape.

This is not a poem about you making me a mixtape.

It's an essay about the fastest routes to God. Frank Sinatra, the Bronx Zoo, and week old pots of coffee with the light still on. God.

This is not a poem about how sometimes my feelings are wrong. It's an essay about my father telling me to pay attention to baseball. The extinction of the butterfly and the way men sink. Women dig.

I swallow.

This isn't a poem about my first Reds game. There will be no attempt to describe strangers and pulled pork and the intimacy of the seventh inning stretch. Not in a poetic way. This is an essay about the meekness of the whooping crane. North America's tallest bird versus a two hundred pound beaver. Josephine and Pete crushing eggs on purpose.

It's not a poem about how things go wrong. It's an essay about wanting to swallow the moon but subtracting it instead. What I'm trying to say is this is not a poem about how I don't sleep anymore so I eat villanelles instead. It's an essay about how sometimes I want poetry to die and Pete to live.

Stop asking what this poem is about. If you want to know, build a railroad to the sky that can withstand a herd of grieving buffalo. I'll be home writing about how the first boy I ever loved isn't coming back.

This is not a poem about people finding meaning in poems.

Frank Sinatra lost in the Bronx Zoo looking for Josephine.

It's an essay about the times they don't.

River otters stuck in Panda Canyon waiting on the red eye to O'Hare.

The first time I saw the Reds play I skipped the fourth inning and two outs in the fifth to make out with a stranger. Six strikes in I asked him his favorite animal but he was too busy sinking to say.

Sometimes when I eat pulled pork I remember me, a stranger, and Winnie the Pooh.

I dig.

This is not a poem about what my father told me when I started writing poems about polar bears. Time Magazine had run a photo of a bear on its cover with the headline "Be Worried. Be Very Worried." I was worried.

I searched the internet for the nearest bear in white, drove three hours to the Columbus Zoo, skipped the Heart of Africa, and went straight for Polar Frontier.

A sign hung from the handprint covered glass, "Exhibit Closed for the Season."

*Sink?*

This is an essay about how I'm always misunderstanding words.

You in the kitchen sink, lingering scent of Oregon pears and Elmer Fudd, missed trains and church roofs bent smaller, and *unfortunately you just don't feel the same way*, but every pipe on the inside of this Amtrak is just carrying mustard seeds to the next place.

How sometimes I ignore the dead-end sign.

"Two Nebraska Hunters Kill the Last of the Pompous Bird."

I write a postcard to my mother and leave out the bird. Tell her how I can't remember the last time it rained.

How I'm always letting broke down deep fryers hurt me.

How when my heart bleeds it's a two hundred pound beaver.

This is an essay about the time I waited in line for two hours to feed a giraffe. To slide through its tongue and tell God.

*God?*

Sometimes when I bend it's up the stairs. When I break it's because I haven't learned how. To love myself, it takes craters full of Nutella and sun.

Why are some animals sexier than others?

Thomas Jefferson, man of many obsessions, came across a few in the early 1780s. One, mammoths. Two, the hugeness of mammoths. And three, disproving Count-George Louis Leclerc Buffon's theory that the life of the animal of the New World was smaller, weaker, and less spectacular than that of the Old World.

It became a thing. Franklin pitching in between lightning rods and bifocals. Madison reporting the dimensions of a certain Virginia weasel.

This is not a poem about the distance between the anus and the vulva of a weasel. This is an essay about how maybe my dad was right.

After Buffon wrote a poem or an essay or some old-looking-but-never-wrinkled-scrolled-up document, perhaps a letter, about how there were no panthers in this new America, Jefferson made a pit stop in France, bought a panther skin to give to the Count, and thought how much easier it was to sink than to dig.

In the letter, he thanked Jefferson for the *cougar* skin.

A year later, Tom was writing flash about a seven-foot-tall moose from Vermont.

I like thinking about kissing more than kissing.

I find out why butterflies are becoming extinct and cry for the first time since that night in February.

I learned to draw by the Duomo, sang alone on the Seine, but I still don't know how to be friends with a boy.

This poem is not about you. This poem is an essay about the time a train full of African Killer Bees came through Virginia and killed Frank the Billy Goat.

This essay is about my aunt dying and everyone asking about poetry instead.

My aunt, Frank, and Pete. Poetry.

Sometimes my heart bleeds so much I forget to write for an audience.

Sometimes I explain so much no one understands.

How sometimes when I write poems I forget the first boy I ever kissed was a man who dug.

How I usually don't know what to do with light in the morning so I pretend the creaks and rattles of sun are crying and praying at the same time.

Sometimes when I write poems there is no such thing as parking tickets.

I am sorry to say this is not a poem.

No Hundred Acre Wood, no hope in pompous birds, no misunderstanding in the dead-end sign you posted.

This is just an essay about feelings.

A two hundred pound beaver and a train sunk in the sky.

EVERY MORNING I USED TO BURY THE WIND

I am sick of the rain that fell.

I killed that man. I wash my sheets  
every morning and watch Pat Sajak  
and honeysuckle spin. I bury  
hemlocks into my palms  
when my mother says  
it was a bad dream.

I burn the whole earth  
into my right shoulder.  
I retrace my steps in the front yard  
to heal my knuckles  
to the throat  
of a man  
who believed my body  
was only meant  
for listening to the wind.

It's how he rowed  
across my fields,  
ate his eggs over easy  
the next morning.

How I searched my mother's jars  
of grapevine for the scent  
of old orchids,

but all I could remember  
were how many bees  
I'd killed that spring.



It's the way he dragged my clothes from the dryer and I stopped thinking about God.

## BUT BEETLES

In my dreams I talk about fuel economy. Fifty-four miles per hour all the way down Mt. Hood.

In my dreams we visit the St. Louis zoo and you tell me how I've unearthed you. Carved into your chest sidewalks and morning dew, yellow rubber boots and standing in line two hours to feed the giraffe peanuts.

I talk about rowing, Oregon pear pizza, and how on Tuesday I can barely make it to 100 strokes without finding a Monarch's wing. I talk about trees burning, cartoon coyotes and the time Elmer Fudd broke into pieces, and all you said was *shit*. After that, I started collecting pictures of shoes and not telling.

Too many missed trains: Huntington to Ohio, D.C. to New York, Seattle to San Francisco. Two hours of shoreline and 36 yellow fields to one white rhino.

This is where I tell you about Nola. How I took a train to San Diego, bought the wrong ticket, and found Mary instead.

Today in India they're starting fires on purpose. Mary is lifting her right foot for her 2pm pedicure and a farmer from Bend is explaining how elephants lose their teeth. Between my thumb and middle finger, I hold Mary by her heel, ask her if she ever forgets to floss.

I don't want you to vanish.

I'm asking you not to vanish like white dwarfs, incandescent light bulbs, and my uncle's honeybees. I'd rather you vanish like Chesapeake blue crabs and the aurora borealis. Vanish like the rain that beat us to Calaveras.

By 2047, most of the planet will be ghost towns. The coldest year in the future will be warmer than the hottest year in the past. Three months ago, the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias in Yosemite National Park shut down for its next phase of restoration. I still can't tell you the difference in a giant sequoia and a sequoia.

This morning Crater Lake is on fire and all I have is this stupid notebook painted with birds and Walt Whitman. *I take to the open road, healthy, free*. My roommate says it's healthy, this fire, and my best friend just responded to my text, *omg its nature, calm down, its nbd*. I know its nbd, but when you google the ten scariest things happening in the world right now, "pumpkin is now a flavor instead of a fruit" is #2 so why can't this be #4?

Tomorrow I'll take a boat to Pictured Rocks and a man in flannel will see I'm worried, *fire is the only way out*.

And nature's got this, the way out of the woods is a tall light stacked under the river, and maybe life is like a creek just before thaw, but all I can think about is the time we sat by the blue lake and watched a man feed a chipmunk peanut M&Ms.

Once I picked up a book of poems because it had a rhino on it. I flipped to a random one, "because

girls shouldn't lay their hands on sharp things.”

In my dreams, you walk away. In Hawaii, a male shortfin pilot whale carries a dead calf in its mouth while swimming. I'm dancing to the hum of the sad city I've lived in for four years and you're walking away. Last year, 1,215 rhinoceroses were killed in South Africa alone. I'm circling the sun 18.5 miles per second and you're walking away. Every year, a mass of trees the size of New Zealand is consumed by fire.

When the Two Bulls Fire started, Crater the chipmunk was blaming an empty bag of peanut m&ms on a stranger from Utah.

I was blaming it on the deep lake getting smaller in your eyes. How they rooted into me when I saw what the Earth was made of.

By the time we reached Bend, it had spread the distance of Huntington to Yeager. We drove to the top of the city with everyone else and every time he took a picture I leaned over the fire to see my face in the clouds of someone new. I fell asleep to the scent of hair lit up and dreamed of the moon melting.

This morning I want to talk to you about how I can't remember. How I sat there with my cheeseburger and Ten Barrel beer telling three strangers *Frozen* is the best movie of all time. I fussed about being cold, and how I was an asshole for not bringing a jacket, but I couldn't even remember if you'd asked, and the moon was making a fishing trip across the sky, besides- it was National Donut Day.

In my dreams, I talk to you about the ambulance singing and the moon shattering. About Marius the giraffe and Cecil the lion. Hunting licenses, American dentistry and how sometimes cattle are more important.

About the male ibex and rain wolves and what's going to happen to the 200 juvenile pallid sturgeons if the Corps of Engineers doesn't hurry up on oak roots and crabgrass at the Grand Haven Pier.

About four cavities and human Pacu taking over the Jersey Shore, baby teeth in Okeechobee, piranhas sunk into mud at the bottom of Lake Superior.

I talk to you about this place right by Wrigley where I worry about drip coffee and the Middle East, evergreens and God, you moving to Texas and how I'll never know the length of an atom.

We talk about baseball and Alcatraz, how your favorite animal's a grizzly and mine's an otter. Not about how if a person wants to leave in the middle of laying floorboards and the seventh inning stretch. Why not let them? We talk about me going to Ireland and you going to Paris, but not about how we'll meet up in Moab.

This summer I drove out west looking for trees and found beetles. For waterfalls and grizzlies, found the valley floor instead. Because when I worry about drip coffee, I'm worrying about you on a plane to Portland. When I talk about fire and indoor plumbing, I'm worried I'll never know what happened to Cecil's cubs' front teeth.

For years, I'd walk out far enough no one could hear my muddy shoes slashing the sky.

