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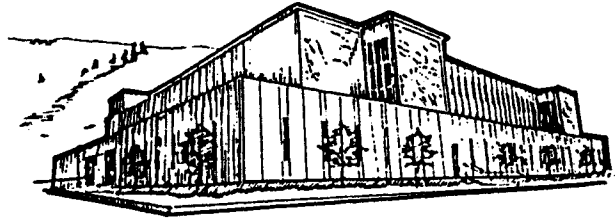
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WEATHER

by

Henrietta Spencer Goodman

B.A., University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1991

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1994

Approved by


Chairman, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

May 6, 1994
Date

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**"To be in love is like going outside
to see what kind of day it is."
—Robert Creeley**

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I

Silk Trick

The man at the door
has plucked and cleaned
a pheasant. He offers it
to me, his hands smeared
with blood and feathers.
Today my scars hardly show.
When he asks my name,
I say "Vanessa."
I wedge the back of a chair
under the doorknob
and hang blankets
over the windows.
I have two beds. I take him
to the one for sleeping alone
but I lie down beside him.

In the morning he wants me
to tell stories.
"How will you know
what's true?" I ask.
I uncrumple my piece
of red silk. It flutters,
nearly transparent.
I make it vanish and reappear.
He asks where I learned how.
I tell him I can't
remember. He grabs
my hands. I don't know
if he's the same man
as last night.
His eyes are darker.
The house is quiet.
Every now and then the clock
skips. He turns his face
against my palm.
What are these days called,
these days I can't find
on the calendar?

Dialogue #1

The man came to see the caverns.
I put on my miner's hat
and led him out across the field.
He ran his hand along the dripping wall.
Stop, I said. I gave my lecture
about minerals. I had cracked pecans
all day. My fingers were sore.
I could tell he wanted to stay
for dinner. He offered to reach
into the stream and catch one of the eyeless fish.
I was touching the switch.
I could have turned the lights out
any time. Then he wanted to see
the bottomless pools. I broke the ice
around the edges with my toe.
He skipped a rock across the surface.
It landed on the other side,
in the moss. "What do you think?"
I asked. I told him I'd dreamed
I could pull the river up
and cut it into strips, like ribbon.
He asked if the pools were really bottomless.

I haven't washed my hair in days.
It smells like old upholstery.
The motel is cheap, orange bedspread
and the TV nailed down.
It's how I like it.
I pull a stray end of hair
to my mouth. I want to swim
but the pool is stagnant,
its walls an opulent green. Dead flies
speckle the bottom. I wear my bikini
anyway. In the courtyard
grasshoppers bounce against the backs
of my knees. Their bleached skeletons
line the gutters.
When the sun starts going down,
I look through the drawers in my room.
I want to find something extra,
and use it. The man from the front desk
knocks. "I need to seal some letters,"
I tell him. I carve my name
in the block of paraffin
with a bent fork.
I'm wearing my raincoat
in case of splatters.
The paraffin melts slowly
in the coffee can over the burner.

We walk around the sculpture
on moldy straw. He stands beside me.
His skin smells like crushed oak leaves.
This afternoon on the hot metal steps
of the trailer I watched the shadows
of bees. The Canadian children
caught sandcrabs in their hands.
Une, deux, trois—
there is no such thing as a circle.
When will he say something
I can steal? Once I lived near the armory.
When the tanks drove down my street
a woman in a white slip ran out
and held up a yellow sign.
I never knew what it said.
Where is the artist? I want to argue
with her. I am in love
but I keep trying to use the word “periphery.”
In the water I stood on a rock
and fish swam around my feet.
You know how I feel about geometry.
With one hand I touch his knuckles.
With the other I scratch the wall.
I knock hard on the metal box.