In my dreams, I'm by the DJ, dancing until everyone is a bad dream brought down. You walk up to me in between songs. In between mountain pine beetles and six white rhinoceroses. In between Juvenile and *keep on dreamin' even if it breaks your heart*. In between trees dying and rhinos living. Dancing like setting the room on fire and watching it burn.

For three days, we talked about visiting zoos. This place he was happy to leave, this place I didn't want to be left. For three days, we talked about Bryce Harper, the Home Run Derby and Céspedes hitting 32 home runs to win. We drank Fire from Wisconsin and three days later, I drove him to a plane leaving for Oregon.

For years I'd abandoned my heart at the corner where we met. Beneath high fives and bent oars, how the sidewalk made room for the blisters on my shins.

A year later, we were sitting by the river talking about our parents, how yours were nearing retirement, and mine didn't live together anymore. We talked about me marrying a lumberjack and how cold the Deschutes got in June, but *he was independent*, and *he'd be fine*, and how many times we'd seen the Nationals play. I was laying my hand on the sharpest thing I could reach and leaving three days later.

How he was *thinking about moving back to the Midwest* and I just *needed to let go for a while*. How I think by letting go, he meant living with large whales when I meant Zion Canyon is usually viewed from the bottom looking up.

When I lose, sometimes all I can talk about are trees. White fir and pine, Virginia dogwoods and the Japanese cherry tree my father planted on the Appalachian Trail when I was five.

The Mother of the Forest peeled into piano.

But beetles. Montana, Wyoming, and Old Faithful. Everything in flames.

In my dreams, we circle the lake and find the greenest parts of a year. We stop at every tree and carve Bryce Harper's initials.

So when I bring up fire, I'm talking about loss. When I drive 2,330 miles to see Redwoods, I'm not looking for him, but for wonderful hands and autumn's light.

Between Abraham and stump. Between hungry beetles and stripping trees. I returned to the sad city where I fell asleep.

In my dreams, I wonder how it started. Someone striking a match gently, a match meant for blue rocket shaped marshmallows. Someone walking on damp orange poppies and then a flame. I wonder if you even saw Crater eating M&Ms or the moon catching Jack Dempsey. If you even saw me watching you take pictures and telling you my favorite weather. Maybe love isn't for me.

In one minute, 250 babies are born. 113 are born into poverty, Oprah makes \$523, and 55,757

barrels of oil are used. Lightning strikes the Earth 360 times and 58 airplanes take off around the world. 83,300 people have sex, 5,441,400 pounds of garbage is created, and 136,824,000 pounds of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere.

This morning Kentucky clerk Kim Davis returned to work after denying a gay couple a marriage license. California is more than two years into the worst drought, and new research published in "Nature" suggests this drying up could change pressure in the earth, trigger more earthquakes.

What if love is abandoning the corner but this time someone's hand is on your shoulder.

14-year-old Ahmed Mohamed was arrested for bringing a clock he'd made from a pencil sharpener to school.

One minute you're dancing and the next minute you're dancing with someone else.

Hungarian riot police are using tear gas and water cannons on migrants at the country's border.

One minute he's coming back for his keys and the next minute he's walking away.

This morning Theo Bronkhorst was granted \$100 bail and "Blood Lions" will premiere Wednesday, October 7<sup>th</sup> on MSNBC.

In less than a minute, a fire can start. In less than a minute, Cecil left behind twelve cubs and the children of Zimbabwe felt a little safer.

*I panicked.*

It can spread of a rate up to 14.29 miles per hour.

*We never shoot a collared animal.*

It can turn evergreens black and shut up the city of sunshine.

*I took it off and put it in a tree.*

This morning Sandra Bland is dead and all I can write about is fire.

In my dreams, I talk to him about Black Butte and parallel parking, how he's always forgetting the sun and telling me it's his favorite weather, and it may feel good to skim the tops of trees, but what if love is collecting bark at the bottom of the lake and two strangers from Texas are there to take a picture.

Today its 79 degrees and sunny in central Oregon. Mary has her feet propped up and Gary from Bend is talking to children about teeth.

I can still see her toes in between my palms when driving thousands of miles away felt like keeping up, when meeting God on the valley floor felt like the only way out, and maybe disaster is missing picnic table signs that lead you to a herd of baby buffalos.

In my dreams, you leave a four minute voicemail about butterflies. How the Monarch is born to fly and it knows it. They leave Washington for California and make it through winter, a journey that can take up to four generations. How sometimes they end up back at the same oyamel fir tree where their great-grandparents started.

Every morning, you leave a four minute voicemail about Sharkey's. How we met in the corner, *but wasn't it by the bar*, something about long islands and fishbowls and *you didn't care*, you were *never going to see these people again*.

How you *feel bad* about me driving you to the airport but *it was by her suggestion*, but all I hear are girls laughing and maybe another guy, and the valley floors around here are linoleum, and the poppies listen to the cries of a chipmunk, and there's always something unholy about the street toward the water.

I google Nola and find out another white rhinoceros is gone.

*It's not like I was going to stop her from coming to Oregon.*

I look for Cecil and 29 antelopes are missing.

*We'd only met three times in person.*

This summer I waited in line to meet Mary, but no one was there to take a picture.

*Three times.*

In my dreams I don't tell you I'm afraid I'll never see you again. I'm afraid you might be busy meeting strangers or moving to Texas.

I say it out loud anyway. When I'm parallel parking and forgetting the sun.

## OLD MILWAUKEE

For months I avoid stairs.  
Instead cut out Billy goats  
and killer bees, you on top  
a red and yellow Phillips Head  
calling nine seventeen, you singing  
dragonflies into their outlets,  
yanking youth fat into honey  
just to see. The dandelions  
bend excuses for you.  
They wear wasps like masks,  
beg my feet bare, instead my feet  
broken. For months I can't remember  
what we'd call trees in Mexico.  
We wake to Jesús above us  
laughing through limbs  
while we pray for rain,  
for the cat who swallowed turpentine,  
for the cartel to leave.  
This morning the windows.  
Bags of sand and you digging Oshkosh  
into coral, chewing sunflowers into machetes.  
For months my mother tells me to forget  
how I'm dead in all the places you lived.

CHARLOTTE

You're in the passenger seat  
of a slow dirty rain. I'm in the other room.

This time I will not ask  
if you love me.

I try not to think of white rhinos  
when a stranger tells me something  
I missed on the news.

There is water in Chile holding  
the outline of stars, the tiniest wound  
on a jawbone.

To comfort people I use my nails  
as putty knives.

For weeks I'd find cracks in Aphrodite's  
wings, century old antennae  
tucked in rotting wood.

For weeks I was the train  
carrying this hum of killer bees.

When my dad tells me he loves me,  
I pretend not to hear.

Every time you kissed me I felt the bark of sequoias bend.



ON THE SPARROW, SOMETHING TRAMPLED

In seven months, I will return to everything  
as you left it. All the animals diving down for green

cartons and tin foil. The thought of the bear's mouth  
by the tub. I'll remember the time we visited flowers,

imagined a million years of old coats. An hour  
of flat soda. This sky is an empty mountain you said,

and I could see two or three islands underwater. On the sparrow  
something trampled, something cracked, but you played

about his eyes between lamp posts, about cups of falling cities.  
In seven months, I will listen to you looking for electricity,

to you holding every statue in your fist, every spring in your sink.  
I'll forget how I wanted to hold in my pores the shudder of Paris,

a man painting you blue by the Seine. I was that man assembling  
the ants. The body of bark breaking, I was the sound of hungry

beetles, the hands of the four-year-old boy too afraid to play.

Everyone knows how to tear a wolf from the gravel.  
Everyone knows the names of places that get cold at night.

EPILAMBANOMAI

*Put your hands on it*

What angers me is you put your hands  
around red skylines. Held tight to trunks  
of mountains until I became the dirt underneath.

My words, where no oxen are, my words like clouds  
stripped of rhetoric and rain. This unwanted smoke.  
Some noise behind the door. The song of gibbons.  
Because listen: if my words are ugly then shooting  
stars. The solar nebula. Even in the dark.

People rearrange every part of me.

The morning it rained, you left for Klamath Falls.  
I saw the loneliness of edge, columbine branch  
made holy by tusks of beetles. By love-like burden.

Unless you can stay yourself, leave.

I touched the sides of every light bulb,  
I started carrying names of abandoned bridges  
and heard the woods fill with bricks. I'd run down the halls  
of stolen cities and feel the scatter of you coming back  
into the empty buildings.

I'm in Chicago. You're my lyric. I'm in Minneapolis.  
You're the ending. We're in Seattle. I hardly know myself.

People tell me my words are beautiful  
and I turn into nine planets shaking.

I peel bark off the sun. My words the sun. Let them soak  
into tree stumps. My words a stump. My words 24 feet  
in diameter. My words the dance floor, a bowling alley.

Let them stick to the breath, to the dust,  
to the black hole ripping herself apart.

In San Francisco, my words become a limb  
of some rotten sycamore. They spill like bobby pin  
coins, like ball-point erasure; watch. These words melt  
with New York City.

I am tired of the river inside, I have more paint than walls.  
I was sitting on the train and you were gone.

Every day I try not to cry into mouths of honeybees  
stuck together, my words like dirt locked in the stream.

Morning after morning, I burn toast to remember trees.

I take my stanzas into fields of frozen buffalo, how it is easy  
to follow every spillway of language.

I push my verse through the ugliness of windmills, every hallway  
of repeated hymn. These words this hurt, this lyric you leaving.

<sup>1</sup>I follow the veins of dying wasps into the ugliest parts of me.

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<sup>1</sup> My words picking flowers off vinyl siding.

FRESH COAST

I don't want to think about the asphalt  
anymore

how the sky looked the same  
for eight days,

I said there's something  
about your face

30 foot flames 50 feet  
from my brother's house,

my nephew's purple coffee pot  
with a fish in it

There was fresh coast in the small glass  
this new drought in every poem,

his favorite shade  
of brown, my November heart

I'd take a plane to Zion's chipmunk  
I'd go hiking in beige shoes

I'd stare at the white deer  
until the blister on my right ankle

peeled, I was alone on the tracks  
singing about dead trees

I was falling asleep to goats walking  
sideways up Burnt Mountain,

Ernest Hemingway hanging  
a map to the black bar

## PACING LEO

That summer Virginia Woolf said though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes.

When you show me the bear all I can say is maybe clouds get buried around the tops of known trees, and not a single thing about pulling weeds, curtain rods, the way in which mosquitos couple on our lashes.

It's what I tell myself every time I come home to the world as mistake. When one of my branches collides with someone else's sky.

It's that death to feeling.

*They're killing all the deer.*

That fire to floating.

*They don't even know what's happening.*

It's like I'm taking a photograph of my feet without meaning to.

That summer I cried over peeled wallpaper and rotting walls. Grey slippers and every other sock with holes. Your only pair of reading glasses stuck to the stairs. What's worse, butterflies fading or butterflies gone. I'd replace mold for Georgian Revival Blue and fix everything they tell me you broke.

Four months later, I come home to a bear in the fridge. You tell me it's a sport. To let you have it. All I can see are long limbs like black rocks, the way they used to stretch out to Route 66, but maybe there's something wrong with my eyes.

Woolf called intellectual liberty the right to say or write what you think in your own words.

To return to an old place and name the bee's stinger. To stick it between clouds.

To stand at the mouth of the bear and explain myself.

People always want to know what "it" means. They imagine a dead deer on the side of M28 or a poem with fewer guns. No, no guns. *I think this is supposed to be a poem without guns.* I imagine that they imagine the world made of feathers.

Forty miles into the Seney Stretch I learned to walk instead of speak.

In ancient Egypt, the huntsmen constituted a social class. They hunted on both sides of the Nile for gazelles, antelopes, fox, hyenas, and occasionally, the bear. They used nooses, arrows, darts, and nets and at times, the lion was trained to hunt.

It's like I'm peeling ladybugs to peel that old summer, picking this medium shade of ocean blue to feel less dizzy about what's coming.

When I finally open the fridge, I'm confused by Vienna Lager and Virginia Bold Rock. I notice the edge of one beer's label peeling off, damp, and wonder if it's leftover from summer or last year's winter, or some other season I can't quite make out even with the brightest of blues.

This past June, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park closed several trails and back country campsites after a black bear attacked a teenage boy. According to park officials, the bear pulled some

16-year-old Athens, Ohio boy from his hammock at about 10:30 pm. 4.5 miles from the Fontana lake shoreline near Hazel Creek in North Carolina. At that hour, the moon, waxing gibbous poured its white light into fontana. I imagine it blinded the boy, but to the bear, the world now pinkish and pulsing.

“Right now, it’s breeding season so males are really roaming” said Daniel Powell, coordinator of the Alabama Black Bear Alliance and past president of the Alabama Wildlife Federation. “We’re seeing males looking for a mate. In the bear world, males roam and the females stay at home.”

In 1948, George Gurdjieff’s “The Work” placed great emphasis on self-remembering. Paying attention to the present moment instead of wandering to the past or future.

That summer I sat under the Mother of the Forest and carved into your trunk a prayer. To never love a man who loved like my father. Back home, an old carton of almond milk spoiling, and how sometimes seeing both means seeing less well.

He was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder soon after he and my mom separated. I was standing in baggage claim at the Atlanta airport when my mom called to tell me how it had been coming for a while. They were just waiting for the right time. To do the right thing. I had just graduated from college and had spent a few weeks in Italy before starting my first job as a teacher. On the conveyor belt, an unclaimed Dora the Explorer suitcase for the third time.

I remember listening like you were the sound of hungry beetles across South Dakota.

And so everything became unloved. Every painting by the Duomo, every sun hitting our Japanese Cherry tree in spring. I wanted to go back to Florence and paint every bridge black.

And who cares? You can get a divorce for \$149 at [Michigan.divorce.writer.com](http://Michigan.divorce.writer.com).

For \$149 you can cancel, reorganize, dissolve.

A few days before heading back to Michigan, you joke about having bear for dinner.

You know I’d been trying to eat vegan since August, but when I come home in December, I stop trying. I am afraid people will love me less without a cheeseburger on my plate. Without the same shade of hunger in my mouth.

In the morning you head for the mountains. You take the dogs with you and lead them to the scent of the bear. You turn the dogs loose. You explain how each bear is different. Some run and run and run. Some go right up the tree, but others stay on the ground and fight. You tell me this year most are skinny, how one was blind.

What makes something the hunter and not the hunted? What makes something both?

That summer the walls of our hundred year old house felt like something I couldn’t mess up. One of my friends helps me pick a color for the bathroom, but after I start peeling wallpaper, I realize they already are. I can tell someone else has already attempted to fix these walls and now I was messing that up too. On the wallpaper, only wings. Behind it, the dawn and dusk of antennae.

I’d had Georgian Revival Blue picked out over a week and had spent a couple days spackling and filling in holes when you tell me you just aren’t ready for me to paint. I tell you the dust is made of wormy chestnut. You focus on the front yard’s dying dogwood and take the ladder with you.

For \$149 I wanted someone to come and fix what I had started.

That summer I was a witness. He tells me it's no big deal, all I'll have to do is answer some *really simple* questions, sign something, and then leave. Into the parking lot I spill past a trunk flooded with Floating Blue and use both my hands to diagram the turbulence of time.

You're sorry. *You don't know anyone else who would come.* You didn't know anyone that summer. And how could apology mean sight? I wonder how sorry can stay bent into place when every morning we stretch towards dirt. Maybe the heart is a thing realized with the eye's ribs.

Three questions in, I remember a couple weeks before, a pair of baby bison on the side of the road. How I couldn't find a way around traffic so I stopped to see. I watched people taking pictures, some with their binoculars out. A friend texts me to ask if I've heard anything about the bear attack in West Yellowstone. She sends me a picture of the lean mother. Three cubs trailing behind in the corner.

In November of 1902, President Roosevelt took a train to Mississippi to hunt black bear. The second morning of the hunt, the dogs finally caught a scent of the bear, chasing it into swamps outside the camp. Roosevelt who had watched the chase was ready for lunch and headed back. His hunting guide, a yarn-spinning ex-slave named Holt Collier, known for having killed three thousand bears, was the one to finally corner the bear, as Roosevelt ate his grilled cheese with tomato.

That summer every morning in grief, every night thinking about grief. Is turning away the same thing as walking away? Every morning, in my room crying. Across pillows praying I don't have what you have. Begging banana mania I'm not unlovable. I am afraid I am the smallest of every color.

Every morning I watch war on a bicycle.

Camus wrote that a leaping into the absurd occurs within a life of limitations.

*Forty Miles into the Seney Stretch*  
*I threw it in the back of a 57' dump truck*

The it being my heart. Sorry about that. The 57' dump truck the same dump truck he brought to the house that summer for us to fill up and haul off. *I don't understand the 57' here. And why a dump truck? Why not a Ford or a Chevy?*

Beneath the Christmas tree is an unwrapped *Rome*. Dorothea Lasky's fourth collection of poems. That summer I told you she was my favorite. That summer, you called cavities the eyes of nesting birds.

I tell you I remember my first bear. Winnie the Pooh in overalls with a storybook for a heart. I was five and you had been staying at a place maybe ten minutes away on Hawthorne. How I would peel tickle-me-pink off my closet's door every time you'd leave. I'd use my nails for putty knives and write

about it later. I'd compare the bare wood beneath, to snow, then teeth rotting, then every lens clouding, then you. Sitting on the bathroom sink the first poem I open to is "Hunters."

Their bloodlust is what made them different from me  
I saw a man with an albino moose  
Holding his antlers with pride  
In the photo  
By your bedside

And all I could think of  
Was how scared the dead moose must have been

Under fading ceilings, chandeliers breaking, you tell me to go to hell.

Tonight I can't tell the difference between thirst and hunger. Every time I come home there is another animal on the wall. Last year an elk. That summer a fallow deer. This time it's a caribou from Montana. I can see its reflection in a plastic pickle hanging from the middle of the tree.

I think about telling you about the baby buffalos on the side of the road but all I can say is it looks like something that would live in Narnia. And it does. I remind you how I've been eating. You've made bean dip with the caribou and call me coming home a special occasion. You call every dead animal a special occasion. A new dish. This reason to gather.

What does it mean to tell someone they're wrong?

By the time Roosevelt made it to the 235-pound female bear, she was barely conscious, injured after killing one dog and hurting another. "Mangy-looking," said Collier who had cracked the bear on the skull so hard it bent back his rifle. When Roosevelt saw her, he refused to shoot and asked a hunting companion to put her out of her misery with a knife.

Sometimes when you leave I look in the fridge. Sometimes I can barely see life without morning. One glimpse of the heart too much like an open field on fire. Sometimes a man drowns his roots just to see up the stairway.

The brain's prefrontal cortex in adults with bipolar tends to be smaller and function less well compared to adults who don't have it. This is what keeps you from solving problems, making decisions, or not. This structure matures during adolescence, suggesting that abnormal development of this brain circuit may account for why the disorder tends to emerge during a person's teen years, when they should be cupping a sweat bee in their palm, wondering what it's like to go through life with only one wing.

In two weeks I'll visit the Bronx Zoo and when the grizzlies aren't out, I'll meet Leo from Pakistan. A snow leopard from Pakistan pacing. Ovid said all creatures look down toward the earth, but man was given a face so that he might see. And I see Leo looking up to grey clouds and if I've learned anything it makes you good to believe in someone.

It's that in Miami someone asks, why animals? I want to tell you about the back and forth of his spotted body, everyone else away looking for bears. What it must be like to see Leo in the mountains of Pakistan. The sign reads he was abandoned. I imagine a Leo without fences. Without the clouds of someone else's sky. I imagine him with an otter's heart in his mouth, his head in Roosevelt's noose.

I think of the picture of you chasing the bear. How when I saw it, I didn't know if I was seeing myself for the first time or if I was seeing you. I think about coming home to Woolf, Camus, and Lasky, how this was my first time being with you without your meds, and for the first time in my life, I don't know why I love visiting zoos. I think of coming home to Pooh.

Every morning grey clouds. Every morning Leo pacing inside the bear's mouth. These days I watch you wake up with the sun, you've bought new socks and a new pair of glasses. Every morning you make a pot of coffee in case I come home.



Sometimes I agree when you say the bears need to die.

I REMEMBER THE BARK BLUE

What if I told you this has nothing to do with the depth of Lake Superior.

When molten basalt erupts, it lasts for twenty years, but when the fog finally lifted, I was standing on the edge of flickered gneiss filling the deep lake with holes.

I can't tell you what it feels like to love someone.

To go back to the tent. Your coffee pot full of kindling.

For two years, I feel too much. If you want to write an essay about six white rhinoceroses, *then you should write an essay about six white rhinoceroses.*

I write about the invention of Nutella. Every morning I climb 1,332 feet to look at things without breaking. *Ten different theories are listed to explain the name white rhinoceros" for an animal that is grey.* I want to believe in nineteen hundred degrees the way I remember you with all my books. *In 1806, Napoleon tried freezing out British commerce to take over the world.*

I take the metro to every museum, imagine myself always alone at the Smithsonian staring down Nola. I just want to know how to let a dying thing leave.