Christmas

I sat by the lake with a man
I had just met. The stable
floated in the fog on the water,
walls of balsam, roof of dried moss.
The moon had three rings.
The man put his hand in the water
and fish nibbled his fingers.
When the stable moved closer,
nuns in white habits leaned over
the rear rail. They waved.
A fish jumped. I waved back
as they disappeared
behind the island.
The bakery had made fresh rolls.
I could smell them.
We were close.
When the stable floated slowly
back across the lake,
the nuns were all kneeling
inside by the manger.
Their habits glowed in the twilight.
I couldn't find my hat. The man
looked surprised. "Be careful,"
he said, "How many chances
do you think you get?"

Vines reclaim the landscape but I'll people
it yet. We sit on stumps in the front yard
and drink. "Teeth are flags," he says
when he kisses me. We balance a mattress
on the beams of the second story, no roof,
no floor. The bed sags where a big man died
years ago. I can't sleep. I tell ghost stories,
say I lived on this burned out side of town.
Rope I drop sways in the dark. When I pull,
it pulls back. "Your hair smells like Polish shampoo,"
he says. One kind of soap, one shade of gray.
My hair smells like smoke and snow. A fire
truck leaves the Second Street station. From here
we can see the bridges where the road breaks
in waves. I need to know who has slept here
since I left. Kudzu buried the big man
but his shape stays. The dead trees are wolves
like always. I look for our names on the walls,
find this small blue bruise on my lip like ink.

Mirrors

He is up to his elbows in dried blood.
"You should tear down the posters,"
I tell him, "No one here will buy anything."
He sits on Emma Lee's handpainted footstool
and stares at the fire. The floorboards
are splintered. "Calm down," I say, "Alchemy is too easy."
How did I learn to talk like that?
The house smells like turpentine.
It used to smell like pepper.
Once in the blue bedroom
Emma Lee dried my hair. She curled it
with a brush. After that my face was finished.
Mirrors don't surprise me. He takes the pictures
of the cousins out of the hall,
leaves the gold frames. I hold onto his arm.
"Practice looking afraid," he says.
It's hard. We have enough dietetic candy
to last as long as we want.
On the backporch by the kiln,
he drinks the last bottle of wine.
I stay in the kitchen. I'm trying
to blow eggs. I peel back the tablecloths.
Around midnight he says it's time to go.
We dance to music from the carousel
across the street. "You'll forget,"
he says. He leaves me pictures,
but he's right,
in those old dresses
he looks like me.

After the Knife Fight

A girl in a shiny bikini
runs behind a pile of rocks.
The car slides on gravel.
She peeks out from behind a green sign.
Frost glitters on her arms.
I didn't do it, I tell her when she gets in.
She smiles. Last time I drove this road
I was not alone.
Tom was in back drunk
and Wendy sat up front pointing out antelope.
Pull over, Wendy said just after we passed
the plaster bull.
She picked sage, barefoot, pulling hard
on the tough clumps.
I know it doesn't sound like much.
The flag lady waves us to a stop.
"We've got some belly dumps coming."
In the car ahead of us, the driver
scratches his neck,
throws a pinch of salt over his shoulder.
The wind picks up. He watches me
in his mirror. "Don't worry,"
the girl says, "See his scars?"

This time of year the sun comes early
but we keep the curtains drawn
in our room over the cafe.
In the purple light she cuts out my stitches.
A few days later there's a man downstairs
with a garbled voice
and a fur bag. He spreads a road atlas
over the pie crumbs
and makes me show him every place I've been.
I think he asks if I like fried catfish.
He traces the highways.
The girl's eyes glow green
in my high beams.

I remember this street. I remember
the plaster wall where I stop to rest.
My fingers throb. In the fighting
a bullet grazed my ear. That day we walked
in the forest he quoted Keats. She stood
in tears amid the alien corn. I stood
in tears while he poked the dead tiger
with a stick, lifted the black gums
to expose the teeth. "Une abeille,"
he said, "that's what stung you."
He smeared green ointment on my hand.
In the bar I hardly recognize him.
He orders a martini.
He still has the stick,
the end coated with tar.
When I was a baby in a bar like this
they gave me wedding cake.
They beat drums. "It's my birthday,"
he says, "the day of the dead."
"I don't care," I tell him.
Where is the dictionary that used to be
on the bar? I used to know more words.
He takes the maps from his pocket
and spreads them out. "Los dias de muertos."
Send me some red leaves from home.
Show me some grief.

Open Hand

This morning I see for the first time
he has an artificial hand.

It glows, translucent and blue-green,
bones like bike chain. The fingers
bend like fingers. He comes back
from the store with milk bottles,

the glass thick and bubbled. We drink
the milk in bed, under the covers.

I can't see out the windows for the crowd
that has gathered at the foot of the bed.
The women blink snow out of their eyelashes.
The men kick their boots against the bedpost.

He has also brought a book with a yellow
cover. Only he can translate the poems.

The first is about a frozen waterfall.
I want the crowd to go away
so I can sleep. His hand glows in the dark.
I can still see it, even when

I am on the long train past the women
doing pushups in the square.

Even when the man with the sword
cuts the heads off all the statues
and they shatter on the frozen ground.
Even when he points the sword at me.

Barbados

Sara sent a letter. "It didn't hurt
as bad as I thought it would," she wrote.
In her room, a folding screen is painted
with cranes stretching their necks
toward dragonflies on waterlilies.
From behind, she tosses a stocking
over the edge. Sara, don't you remember?
All the time we were swimming, the cave
was underneath us. We dove five feet down
and entered a green room veined with light.
I unwrapped seaweed from your ankle.
When we stood up on the rocks,
the passing trucks blew their horns.
We kept moving to stay warm.

Now I go there with him. He holds
my foot in his lap and rubs my heel
with a pumice stone. I ask for a story
about lava. I can see the dark mouth
of the cave at the base of the cliff.
I don't know where the fear comes from.
It's not the water. I'm not afraid
of water. He says he loves to see
me shiver. He never saw anyone so white.
Sara, remember when you tried on my silks,
looped my chain of bells around your waist?
What are you doing? Why did you say, "Barbados,
where the black men are so scary and ugly?"
Sara, the water turned my rings gold.

Not in awe, but—

I've been trying to say something
straightforward. At the lake
we sat on the dock. I drew on the boards
with chalk rocks. We watched the island.
In my clearest moments
I see things that aren't there.
He turns his back to the window. An old man
behind him looks in. I don't mean
to be mystical. We shared
a chocolate bar, a can of corn.
Where is my persona?
In my red gown I follow him
along the railroad track.
He leads me by the hand
but I keep slipping, missing steps.
I lie down. There. I'm safe.
I want to make an analogy
between myself and Ireland.
It doesn't work. The sun's not up
and already the preacher is out on the corner.
Already I am suggesting guilt.
At least indecision. It would be comfortable,
now, to enter an alternate universe.
I could let a man in a turban appear
and say "don't eat the white berries."
I could express concern about businessmen.
No. It's not like that.
He is more afraid of his grandparents' bed
than I am.

II

- I. The branches clack. The pods
rub together, dry and transparent.
Most have three seeds inside.
I've sat all afternoon
peeling the layers, gathering
the seeds in a little pile
on the rail. Two crows peck
the frozen ground. The body
is divided exactly in two,
by the limbs, by the lines
of the chest and back.
A train passes. I run my hand
down my spine. It is farther
than it looks to the edge
of the yard.
- II. Last night a woman touched
my hair. I can't stop thinking
about it. A man took my hand.
I'm trying to call all of it back—
I walked across the bridge.
The wind was cold. Pigeons
flew off the roof of the movie house
and out over the river. I walked
with my arms folded. In the bar
the late afternoon light
was shining through the open door
and the windows, glowing
across the wooden floor.
I remember now, that this is how
most things start,
in a light I know.
And then come the bodies
and the hands.