In 1904, Herman Merkel discovered a blight on American Chestnut trees. *Cryphonectria parasitica* swept across the region killing trees at a rate of fifty miles per hour. During summer when the tree flowered, the Appalachians appeared covered in snow. Every summer I crest McAfee's Knob to watch the last grey wolves roam the lake.

I'd take pictures of your shoes when you'd leave.

Every night I make a list of everything I've lost. *Hazelnut birch made of floating ivory...* sometimes I wish I only listened to things on fire.

What if I said blue to you in your green suit.

TEN SLEEP

I've been hurt by someone with god  
in his name. I have pushed across  
fox tail, made jars out of wild  
onion and lightning glass.

Once I sat on a stump in California  
and now I can't stop wondering  
if this is the same feeling as stripping  
a sequoia of its bark,

if it's the same thing as bison calves  
on the other side of half dome,  
or some family of grizzlies hungry  
for Lakota heart.

I try not to think of their hooves  
stuck to ice when I'm cutting the grass.

I've scattered too much ragweed across  
Blue Ridge until barnyard became orchard  
and everything he touched turned into falling  
springs.

In my dreams the Mother of the Forest watched  
him pour his restlessness and tobacco into fields  
until they became the biggest black hole in Appalachia.

I have pushed through nimble will for nine-volt dirt.  
I have pushed across buckhorn to get to black chalk.  
I have pushed into plum pits to unbury this earth.

## THAT WINTER

I used to think about stars dying. I'd lie awake and imagine white specs exploding into black, stellar winds pushing their twinkle into tiny windows. Then nothing. I was twenty-two and the closest thing to God was the closest thing I could see from the shores of Lake Superior.

Some days the deep lake would hang above my bed like dead figs stuck together. Some days the deep lake was the only thing I saw before the sky went black.

For weeks, I stayed up for Northern Lights. I set my alarm to the sky and waited for it to go green. For weeks, I wanted to believe in unfinished maps. For weeks, I walked the shoreline alone believing the front yard's moss would weep for thirty years.

930 miles North of the Japanese cherry tree my dad planted when I was five is 3,000 miles of granite gneiss. Here, I watch strangers search through smooth rocks for red-brown. I watch strangers with their heads bowed for hours until the snow starts to fall. Here, on top green glass and agate, I waited.

I waited for his shoulders to weaken, waited for water to seek water. I waited for needle to reach satin, scattered pores exchanging gas for air. Here I waited for five-petalled flowers to sour.

I started measuring time with trees. I can't tell you what this had to do with dying stars, with planetary nebulae lit up for 10,000 years, or the central star cooling, or rings of dust tracing where the new stars form. I only remember counting leaves until they became soft. I'd watch white pine scatter, then scraps of red in between white. I'd watch colors brighten, dull. Here was something like an animal running around death. The last week of September, I stared so long honeysuckle became mountain maple.

The problem with pain is the sun going flat. Finding out there is a butterfly that only lives for five days. The problem with pain is I was standing on the shores of flickered gneiss when I realized it was the daisies I'd pulled.

When I was little, I told you that of all the trees on our way to the river, I'd be a birch. I decided this with my right index finger, how it followed a stream of warm sap down the tree's golden bark. Looking up, its yellow leaves were the only things I could see on top of daylight. Looking up, how I believed in rain falling to feed flowers. How I dreamed the trees would fall asleep to dusty cocoons, caterpillars circling dark clouds, different ways than sleeping stars, than my father and me.

In the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, half a year's winter. When I moved here, it was mid-July and 55 degrees. Walking the lake that morning, I hated the pure air and its chill. *But look at all the flowers*, you said, as if to change my mind. You were leaving the next morning so I smiled at placed petunias and painted brick as if you had.

But you couldn't. In a couple months, the bright greens and red-orange that lined the highway would be dead and dry and gone. I wanted mountains again, to be home on riverbanks standing under the yellow birch's shade. The same yellow birch you told me God put there one Saturday morning. When you said this, the smallest star shook. When you said this, a language of birds.

For months, it stopped raining. For months, I stopped thinking about the light pink of cherry blossoms, how they piled themselves on top half broken blue jays every spring, and of God.

Gaston Bachelard says we comfort ourselves by living memories of protection. That something closed must retain our memories while leaving their original value as images. And when the image is new, the world is new. Unlike my father, Bachelard liked to hide in the slump of ravines. I imagine it was thick wood that kept him from sad cities, the sound of dying stars.

And so, winter came. I remember telling the joke about loneliness. The walk to willowy bodies where I'd laugh just to weep. There are too many pines, I wrote one morning in a journal you'd sent. There were bible verses all over its front pages, how you wanted me to remember words like wind and bones.

For months, I listened to the hardness of water. For months, all I could hear was Andromeda asking shorelines for ore.

I thought if I could put it all down, I would find what I wanted in the shadows of freezing sap. I thought then, I might fall asleep to the stars putting the sky back together. If I kept reaching for the yellow birch's limbs, one morning I'd wake to a face in the trees.

In 1852, miners stumbled across a grove of giant trees in Northern California's Calaveras County. Word of the tall trees spread east to San Francisco and it was George Gale who first rode out to see the giants. Among the 92 sequoias in the 160-acre valley, Gale came across what he thought to be a cedar, a tree measuring 321-feet high and 92-feet around, she was perfectly symmetrical. *Mother of the Forest*, Gale named her one morning under altostratus. Inside his body, the soft tissue where his hands had opened the fox's chest, as he named her.

This was the age of freak shows. Barnum nights full of speculators and gold. In the 1850s people circled the tallest trees reading newspapers, foreign fingerprints grinding on fallen acorns. Gale saw the Mother of the Forest and sensed a commercial opportunity, shards of crimson meant for Vaudeville.

And so came exploding stars, falling asleep to things dying, things washed away. I started to imagine my life ending, and all the strangers stopping with arms full of rocks to watch my knees stare out of me. *Every loneliness dies here*, I'd say until I fell asleep.

Ruaan Kellerman has written a logical theory of trees. He says trees occur naturally in mathematical settings with their paths representing different histories. He believes that every tree is a forest, and every forest is a union of trees. I read this to you in between Christmas and the new year. I want an answer to my loneliness, to give the animal a name. *For every burning star, eight elms dropping. For every well-rounded tree there is an ordered path...*

You tell me how they talk to one another, how one came down in October and no one could cross the river for weeks. That winter, you don't remember the time I was a birch.

Another morning I wake to the sky still dark and a line from Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, because *nothing you say can fuck up the space for God*. Because nothing I said could make the moss empty sidewalks, because that winter there wasn't any room in the house for three hundred nights.

Because I waited like a field of statues.

I walk through the forest's sassafras and frozen gale and find a spot on the ice where there used to be sand. Into the waves, I drop down earlier parts of the year when I listened to God standing under Virginia dogwood. Into the waves, I ask if the map is still unfinished.

There has to be a way through the woods, I wrote underneath Psalm 37:4. *Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart*, I filled in with blue ink just in case there was somewhere my life existed. I miss the rain, I wrote on the page's bottom left corner. I was halfway through the forest when the sun picked what was left of a hemlock. That morning I sat on the old hemlock's stump and said nothing.

Every morning for months, I'd watch the kids next door play underneath the silent pine and fill bright orange buckets to make snowmen. They'd play through winter's sun cup and firn, and I couldn't remember the last time I felt someone's hot hand behind me. The tallest snowman was still there in April when I used to plant daisies in the front yard.

It took three weeks and five men to cut through the tree's 2,000 year-old trunk. Even after she was sawed through completely, the tree remained upright. For twenty-five days, men forced wedges into the cut with hammers and sledges, her trunk smashed by a nearby battering ram. For twenty-five days, the Mother of the Forest stood still. For twenty-five days, she continued her song to monkey flowers and Abe.

I held onto Bachelard as the snow fell, "a creature that hides and withdraws into its shell is preparing a way out." I held onto seasons changing, how summer would come and I'd leave for fields of frozen buffalo.

Every morning I worried I'd messed up the map coming here. My image was a fifteen-foot pine with needles for a floor. Moss floor taken up by three feet of snow and floating birch.

Three months before moving to Michigan, I went home to the river and all its trail. I couldn't remember it ever being that green. It was morning when you asked me to pull weeds from the front yard's flower bed. You can barely make out the spots curling the top of its dying limbs. That morning I watched the smallest tree shake off its top layer and shrink.

Some say that the yellow birch is the most important of its kind. A species of lower elevations, it's a slow-growing, long lived tree. A single trunk with yellow-bronze bark, it is best solitary, when it can develop its broad, open shape.

Still I'd listen to the others, "if we remain at the heart of the image under consideration... by staying in the motionless of its shell, the creature is preparing temporal explosions, not to say whirlwinds, of being."

*The yellow birch is meant to be alone*, I would write over and over until it was true.

For months, I tried vanishing into the outline of pine. I'd reach the water's edge and be glad no one was there to watch. Slowly, and then all at once, I sat under the soft, simple leaves and stopped

talking to God. I'd tell the branches next door about the elbows of black-eyed susans instead. How they'd line the riverbank's edge just as the gravel began.

It wasn't until strong winds, the dead of night, that the giant tree finally began her groan and sway. Sounds of the crash carried fifteen miles away to a mining camp, the Mother of the Forest burying herself twelve feet deep into creek bed while a family of stellar jays and a junco watched.

Gale's men stripped most of the tree's bark, some parts of her two-feet thick. His plan was to piece the tree back together for display. The tree was so immense and stored enough water that five years passed before its leaves turned brown and died. Once reassembled, she stood fifty feet high, thirty feet in diameter, and ninety feet around, a piano was placed in the middle of her.

The junco was dead. Only two of the jays surviving.

For years, guests danced to the sounds of rotting bark. For years, someone else's lyric sunk into her skin. In December 1866, all that was leftover was lost to a fire.

But when I tell you I hated it here, I don't mean the abandoned boats falling apart, the sound of the ice cracking. I hated my loneliness. I hated the frozen lilac outside my kitchen window. I hated how my knees stared out of me at 2am. I hated the trees for watching.

There were so many stars, and all I could think about was Andromeda's branches falling into the deep lake with all their collected rocks. 40 degrees down, one hour to the right, I'd watch the Chained Lady spill across November's skin.