Three Legged Race

I was better at the sack race, faster in the rising
smell of burlap and grass. I could only win

the three legged race if I practiced ahead of time,
hobbled my leg to another's and held on tight

until we could stride as one. Afterward,
it felt awkward to untie my leg and walk alone.

It's twilight. The sidewalks are buckled
with roots. What am I afraid of?

I had to be told to be amazed
when the waves washed my green shovel

out with the tide and returned it the next day.
I found it on the sand, beside a horseshoe crab shell

and some pieces of pink coral. "It's back," I said,
and I sat down and dug a hole to watch it fill with water.

Spring

Even the snow in the shade is melting.
Soon the hardware store will put out
flats of tomato and pepper plants,
bags of beans dusted with pink powder.
I think I look relaxed, one foot
propped on the porch rail.
I don't look like I'm waiting.
A girl rides by on a bike,
fast over the bumpy street,
her blond hair bundled under a scarf.
I would be all right
if I could stop that woman from calling
every night to say rhymes in my ear—
coat rack, rabbit track.
She won't say what she wants.
I hold the phone, try to grab
the string that turns the light on
but it swings over my head.
She laughs and asks,
"Are you there? Are you still there?"
I'm trying to remember a song.
People are all out walking
with their children. Next door
a man carves something small and ornate
from a piece of oak.
The clear air sharpens my ears.
I hear sawdust falling,
potatoes growing in their buckets.
I hear bubbles from the mouths
of the goldfish. The sun
is just where it should be.

Black Water

- I. Nothing to do with the moon, this way of black water,
decay, brine-soaked compost of last year's leaves,

this mirror that turns me upside down, shakes out confessions
I never meant to make. You want me to lie for you,

fire one warning shot into the air. I make my fingers
wrought iron, black grip of nails on palms, tell you no.

The bullet still falls somewhere. You made me stand
in wet red light and watch the wreck and now I can't leave.

I'm beside a dying man. People wait
in the car behind us. I tell them

I can't stay, that I'll find the path in the dark,
crunch leaves like insects under my feet

and take the sign down. Then I'll go back to him
but one of you with hands over your face has to come too.

- II. Some nights I think the fights start not over
spilled drinks and uncalled shots, but because the current

surging through me loops out to ionize the room.
You've said this is unreasonable. At least

I know when to stop watching, when a temple cracks
on the corner of a table, knuckles sling blood,

bodies lurch to break the circle. We pour
onto the street under a light that blinks

fast as an eye. We are severed. The light pulses,
holds us still as we try to slip away.

Horizon

To get here we have walked
in our sleep
past dark holes
where animals live,
cliff-caves,
river canyons.
Our eyes stop
before the horizon.
The shade of all
we can't see
falls.

The winter sun shatters
windows. We sit
with glass in our laps,
grind it to sand
or glue the pieces back,
but the light is crooked.
It turns corners.

A seagull circles
the basin
a thousand miles inland.
The hills have rings.
Salt crusts along the shore.

We follow a broken
white line.
Twilight and dust
blur our vision.
The water has risen.
It strands us on mountaintops.,
Lights we see
in the valleys
at night
are noctiluca,
stars
in the swells.

What good does it do to go to the island alone?
My windows rattle whether or not the train passes.
I wake thinking dead man's pedal, a picket fence
around the devil and his red pit. Then the long
whistle. Dandelions grow large here. Under my chin
they glow through any lie about forgetting.
In their light I see the veins of my eyes.

Horses' hooves beat to the end of the island.
In the store across the bridge, a man
follows while I pick up bread. He rubs his scar,
temple to jaw, and invites me to a party.
My accent makes me look familiar. He grew up
in Morganton. I almost ask if he knew John
but the dates are wrong. I need a knife.
All he has is a plastic spoon.
When I cross the bridge again, the blowing sand,
the white birds standing in the marsh like vases
ask me to wait.

I was the conductor's daughter.
On hot days I rode on the open platform.
When I saw the black silhouettes
of farmers, I always thought the sun
was going down. From back east
Karen sent me a piece of her hair.
Ruthella, Maryalice, and Estella
elected her treasurer.
Sometimes after dark she puts on
a kerchief and goes down the gully
to eat with the hobos.
She asks the hard questions—
Are you home?
Are you at home?
Are you coming home?
Once she asked me about beauty.
Well, I said, daisies grow
along the tracks.
I used the word "malleable"
though I knew she wouldn't know it.
I said my pockets were heavy
with melted pennies.

Snowscape

Urging me to think about God,
he traces the letters on my forehead
with his finger—GOD.
In the crowded cafe,
people turn to look.
My lip hurts. Today I tried to sell
my dresses. The light meter
on my camera is broken.
My pictures come out black,
or bright in irregular patterns.
You're missing something, he says.
If you drive over the pass
you need chains, or radials.
You might have radials.
We'll check in the morning.
Delores and Veronica, remember me
from school? You danced to a song
I liked. What was the name of it?

After dinner we drink Sangre de Toro.
I count the grains of rice
left on my plate.
Someone is always telling me not to move.
The flash goes off. Of course I agree.
I will try to forget where the grave
is located, or at least mark it
with something useful,
like a windmill.

Ghost Town

This is what you believe in—
dry veins and bottles still waiting
on a table.

You choose a room in the hotel
and hang the lamp on the wall.
Your reflection wavers in the mirror.
In the dim light your eyes are open mines.

I refuse dead ends, abandoned beds
with mushrooms growing through the mattresses.
While you sleep I walk the hallways
nailing horseshoes to the walls,
trying on dresses threaded with cobwebs
and the scent of mothballs and lavender.

A shaft finally opens.
I clear away the porous earth
and piles of timber.
Between here and town
bodies huddle in a tunnel,
glowing and heavy as gold.
It takes all night to carry them out
and they turn to dust
at the first touch of air.

When I return to you, phosphorescent
from their hands,
you will remember the dark place
where I have held you,
the trails of light I have left on your skin.

I Never Told You

I never told you how easy it was.
You blew the horn on the toy car
while I petted the guinea pig.
The pile of ice skates dripped
in the corner. There was a picture
on the wall of a big bird, white
and heavy-looking, standing out
from the canvas on a stairstep
of folded paper. It trembled
when we stamped our feet.
I'm sure I did say at least once,
"oh come on, we're not children,"
but you couldn't hear me over
the clanking pots and pans.
I wanted to go back out on the ice.
Down at the inlet I could see
silver ripples of moving water.

Near the island, bushes and reeds
stuck through the frozen surface.
Where I brushed off the snow
I saw bubbles, deep cracks.
Did you know I could hear you
singing back at the house?
I listened all the way through
"Silent Night" in German. The pond
was empty except for a group of boys
at one end, chilling their beer
in a hole. I skated around them
in a big circle. I practiced stopping
in little circles. Soon it was easy.
I spun so that everything blurred.
Then I skated over the snow-covered
gravel and down the hill to the river.

The Fox

On top of the mountain, my mother
saw a red fox. When we came around a bend
it stood bright against the snow
at the edge of a thicket. It watched her.
She didn't tell my father. He carried me
on his shoulders down the trail.
Half-asleep, I opened my eyes
in a patch of low fog. My face was wet.
I didn't know where I was.

My mother and father fight
about Catalina Island. He says
she can't see it from the mainland.
She says she can. It is cloudy.
She told me we might go out
in a glass-bottomed boat, but he won't
take us. Along the shore, people
in raincoats and yellow gloves
gather razor clams.

The car breaks through the guardrail.
One wheel hangs over the edge,
over water. With my cheek against the seat
I sit still. The man from the tollbooth
runs toward us in his suit and cap.
I pretend I'm in a seashell.
It's midnight. Where are my black olives,
my slices of cheese and ham?
I saw my hair under the microscope.
I saw water.
I don't want the empty bank,
or the string of pearls.
I can walk from here.
When is it safe to come out?
When will the coins stop falling
to the yellow carpet?