Gertrude Stein says anybody is as their land and air is. For months, I was iron. For months, I was the maple. The sky. Thin circling lines in the agate. For months, it was winter.

No one ever told me how loss felt godless. This is what I say to you when you ask if I've been praying. No one ever told me how the trees would stop explaining and I'd be standing by the deep lake alone.

That summer I left the shores of granite gneiss for taller trees. I wanted to stand beneath time, I wanted to drive across seasons, and forget. I pressed my hand against the window while it rained and asked cities I'd pass to explain. Stein would have named this season first.

*Your joy is your sorrow unmasked*, I read to black hills and herds of prairie dogs, missed trains, and thaw. I'd traded in Bachelard for Gibran. Staring at Lincoln's chin, *the deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain*.

For days, I felt my life exploding in stone, my sorrow described underneath mountains of pine.

The first time I drove through redwoods, there was still snow on the ground. My feet got cold and I thought about the strangers digging for rocks. I thought about the silver walls of my kitchen sink and that sad February. The first time I drove through the tallest trees, I thought about God and the junco that watched her fall to the forest floor.

2,363 miles from the shores of Lake Superior, I watched rain skim the top of trees, I watched rain hit my right index finger and then leave.

Standing under the Mother of the Forest, I saw my life in fire-blackened bark. I saw marks made when her skin was cut away, a dead tree 100 feet tall still standing. I saw someone else's life peeled into piano.

I forgave myself when the blues went white, when I realized it was the daisies I'd pulled. The sky exploding slowly. Slow enough for the smallest galaxies to collide, tidal tails of long, thin stars forming above birch. Slow enough for blood-root to reach sun, slow enough for Orion to notice the red-orange fuzz, growing like a fox hole, just below his hip.



BUSINESS OF WHALES

I move with the fields  
now in every kitchen—  
black flies,  
a laboratory of the railway's  
organs, the word birth  
hanging necks of copper  
and sun. Your plaid shorts.  
This morning: another short  
rain. Another fish stuffed  
with candles, the river  
lit up small. I don't know this  
bright age of summer—  
I can't find enough ships  
to tell you I'm home.  
They say the animals will come  
for the mud, make earth  
out of our bad giants,  
the whale's heavy  
tongue. You were wearing  
a blue shirt  
when we crossed the street  
for shade.

## THE WORLD IS BOUND WITH SECRET KNOTS

A chandelier spilling bells. Balls rolling down hills. Four door trucks and a fish net torn by polar bears. A terrible splashing. The world is a chorus of well-spaced rain working its way to the tops of mountains. The voice of the elephant telling notes apart. *Blue, blue, blue.* Winds blowing one dune on top of the other. A wreck of El Niño. The stubbornness of rhinos. This dormant seed. 134 degrees Fahrenheit on July 10, 1913 when the tortoises drank and the black brush grew. Noise in the canyon. Noise coming from the trees. A buzzing of yellow white carpenter bees on strike. 282 feet below sea level, the world looks like a daisy. Waist height. Delicate pink with five burgundy spots around its center. Three inches the first two weeks of October and a swarm of pigeons floating above. *Ephemerals.* The world is one acre of leaves hiding in the grey plastic of a chair. Wolves arriving in Isle Royale just before midnight. Every morning Dorothy sprinting through a field of yellow poppies. A bus of butterflies. A shenanigan of moths. A romp of otters in the back of the limo. Sunlight on the picnic table while you wash dishes. The world is ten day intervals made from these infant nails and broken taupe umbrellas. Monkey flowers and the ground getting warmer. The dolphin needing to sleep. Green light from the wolf's eyes. The science of death. A gorge so deep and narrow sunlight never reaches the bottom. The world is bound with two muddy wheels in the path of an oncoming train. A salamander hatchling less than three-quarters of an inch long. A trio of unfired painted figurines in coach. A hotel in the suburbs of Kenya. A giraffe named Lynne. The caribou in the willows. Pellets of bran and molasses in a six-year-old's hands. Her eyes like the deer destroying snakes. It's mammoths and mountains. 5:30 am. The land of a little rain. The loneliest island. Hedgehogs roaming the streets for duck's breath and sparkly lipstick. Half-way up Angel's chains, a couple sharing a protein bar. Sharing milk, sharing coffee, sharing crispy brussel sprouts. The world is spotted at 15,000 feet by a man on a stool. I see galaxies in the yipping. Little brownies in California contours. The second engine made of ivory. I see water in my suit. A zipper I can't reach. Waist deep your name in beds of Navajo sandstone breaking. Lake Superior. Joyce Kilmer. Charles Lehmborg looking at old poems. How the ark came first. The stingray with a hook in its mouth. In its left side. The top of its right cheek. The bird in its nest and the eggs underneath. A ball of flashing lights that brought you home. Your keys. Then the floor of a five hour room. Four boats pulling in four different directions. A giant petrel paddling across Ocean Harbor. The world is bound with the locks opening and the museum closing. The prettiest plumage. A shared bag of potato chips and the truck sold. My heart driving slowly into the black of the glacier. My heart this little yellow rock taking the 6:15. My heart dropped hundreds of feet into subterranean waters. Subterranean fires. The beige of the bathroom stall. Your feet on the other side. How the ark came first. Then butterflies like blankets. How they spill through the roof. But you play songs about the zoo. Pour my coffee into yours. The time by the river, you taking pictures with your hands. We need wildflowers. Reasons like shared milk. I said spiders. I drew sun. I stared down the radio. I forgot to press the button. I forgot to tell the bees. The tower would have to be 178,672 miles high to reach the moon. *Love lies in the chemical composition of ant eggs.* Cacti blooming. Four canines and a rabbit. The train getting close. The bells growing faint. The smallest white rhino learning to wobble his ears, take pictures of his feet. What we do up until the collision.

ANOTHER RHINOCEROS IS DEAD

*For Nola*

When honeybees vanish, I know pain is not light blue. Every morning I climb stairs to ten buses in Tovarnik: a woman holding her child against the earth unopened. Under television smoke I stop building. Art is naming hands that drove buses of bodies without windows. Is it wrong to bend mouths sinking coral into my lips. Is this stinging a god who says nothing? I want to know why I've stopped listening to the grass tell the wind not to worry. I can't see anything from this city of pillows. Another rhinoceros in the sky, another doll left at the border. Nigeria is free today and another prison. Why are there guns in the river? *Let's move on.* We cut down mountains with the language in our hands. This pain is ivory buried.

SECOND ENGINE

When I think about the room  
of you

I think about small green  
soldiers searching for Crater Lake

I think about Cleopatra wearing  
the wrong sword, a man reading

about men, Roman grace  
and dumb sun, the extinction

of butterflies, his voice little like mine  
At the top of Sugarloaf, I counted

legos until they became blue trees  
I saved chess pieces and cabin porn

I prayed over medium sized coolers,  
a color disturbed by the Egyptian queen

I said weather  
I want the weather of you

I asked for a blanket  
and you gave me a pillow

Without war, there is no God.

## THE BLACK SAND OF CYGRUS

I don't know how many stars died in 1981. Still, I planned a trip to the Grand Canyon and never bought a train ticket. Instead, I stayed home and cut out cardboard snowmen. Beneath its nose, just above the second coal, I told you how in the third grade I won an essay contest entitled, "Trucker Buddies."

I try not to think about love as the canyon narrows. When I read about the youngest plutons, swarms of the earliest rocks.

For two years, I write about the insides of a log. How I felt it reaching into blue dots, but after you turned left, I saw trees governed by time. I turned right, and saw separate parts of the honey bee shaking. A pink dot at the tip of the elephant trunk.

I'm always lost in the middle of a detour on Highway 19 and you're at the campsite waiting. Something about how the sky feeds on Fremont cottonwood and willow, you picking a seat at the bottom of Douglas fir, how I always love the wrong things. The sign I pass says something about falling oxen, a large lake full of mammoths and caribou, one woolly rhino.

Lately I feel like I talk too much. In 1973, an airplane was forced to land on a black sand beach in Iceland. Cognivists assume that the mind is so rational that it can always translate thoughts into language. I write words to forget the time we ate pizza.

Talking to you is like putting my feet in every river. It's like the time I was jumping into class IV rapids and you were, too. I forget to drink water. I stop leaving voicemails. I remember the world at the feet of General Sherman, but when I stick my right foot in, I call God Aphrodite's pet.

Still, turbulence stirring the wind of nimbostratus and dust, wild hue coming from the plane's stolen tail. I write words to try turning the jar, to try moving the table's leg. I write words to look at the deep lake from its right side.

There is a well known saying of Pascal: "le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connait pas." The heart has reasons that reason knows nothing of. For two years, I fall asleep to *Peter Pan* playing in the background. I think about the way an article sounds next to an adjective. I see my mom for the first time in months and Nola dies. In 1904, Peter gave directions to Neverland with no mention of the stars.

To avoid hurt, I ask questions about capitalism. I lie about pillow cases. I call love a first world problem and consider myself left out. For two years, I don't know how to tell you how I feel. I stare at the second engine until it becomes a five-night stay by the South Rim.

I write about the leaves getting wet. Us alone in the tent. I read about planets bending. Us alone in every parking lot. I dream about the world spilling ice. Us in the same tax bracket buying flannel sheets. Peter just said anything that came into his head.

For two years, I drive to watch the Brewers play. I pick every war movie and teach *The Things They Carried*. I stay single and write about how the oldest stars can be seen as blue dots, some kind of sand beneath the crash. When my students ask for Mel Gibson, I cry.

“The black sand of Cygrus,” Peter might have said. But this is not the same thing as giving directions to the river’s mirror. This is not the same thing as the poem carrying you away gently, into meadows of frozen buffalo, fields of yellow poppies.

After I won “Trucker Buddies,” my friends started sitting at someone else’s table during lunch and I started skipping recess. Sometimes I’d draw pictures of birds carrying maps on the back of my Freewrite Friday. I’d write about the smallest pink dot becoming friends with the space voyager.

I wanted to drive to the top of the Grand Canyon and write an essay with Peter, “Blue Woolly Rhino,” we would decide to call it.

The Crab nebula exploded in 1054 and was visible for months. In baggage claim at the Atlanta airport, my mom tells me she doesn’t love my dad anymore. I write about the house being empty. Me in Las Vegas and you at your cousin’s wedding. Over 3,000 miles and winter’s bright stars, I tell you how the fire started just before the gorge. How I could almost make out the caribou’s left antler, the rhino’s missing ivory.

Underneath Orion’s belt, just above the 100-foot trees, I write how I imagined you in the passenger seat just before I fell asleep.