Twist

I drive fast on the old highway,
pointing out shapes under the kudzu
to the man beside me.

I'm taking him back to my house
to sit on the long green sofa
and play cards
around the handpieced table.

I will reassemble the bed,
put on the thick blue canopy
to match the spread and drapes.

I will take the knife out
from under the pillow
and break the blade.

During the hot afternoons,
I'll unlock the trunk
and wear the faded lace dresses,
the gold sandals.

This is not a dream.

That's my store on the corner
with its shady cement wall,
my sewer ditch blossoming
with algae and violets.

Here we come in the car
to see the envelope full of my hair,
the loose banister.

Look, that's my mother and my aunt
sitting on the stairs
expecting a thunderstorm.

The lights are out.

They're sharing a bowl
of pineapple sherbet,
and when the lightning
flashes over their faces

I can tell they are smiling.

Paradise

You have to watch out for the past.
Where are we right now?
Outside the Dixon General Store,
Kevin and I eat fried fruit pies.
Sundays, the Dixon bar is closed.
Where are we now?
Across the bridge, Paradise—Population 300.
I am not thinking what paradise could mean
except that the striped cliffs
lead us in. The green river matches
the green of the sky in the east.
Hail. What is hail in Paradise?
Ice, like anywhere else.
Kevin says, "I could live here."
Paradise has two bars, both open.
If I were Kevin, this poem might be about irony.
He would tell me, "You should have left
that deer skull where you found it
instead of taking it to Paradise
in a paper bag on the seat between us."
He might try to make me tell him
why I wanted it. Of what were you made?
Of dust. I could make up something good enough
about the permanence of bone.
Where are we right now?
You know what I mean.
"It would be worse to take it
and then put it back," he said.
This ending is too easy. Go back
to Paradise. I almost forgot
this was not Kevin's poem.
Never mind the deer skull.
He said we might reach escape velocity.
We talked about what would happen.

III

Red Berries

I woke and said mama. I don't know
if I was calling her. Overnight
the berries turned from orange to red.
"What does my back feel like?" he asks.
All week the fish have swum circles
in the old washtub. I release them
at the reservoir. Overhead, skeet plates shatter.
The shots send tremors through the water.
The fish don't want to leave my hands.
They are like moths.
They want to fly in my hair.

My mother types, sucking a penny.
I sit on the floor by her cot.
Mama, I was the one who cracked
all the lightbulbs. I pulled out the wire.
It was after I fell in love.
"No, my pearl," she says, "You can't escape politics."
My mouth tastes like ink. This isn't the scene
I wanted. A man stands by a rock wall.
He is tired of walking.
He takes off his pack.
My mother shows me the black hairs on her breasts.

Evensong

The front room sometimes is a bar. He leaves the four men there, her voice already in his ears like wind, and closes the doors behind him. In the last room she is singing, her face turned to the ceiling. Her ivory dress clings as if it is wet, darkened by her skin. The song is half sob, a hum and stab in his marrow, a blue vibration like the center of a flame.

When she drops her head he asks her to sing again. She spits something shiny into his hand and closes his fingers around the edge. "My vocal cords are cut," she says. A red rope drops and she drapes it around her neck. Her whole body flickers but he never thinks ghost. She can't step down, so she must be safe, but the floor drops and he is falling.

He waits in the front room. The four men carry her body in and prop her beside the river that flows along the east wall. Then he is alone with her and the evensong of pigeons and the hollow smoky sound of the moon on water. He can't look at her. Down the river the men are frying fish, and he tells her softly, "yes, a fishbone could be a ladder." When she sits up and stretches out her arms he is not surprised. He doesn't think angel as she arcs into the river and the crab-apple branches close.

He can't save her, and can't keep her from coming back, the scent of burnt paper in her dress, her body washed on a flood plain miles away waiting for the four men, her mute music, the barnacled notes.

If I say love because I don't know
another word, I will have to bring
the moon in, and the black tailless cat.
I will have to consider luck and chance
and how after the game of poker
and the argument about the actor
everyone else went out into the snow
and I stayed. I will have to say
we stood by the heater and danced
to some old song and he blew out the candles
and we went to bed together.
I will have to stay in this poem
until morning when the radio still plays
and a dog wearing a bell walks under
the window, and the bed shakes
from trains linking cars three blocks away.
I would like to stop here.
I will have to take us to the restaurant
where we have toast and half-done eggs
and read our horoscopes
with the old men eating alone
and the springs of the seats gone.

I would rather go to the afternoon
we sat in Wendy's house waiting
while she took a bath, playing
the same song over and over. Then
she would put on a flowered robe
and make jasmine tea, and we would
all stretch out on the floor
and sleep until spring. We would
grow older without knowing.
I would not let us go beyond
what we were doing, sleeping
through the dripping ice and the sun.

Revenge

Last fall the gypsy painted her booth red.
She laughed in the fairway dust,
a deep green bruise on her shoulder,
woodchips in the wind, the smell
of manure and grease.
“Hooks and eyes bring you luck,” she said,
“Make him fasten them.”

The house behind the orchard burned.
We ate peaches off the trees,
their skin warm and smoky.
He talked a lot, used words like “corn silk”
and “oil lamp.” He said the tobacco
drying in the field was rows
of blond children looking back.

The gypsy said to dream of the fire eater
means survival. Tonight I’m him.
I do all the talking.
Tonight he wants to listen.
I talk about starlings on the phone lines.
This is not a question
of revenge. All I know about the place
I tried to take him is neither of us belong there.

It’s snowing again. Going home
the car gets stuck twice.
I stand in the kitchen.
The avocado seed on the sill
is growing roots in a glass of water.
He said inside my body was the safest place.
At the end of the pasture, a girl
puts her lips to the electric fence.

Sir, allow me to say
the moon was full.
I am sure you'd rather I didn't.
Allow me to say the moon is full
on every canvas stacked in his closet.
Lean close, so the tip of your waxed mustache
brushes my cheek.
Your name is Buckshot.
You are a tattoo artist.
Pronghorn, not antelope, he said.
He handed me a vial
of litmus paper.
When I woke in the dark
he sat smoking.
The dog's face glowed at the window.
I thought I was a ghost.
Yes, sir. A little melodrama.
It's simple geometry—
turn enough corners and you're back
where you started.
Little boys roast potatoes
over fires in the gutter.
But a pyramid, there's one thing
I don't trust.
Say: "I hate it when the girls cry.
The outline hurts more than the rest."
Who was it who wanted to be a priest?
Hey, don't you remember
how all this started?
You went to get your first tattoo
from a girl whose hair smelled like almonds.

Pioneering

Justin said to wait and he'd be back.
 I gave him my blue rock,
 my bird.
 Untangle those tin cans and string,
 I said. I'm making ambrosia

in the hotel room. I leave milky prints
 on the windows from the coconut.
 The blue lights on the runway blink.
 It helps to stay in one place

for a while, even though the man who lived in the old cabin
 next to ours had a gun
 and a yard full of crabgrass he wove into whips.
 He watched Love Connection every weeknight at eleven.
 Light from the TV flickered
 through his curtains.

On weekends he watched us.
 When I saw him sight us
 through the scope of his gun
 I waved. I kissed Justin's knee.

While I wait I ride the carnival swings
 every day. I live in air, like a plant.
 You don't need anything,

he says when I run out to meet him.
 I sit crosslegged in the cab of his truck
 and he drives out past all the lights.
 The stars flash.
 He tells me his new word—

noctilucent. I know we are headed for the ocean
 to sit on a rock
 and look for dolphins. I keep pointing

out the windows. There's a nice spot.
 The flat-topped ridge looks almost like horizon.
 I could grow ornamental cabbages
 on the hillside.