You tell me the flames were planned, how you watched one from the highway two weeks before. And nothing about exploding fir, balls rolling down hills, musk oxen asleep outside the tent. You call the red whirl a 25-man crew widening a line and forget the time we split an apple fritter and tea.

I read about fighter jets and how to get rid of an ulcer. Mel Gibson handing out copies of *Full Metal Jacket* to the first 100 fans at Miller Stadium. I write about the poem running out of sidewalk in our hometown. My uncle’s honeybees at the Lincoln Park Zoo pointing their pink dot towards Nola. Tell me how to write something that isn’t true.

I think God is the temperature dropping and the fuel cap freezing. You in your green suit and me in blue socks. For two years, I never mention war.

For two years, every dream into falling down planes. I remember what Woolf said that night you left for Rhode Island, *it is a mistake for a woman to read them, for she will inevitably look for something she will not find*. I remember the time I held onto the side of a spider.

I think about you kissing her in the rain. Something about Thomas Jefferson. I think about you kissing her in a snowstorm. Something about Walt Disney giving General Sherman to his wife. I like to think about you kissing her when there’s zero visibility and all the cars are driving by. Something about a bent and broken moon, all battered, black, as from a thousand battles.

When my mom asks what’s changed, I stare at a translation of *Beowulf*. I write about the stars above the tent. I draw pictures of blue dots outside the plane. How the sound in a poem feels like every floating log. How you said you would call. You made San Diego #1 and Norfolk #3 after we talked.

How it took a red and yellow Phillips head striking Peter in the eye, six weeks in a dark room, and the fear of blinders for him to see the world in swirls of the most ancient light. How Jefferson liked the feeling of white dwarfs on his lips.

For two years, I imagine us going back to the tent, its wet zippers.

I write about three feet of muddy snow. I try to forget the face of a dying rhino so I can go teach Thoreau. In California, I planned to spend two days under General Sherman, but I got lost looking for Nola. How we'd planned to get donuts before parasailing, pepperoni pizza beside the water.

You said you wanted to show me the second engine again.

For two years, I want to let in every animal. I want to make myself the incessant rain of small meteors striking the dead trees. For two years, putting little white dots on a blue-black surface is not enough. For two years, I forget the time you chose creme brûlée and called poetry the sweat in our palms, this white magic, an emotion without cause.

You kept adding donuts to the order and I stood there like trees walking around, like there is a difference between the logic of love, and the texture of the language about love.

I know the orange hue at the bottom of the gorge was only an oncoming car. I know unhappiness is best defined as the distance between truth and sound. I know there are beetles with heart shaped elbows.

Belief, as Plato pains to make clear, is to get a hold of the mirror, to carry it around. Something about painters and playwrights, always being alone, how I'm two generations away from the truth.

For two years, I search the internet for stars and a picture of Kesha comes up. I type #milkyway into Twitter and there's a girl covered in Sour Patch Kids. For two years I've been carrying around the sun, I've been writing to heavenly bodies.

For two years, I ran to McCarty's to forget walking seven miles for grilled cheese. How we'd started running, but then I was cramping, so we walked seven miles instead, and found a mirror measuring 3.5 meters in diameter.

For two years, I ran to the shores of Lake Superior so I wouldn't tell you how you were the only boy I'd ever loved.

How I'm always taking trains to leave out the sound of helicopters breaking. How after I turned right, my audience was you.

What if the stars we slept under already died.

Something about blue dots gradually coming out from the hills, their mouths open, full of giant planets and undercut rocks. Paper airplanes made from faded navy snowmen.



## COLLECTING FISH

I keep telling them  
that men  
are more anxious  
about pinecones

the male mackerel  
more capable  
of hiding  
from the tenderness  
of tuff

once I drove  
to the top  
of Torrey Pines  
just to watch old coffee  
hit the dirt  
in between

I remember people  
taking pictures

a couple sharing a sandwich

bright colors, the lettuce  
disappearing

for the third time

I remember the legs  
of a crab-spider  
coming  
across my chin

I was six years old  
thinking about timberline

the next lake

10,000 stingrays  
stuck between trees

AFFOGATO

I saw myself espresso. Behind the lake  
two planets in the glass at your feet.

If you want someone to love you, make love  
an atlas. From the bottom of white fir,

you can starve on this iron ore. From this view,  
all our captains curve into vanilla bean. Under blue

mirrors I found myself in the meadow in a wooden  
chair asking. *Why sum?* I like that oars don't bend

like bridal veil, picnic table limbs instead of your chipped  
tongue. There is something about where dust skies

choose to go in winter. Between mountain maple  
and ice, how I wanted to spill into the valley of a stranger's

steel toes as I watched the roots of your language turn  
to draught. How I watched planets bury polar bears

beneath hayfield as the rivers I said to you emptied.  
Want someone to love you? Love again.

Pick the glass from your shoes and name it, as if a moon.

## BLUE RHINO

This is the sound of caterpillars burning.

The passenger rear tire with a screw in its left side and the wolf in its own mouth. This is the last letter I wrote you. The first love coming back and the elephant leading me there.

The letter I never sent.

Bags hang from rotting trees, bodies fall to the feet of Virginia dogwood. The monarch spills across Appalachia and the smallest white rhino learns to walk along the coast.

This is me standing under the world's largest mounted specimen and you don't even know. The sign above me says the 24,000 lb. African Bush elephant was 55 years old when Josef J. Fenykovi came to to hunt.

This is the distance between six white rhinos and the oldest love. My heart catching the train to the Smithsonian and a butterfly in my hair.

Bullets reach sky, the dolphin smells its own blood, every elephant comes home headfirst.

This is my friend telling me to pose for a picture, but all I see are swollen hands, his fingertips around the wrong neck, someone else's body at the top of the moat.

Every time I bump into a stranger, I see the deer's eyes between broken limbs. Fiberglass made of painted ivory.

This is Harambe dying, Masamba wobbling, you talking to God at 25,000 feet. Me in the passenger seat above the Three Sisters just so I could send you a picture.

In between tusks too heavy to mount, I follow the sound of heavy rains. Beneath the mystery in water, the rocks unknown, I know the age of honeybees. I see the seal puking up curdled milk and the swallow thrown out of its own nest.

This is you telling me how the trees would fall asleep. How Teddy would leave behind the bear and bring home someone else.

How the elephant would cross the river singing, but the children would be too afraid to play.

This is my heart at the museum feeling too much.

*One of the largest living mammals, the sign reads, this rhinoceros is currently endangered.*  
My heart in the shallow burrows where penguins lay their eggs.

*Former President Roosevelt collected this specimen in 1909.*

My heart writing poems about Nola on the train to the zoo.

*"I speak of Africa and golden joys."*

I was buying a ticket to San Diego Safari Park for the second time.

My dad used to burn caterpillars out of our front yard's trees. How he would wait for dusk to settle, and then light matches to them. I couldn't see their eyes, but I could imagine their moving bodies, pitch black and bright yellow, it was the smell of plants burning.

Sometimes I'd lie in bed and imagine them waking up to the flames.

Sometimes I'd bury them beside the same tree that burned.

This is my heart snow-covered in summer.

My heart at the foot of dogwoods making no sense.

Sitting at a blue table inside Little Italy, you pour my coffee into yours. I tell you how I can't stop writing about floating horns, her face on the other side. How now there are only three. You ask if I'd write about the second engine if you showed it to me.

I come home headfirst, I say, smelling the coffee black, running from the people on the train.

How you nudged me off the sidewalk because it's something your grandpa would do.

In 1909, Roosevelt made a deal with The Smithsonian. They would fund an expedition to east Africa and he would bring back big game for the museum's collection.

With a river craft, two sailboats, and some rowboats, he'd travel hundreds of miles down the Nile to Lado Enclave, hundreds of miles to one white rhino.

He planned to shoot two family groups, one for the Smithsonian and another that he had promised to a sculptor and taxidermist working at the American Museum of Natural History.

Roosevelt, who was known for being a conservationist, knew the white rhino was already nearing extinction, but felt the species was inevitably doomed, and it was important for him to collect specimens before it went extinct.

In the end, he shot five, another four killed by someone else. As game, rhinos were known for being unimpressive. Most were shot while waking up.

During the spree, sixty foot flames swept through red sky and elephant grass. Roosevelt and his men waking to the aftermath of apocalypse.

This is me in our hometown making sidewalk from the ash of ivory tusks.

Waiting for Skyfari, I read about fewer wolves. Caribou hunters leaving them behind to die. How sometimes they'd spill for a week and no one would know.

They eat coyotes alive, you tell me, how they'll take a bite out of the elk's back leg before it's had time to lift its second antlers. Before it's learned to cross the river.

This is me 16,000 feet above Banff telling a stranger about the snare around its neck, the smell of rotting blood and the ivory ash covering our front yard's trees, and how sometimes the zoo is the only place I can go to be this sad.

*You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts*

At the top of Marble Canyon, I see rainbows in dogwoods, orange mud across manmade grass. A couple asks why I do it alone. I say sometimes the forest has to die. The wolf killed in its sleep.

*And in much of your talking, thinking is half murdered*

I say sometimes the only way to African Plains is through spilling ochre.

The first time I read about Roosevelt, he was on a hunt for a bear. How she was 225 lbs. and mangy looking, but by the time he got to her, he just couldn't do it. He asked a friend instead, and chose a knife to put her out of her misery. He couldn't shoot something that had already been through such a fight.

This is you calling as soon as the train stopped, putting on your green suit and asking me what it means.

This is my heart at the table waiting to say blue. My heart missing the 5:30 bus and carrying Gibran.

I was just so sad, I tell you.

*For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you*

I'm just so sad, I would say to the snow. I just want to be friends again. For months I fell asleep to all the animals awake. For months, you never said anything.

*Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning*

Months later at the Smithsonian, I pass a stuffed grizzly. Her arms lifted as if to fight.

This is me Googling "the saddest things happening in the world right now" eight months after you left.

"Jane Goodall Says Zoo Had No Choice But to Kill Harambe the Gorilla"

This is me moving to Michigan and you didn't even know.

*He may have been protecting the boy and putting an arm around him.*

Jane in Gorilla Forest waiting to push send.

*But when people come into contact with wild animals...*

Then five days later, the email in her outbox.

RE: "Complex Questions"

This is my heart buried 13 feet in Elephant Valley.

This is my heart writing to tell you: "Countdown to extinction: Only 6 northern white rhinos left on Earth."

I see Harambe in his birthday hat. Nola passing out forks and Masamba licking Funfetti icing off the second engine. A couple sitting beside me asks how I do it alone.

This is me waking up to a flat tire and you falling asleep in our hometown.

This is me driving through grizzlies, through avalanche zones, through Asian Savanna and tusks worth more than platinum and gold.

Me in Gorilla Forest trying not to think about love.

Teddy and Jane sharing a grilled cheese sandwich above the trees.

How once I wrote to you about Polar Frontier, but I ran out of stamps.

This morning a shooter went into a nightclub in Orlando and killed 49 strangers. I'm telling my dad about Masamba when it comes on the news.

Months after I'd been writing about one white rhino, months after Oregon and Paris, months after I told you I just couldn't be friends anymore.

*I can't stop writing about what I can't do.*

Months after Nola died in San Diego.

*How do we write about what isn't happening to us?*

Months after you moved there to fly helicopters in the sun.

*What hurts most- how it keeps coming back.*

Months after I'd compare a rhino dying to the gun going off.

How I would write to sidewalks covered in snow.

My dad sips from his coffee mug, asks if there's still a can of ant spray under the kitchen sink.

This is me trying to write about Harambe, trying to make sense of Masamba being born and Harambe being shot, how 49 people are dead.

I don't know if you've heard about it yet, if you've put on your green suit, or if you're still sleeping.

*But when I speak to you, there's the bridge to a picnic table. A sun drawn.*

Sometimes I wake up to the monarch's wings between my teeth.

*There's the way I was then, and the way I am now.*

Sometimes I stare at my coffee until it becomes the second engine.

*There's how many are praying and how many are crying.*

Sometimes I drive 3,000 miles to spill across African Plains.

*How many are on their way to God.*

This is my heart writing to everyone but you.

I'm afraid the trees are always awake. That the caterpillars will always burn. I'm afraid I'll never really know the age of honeybees. The color of butterflies spilling.

I'm afraid their bodies were identical, formless and still.

THIS IS WHERE I TELL YOU ABOUT NOLA

There is no pine. No thin second sidewalk  
of jupiter. For the first time, I'm not wishing  
you were here, forcing God into the rocks.  
Little Zion looking up, I choose indian pale ale

without you. Here, the Virgin River carves  
a constellation of myths. Asterisms blooming  
on the desert floor. I see the canyon hips  
widen, the river run away. Finally there's this

song: a great gantlet rimmed with slick rock  
peaks and hanging valleys. How easy it is  
every morning to lose some spinning earth.  
To stand at the foot of drooping dogwoods

and explain myself. Thick stands of Fremont  
cottonwood, box elder, a short distance away,  
willow. You say they tell you not to feel. In San Diego,  
you stand on the rim and look out, a million years

of floating water cut through red and white halls  
of sandstone. Because if oars divide the ocean,  
softened rain. Caterpillar bags spilling green sun.

And this is where I tell you about Nola. Geologic  
heart of canyon roof. Unwanted sky on top  
of unwanted sky until sands reach feet. I only run  
when there is sound coming from trees. Canyon walls.

Whatever I see I swallow.



## SOMEONE ELSE'S WEATHER

Somewhere between Lost and landmine, it's intimate,  
inducing heat, as polar bears cross borders, wait for  
farmhouses to empty. I want to sink into everything

when you're turning it on. I wade time zones at McCarty's  
by the slammed door and vocabulary, the slide of Seattle  
and drip, but still somewhere between Lost and inducing

heat it's intimate beneath the swell of the green sky, my thieves  
begged from the crater that sombered and said Someday  
I want to sink. Into everything when you're turning it on,

when a shipwreck of a story I didn't know resembles lost  
and found and isotactic. "This poem's perspective:  
somewhere between Lost and inducing heat it's intimate

and it's just passing through," sometimes hurt. "More than holy  
there's hardened, brazing, close fitted and fit."

I want to sink into everything when you're turning it on,  
while you're parallel parking and forgetting the sun.

## COUNTY ROAD 550

I had them kill the little fox last night. The sky pointed towards a couple searching for the ship's rusted belly in Detroit, a part of it opening up two fields away, almost pink. I was scared, too, worrying about burnt soup, my missing shoes, wanting the beetles to come for the rain. I listened to the moon yell at cottonmouths, the waves circling rocks. I tried standing on the opposite riverbank singing, I tried getting quiet in between the tick and the fox's swollen neck. We think there is a nature in walking to blueberries rotting. A sweetness when the tick searches for a boat full of mums, a home. I had them do it while the screen fell from the upstairs window. Two men stopping to ask if the clouds were evil, if the weather said so, if I could get used to it. They read advertisements about a forty-five-foot rope under the dragging pine and I worried I would. This feeling of believing my eyes, this year of black-eyed Susans laughing, the gravel not knowing while they peeled moss off my tongue. The little fox digging through yellow boots and old gloves again, me wanting to forget.

## AFTER YOU TELL ME I ROMANTICIZE EVERYTHING

I'm pulling the tread from your bike's front tire. We're sitting in the parking lot, and you say *let's get you some tea*. It's April, and I think about the strangers shoveling dead stars in the street. I think about their shoulders tired, muscles jumping from the ice underneath. That morning I was quiet while the tiger roared. The sign reads: Teddy is father to two sets of cubs in the park. I knew I would remember him standing up, sitting down, his unwilling knees like the time you poured my coffee into yours. I heard him singing from Condor Ridge, wading through woolly blue curls in the bent styrofoam. On the map, I drew pictures of sun bears. I thought of the family on the train, felt the garden shaking, the moon shattering again. How the son cried over his spilt slushy, the youngest daughter yelling at a pair of Gouldian finches to wake up. The first time I watched you from the passenger seat, I thought mountains were just big trees. I tried holding ochre in my hands to rub out the color of leaves. We practiced ourselves. It was like elephants coming home, the lion waking at dawn with a full heart. You pulled the hair from my earring and moved closer. *Why are you sad?* It was Friday and now she was coming, too. From the backseat, I watched the lion step on ilex leaves until it went numb. From the backseat, I was Aphrodite's pet, the last passenger pigeon. I couldn't reach the button, I held onto the bees. How you'd moved the picnic table around and an apron hung from the kitchen door. I wanted back on Africa Tram, to be the raisin in the four year old's hands as we passed the shortest giraffe's tongue. How it fell into my flesh when you poured your beer into hers. Told me there's too much of my heart in Gorilla Forest. Too much of me spilling inside Little Italy. This morning I am busy wondering why I didn't know to cling to the earth. In the backseat of the second engine, how I didn't know to press my feet into the tallest grass, impress it fully into memory. I pulled tread from your bike's front tire. I made myself cry. I sat down on the banks of a river and separated the leaves of my heart. There was something in the middle of them, still falling, a room of that morning. For years I couldn't get up on waterskis. For years I couldn't tell you the difference between friendship and love.

LITTLE PRESQUE

I vanish off the highway into golden  
with all my poppy neck. I take summer raw

to the librarian who cries softly into her Britannica.  
I unplug wild grass. I bend down at every

fallen tree and watch men build thirty-five-foot  
fog with missing boats. I didn't always fly over

someone else's city and lose it all. I didn't always  
wait hours for turbulence to come.

If I know nothing in an empty room,  
then six types of screwdrivers.

## RACCOON, A COYOTE, OR MAYBE THE UGLIEST FISH

I saw the rain too long that morning. He had just finished eating his eggs over easy and I was in the backyard adding up the dandelions. I would find what I wanted that summer in whatever swamp, whatever side of the garden that grew, every morning drawing in books pictures of emerald pools, and God, and Crater the chipmunk.

I never thought how I might be walking in on the trees stripped down, an old elm eating rotting mushrooms, the missing mollusk. The soft sound of an orange leaf dropping six feet. I never thought how maybe the trees didn't want me there that Tuesday morning, my hands buried into the hemlock's palm.

Thoreau believed that in wilderness is the preservation of the world. A small library in the downy woodpecker's first nest. I read this to you on a bus from L.A. to San Diego. Staring at the grey cloth peeling, I tell you how I'm planning to rent a wet suit and hike the Narrows alone.

I'd take a plane to Zion's red and white walls and fail to make sense of my feet buried in Superior's soft sand. I'd go to Weeping Rock one evening and write a villanelle about winter. I didn't know how

I'd talk to my heart in between the Virgin's cold water and sun.

They call it a double wound, *nature*. The way something is precisely not known in the first instance. How it returns later on, when you're driving to blue trees, when you're finally looking into the bent mirror, the ugliest fish in the passenger seat laughing. When you're being stung by the entire hive.

Finally I'm taking that left onto County Road 550 knowing the red and white walls would crumble.

It was Heidegger who saw the earth as poetry. In the iron, the most important geologic fact in Minnesota, how mystery comes and disappears again. On a bus from D.C. to New York, I'm a little fox, the smallest white rhino, every monarch wing. How it was Heidegger who planted those mums in the front yard's boat.

I was twenty-two writing my first poem, *the more one knows of its peculiar history, the more one realizes that wilderness is not quite what it seems*. A student came to me five days after Thanksgiving and told me about the storm ripping up some pine's roots, the color of her mom's coat right before it rained, the roar of the water and the walls dropping away.

I was twenty-two writing about bodies— raccoons, coyotes, the ugliest fish. I was twenty-two, and wilderness was hiding its unnaturalness behind a small red fox.

But isn't the laughable only a part of what is ugly, I have this memory of white walls caving in, my hair caught in the wet suit's zipper, I don't know which wall to grab, which part of the canyon holds the most water, I'm alone with the rocks and when the water finally gets in, I am sick of the rain that fell.

*I killed that man. I wash my sheets  
every morning and watch Pat Sajak  
and honeysuckle spin. I bury*

*hemlocks into my palms  
when my mother says  
it was a bad dream*

Wilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good— it had been the darkness, one might say, on the far side of the garden wall—

And why is it hard to walk on the soft sand? “One cannot say: here are our monsters without turning the monsters into pets.” I spent four years thinking about the names of butterflies, four years watching the stars spill sulfur. I spent four years imagining the sun without a moon.

Even tonight, when I take a walk to the white deer, I am drawn to the center of myself.

And yet by the end of the 19th century, wilderness was Eden itself. The wastelands that once seemed worthless and savage, lacking and barren, had become priceless, a glimpse of God’s right cheek. The poet feeling most in the literal presence of the divine— the closest feeling to terror. It wasn’t until the 1940s that God would make a visit to the country’s first swamp.

I’m worried poetry deforms minds. That it feeds its lower parts, leaving that inner organ which can perceive truth and reality behind.

I have this memory of being wrong about bees.

Wilderness is defined as an area undisturbed by humans, an empty space where groups of nebulae are found, a part of a garden devoted to wild growth.

I have this memory of craving eggs, a radio, staring at the sun as it hits a red and yellow Phillips head. I have this memory of watching strangers follow the chains up to Angel’s Landing. This memory of you calling me a romantic, *just like Muir*.

I recently found an old notebook with an old poem, “Missing Seattle.” I wrote it a few years ago while I was visiting a friend in Brooklyn. The L-train had broken down somewhere in between Broadway Junction and Jefferson. From Morgan to Grand, I watch a family cling to one another’s hips and thighs, talk of having duck for dinner.

Underneath the poem are notes I don’t remember taking, how beings are driven by both desires and fears, both needs and conflicts, experiences of which they are unaware. That the unconscious is where those painful emotions are stored. That they come into being when we are young, holding onto the side of rough wood imagining a memory of soft sand.

I had been to Seattle only once before, February, and had spent the first morning walking down to the fish market. I bought five dollars worth of sunflowers and imagined myself there in late June. I imagined hiking Mount Rainier on my 23rd birthday, and falling in love slowly with the Puget Sound one Tuesday morning.

When the train finally takes off, I wonder how long it’s been since the four-year-old girl held on to the side of sassafras.

Pascal says, more or less: kneel down, move your lips and believe.

But even as Thoreau joined Moses in watching the Lord appear in a cloud, wilderness was being tamed. By the second half of the nineteenth century, tourists were lining up to watch Old Faithful explode, Muir writing a ghazal about Yosemite— *between every two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life.*

And I believed him. *None of nature's landscapes are ugly so long as they are wild.*

I was standing in the valley of empty hours, staring at Vernal Falls. Between a forest of ponchos, a meadow of a stranger's flashing lights, I was crying over an orange sign. *On this site President Theodore Roosevelt sat beside a campfire with John Muir, talking forest good.* I was crying over the time the dandelions stayed behind, collecting stingers in their cups. *At this spot one of our country's foremost conservationist received great inspiration.*

Finally I am before man, before the coffee hitting the dirt, before pinecones lit up. Finally in a field of frozen buffalo, there is something other than myself, something other than rough hands, the ugly fish laughing or grasping for air. In fact, it is in the not knowing, or if we do know, not realizing when it is influencing us.

*I burn the whole earth  
into my right shoulder.*

*I retrace my steps in the front yard  
to heal my knuckles  
to the throat  
of a man  
who believed my body  
was only meant  
for listening to the wind.*

In 1870, explorers gathered around a campfire at the joining of two rivers. Over the flames, they discussed the land, the fire, the ice, and wild animals they had discovered during their exploration and decided all these needed to be preserved. In 1872, President Grant signed the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act into law, “the headwaters of the Yellowstone River...is hereby reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy or sale, ... and dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”

Yosemite came soon after. Then the sequoias, Mount Rainier, Oregon's blue mirror. All the bears and moose, every flightless passenger pigeon and plant, every baby buffalo wobbling on the side of the road.

But it wasn't a coyote, not the raccoon's swollen tail, the walk to white deer. It wasn't a memory of changing leaves, or Lake Superior's lashing, or a field-skipper landing in my hair, it was Zion's chipmunk asking to share a White Macadamia Cliff bar.

Someone once told me a poet is someone who looks at something, and keeps looking. That the eye

has knowledge the mind cannot share. For Eliot, it wasn't the loosening of emotion, not the mountains or the clouds, but an escape from the high grass' dew, from rough hands and the dandelions that stayed. Every morning after the summer I turned nine, I used to bury the wind. Months after I took a bus to San Diego, I tell you how I couldn't make it past the chains, how the earth curved on its way to Angel's Landing, and a couple shared a grilled cheese as I sat down to write.

I woke early that morning and went straight to the trail's head listening to a playlist that sounded like fall, it reminded me of you leaving for Rhode Island, the time we went camping off Route 19, I was lost but then we were spilling into the river with a bunch of strangers, jumping in finally and you took a picture with your hands, and that night you listened to a poem about little foxes on a footstool, *because art for the sake of art*, you said.

A week before going to Zion, I told you about blue trees, how I felt safe beneath the river's birch, hiding in the shadows of the oldest pines. At the top of Angel's Landing, I wrote to you as if you would be there, too. One day we would climb the Narrows together, you with my zipper and me in the cold water.

Still the piles of dirty snow on Third Street and all its stalagmites, still the fields of frozen buffalo in a different kind of June.

Poems as epics— the great men had sung of battles and heroes, whose actions affected thousands. In the West, it begins with a woman on an island in the seventh of sixth century B.C.

*It's how he rowed  
across my fields,  
ate his eggs over easy  
the next morning.*

I am the blue chair burning. I was two and the wood stove had caught fire just before December's dark. Our next door neighbor came over to sit with me while the fire department took care of the flames. We were sitting in the blue chair and I was thinking about this hidden canyon, a trail to weeping rocks.

And isn't it both the knowing and the not knowing, the static and the radio's antennae breaking, a sound of eggs popping too soon, far from telling of an escape from reality. Isn't is the point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language and the unconscious meet?

I was two years old thinking about gardens made by kings. The fish flocking to sunken ships. I was two years old and a man was watching me think about the walk to the white deer. I was two years old disappearing, a family of tiger swallowtails in my hair.

*How I searched my mother's jars  
of grapevine for the scent  
of old orchids,*

At the top of Little Beehive, I asked rusting concrete what it means to hold something too heavy in your hands. What it means for the rain to hit the plane's broken tail and to call the clouds evil after.



He laughed when I said it, sat there with his creme brûlée donut while I crawled into the corner of a map and imagined myself so small I remembered the fawn's tiny spots melting into fresh pavement. Imagined myself watching sassafras between my teeth.

For years, conservation has been evicting indigenous peoples from their homelands, re-naming them "wilderness." For years, we've renamed canyons and trees, the Virgin River and Smith Rock. For years, we've taken the red fox into the back room teaching it a memory of tools.

But the trouble with wilderness is that it whispers the very values its devotees seek to reject. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined desires.

At the top of Little Beehive, a couple picks snow from one another's shoes and asks where I'm from. They laugh when I tell them the Blue Ridge, they can tell from the way I say small, how long it takes me to say blue.

I saw you when I said it. When I imagined every birch dying, the corner of a map no one ever looks at. I saw you when I was looking for somewhere to fill in the words. I saw you staring at yellow leaves.

I was driving to blue trees, I was driving along a memory of the mother's face watching, a family of swallowtails locked in the white room, dandelion roots writing their first bad poem,

*but all I could remember  
were how many bees  
I'd killed that spring.*

It's the way he dragged my clothes from the dryer and I stopped thinking about God.

## WINTER KILL

And still, I don't know what  
to call two hundred trout  
without a lake,

the gray wolf cutting through  
a nearby swamp to get back  
to its blue warbler. I stay

up watching for signs  
of an uncut flower, some new  
vocabulary in the Seney's slush.

Now that you're gone I'm sorry  
I thought maybe you were right  
calling me Donald Trump  
over creme brûlée, and god's

machine. That night I apologized  
ten times to a bowl of popcorn,

I got lost on Fourth Avenue saying sorry  
to someone else's quinoa.

Someone once told me  
that the earth began  
on a woman's knee,

that two hours North of here  
a man is tired  
of hanging monarchs  
from their feet.

I thought I was over you.

I thought I was a bee floating  
beside reddish brown splotches  
when you had me choose  
between teas.

And still, there's the ripped-out  
heart thawing in the divided  
highway line, and the coming gale

again mistakes 3,000 miles  
of shoreline for a basket.

HUNTER

I said goodbye twenty times  
and wrote a villanelle just in case

this morning men talked  
about passion

and it made me want to row  
to the tallest mountain  
between Newport and Austin

and carve its elegy,  
*not tall enough.*

My hands are made for meeting strangers  
in Wall, South Dakota

and tasting the river in my mouth  
too early.

I couldn't care less if the only thing I get  
from love is a body of empty boxes.

What I'm trying to say  
is I'm sorry  
for driving you  
to the airport

my kindness  
six stories taller  
than the Statue of Liberty,

how my trunk was full of young-adult  
fiction, rotten zucchini.

Somewhere in Welch, West Virginia  
there is a street corner as holy  
as a four minute long voicemail.

## WHEN A GUY AT THE BAR TELLS ME I SOUND DAMAGED

Every morning it takes 57 kinds of fish to listen  
to the helicopters overhead. The shattering of mountains

is a good thing. That's what I told myself for five days after  
we sat on the second floor eating donuts. When I came home,

my best friend picked raspberries from the insides of a tree.  
Someone had cut out its middle, stuck a horse inside, sometimes

an '87 Volvo. I picked the smallest berry from his right palm  
and threw it at a groundhog watching. He said I didn't have to

be happy for the Cleveland Indians if I didn't want to. I could hate  
how the tree fell only if I could remember it laying in a pond

or a lake or at the feet of monkey flowers and Abe. Sitting in the back  
of the cockpit, I stared so long at a map I replaced the stars with potato

chips. I used to think if you circled something long enough, God would  
get tired of baseball. For five days, I took the Q-train to Coney Island

to watch blue helicopters search for sharks. I wondered if one morning  
you would remember the stingray with a hook in its mouth, Bob Lemon

sinking into the soft sand. I was nine the first time a man took me upstairs  
and showed me the absence of oxygen and light. I was nine trying to say

the word airplane. Zoo. Half-earth. I was deep in the forest rubbing two birds  
against each other and God was busy hanging pictures of Pioneer Cabin,

the inside of a MH-60 Knighthawk, a little girl sticking stained hands  
into the holes of the second engine, the Jackson River running through it.

BLOOD-ROOT

And to trap figs, I put your name  
in the basin of a tree. Tall elm. Flesh.

Your bluest shoes. Nothing swallows my feet  
like a broken arrow. Yellow poppies

across the drought theater. Sometimes I'm driving  
through badlands killing herds of prairie dogs; *what if*

*I want them to die.* I'd put the guns in the first sentence  
of woods, unbutton your shirt

just to get to your forehead. My life is full  
of flowers underwater, the rain shooting leaves.

My face hot from the cars driving by,  
from using ugly too many times. The way the curbside hangs

from my neck. I am ugly too many times, I loved you  
until I forgot the sun, their little heads popping.

If I ask for light am I rotting bark,  
closemouthed telling the secret of dandelions

am I ugly when horses confuse honey for paper,  
am I pointing a gun at the sky