Yes, I'm exaggerating. But I do
have questions. What makes a washboard road?

Can we please stop here?

From the steps of the empty church
I can see the slag heaps gleam.
The mimosa branches droop,
dropping their blossoms. The tree
has been in bloom for weeks.
It makes me sleepy. I lean against the stops
and shut my eyes. I know it all without looking—
the row of outhouses down the gully,
the ceramic shards arranged in patterns
on the ground. I hear the sound of hammering.
Yesterday crossing the trestle,
I scraped my ankle on a strip of rusted metal.
I used the last of the antiseptic.
The bleached bones of a dog
lay on the track below, the black hide
torn off the ribs and gnawed to shreds.
When I got back to the church
the chipped vase was full
of black-eyed Susans.
I open my eyes. Children are running
down the hill, their arms open wide
to the wind. Steps come around the side
of the church but I don't turn.
His hands touch my shoulders.
"I've been to California," he says,
"I met a man who built a house
out of driftwood."

The Queen Anne's lace along the road is turning brown.
I've forgotten all I gave up
for the smell of lamp oil,
long nights with a voice always calling for water.
The river hangs like a curtain
over the windows. Last month on the back steps
we drank every night, woke angry,
unable to remember why.
Now I've dreamed of the red bird again,
and the child I've left behind
who might be mine.
Wolves leap to the trees
and lie along the branches.
The rusted machines in the barn won't let us leave.
Harnessed, his horse circles the press,
crushes stalks of sugar cane to green juice.
He carries full buckets to the iron pot
over the fire. I fry venison, watch him
fold his arms and stare at the sky,
at the patch of soy beans near the porch.
Wind rustles the weeds, the same sound
the wolves' eyes make as they watch
the child. He kills a copperhead,
throws it to a ditch.
The horse stops.
Black clouds spread out above the barn.
I call him in, unbuttoning my dress.
He stirs the pot once more,
covers it. Light ripples along the walls.
Look, I say, and I show him my steady hands.

Marina

Down at the docks I'm still
not sure. If I stay
with him I will have to tear
the tape off the last box,
the one marked "miscellaneous"
in red ink. The children
pass by with bouquets
of snapdragons. They squeeze
the blooms to make them talk.
Could I say I just came down
to watch my reflection
in the water, to buy
some fresh fish for the old woman
next door with granny beads
of dirt and sweat
around her neck?
Once he said something to me
about unlimited time,
about new freckles
on my chest.
I almost missed it
It was one of those nights
he pressed his face
to the glass of the kitchen door.
I don't know
if he wanted in or out.

The choice had more to do with waiting
than I thought. I built a fire
at the edge of the lot and burned
my dress. Airplane lights
washed over me. Gradually
it became winter. I was driving.
Along the road I saw signs—
one said quarantine—
but I ignored them. I burned
my list of numbers in the ashtray.
When he got in the car,
it was warmer. He put a bottlecap
under the broken wiper.
The scraping stopped.
He stopped coughing.
The snow fell straight down.
We listened. It was nearly dark.
This was one option.
I couldn't think of the other.

February 2nd

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I can't stop laughing. The funny thing
happened hours ago. On TV a man
in a suit carried a groundhog
through the crowd.
It sniffed his sleeve,
curled around his arm.
My mother wants my address.
While I talk to her
the sun glints off black dog hair
on the sofa. He turns
the Portuguese tape on loud.
I've picked up a few words—
lobster, please, thank you.
Last night I bit a fragment of brass
in the venison.
I put it in my pocket.
This morning we planted small red potatoes
in two metal buckets.
Their white roots glow
through the soil.

Tonight while he is packing
I check the mail.
I read the catalog of glass eyes.
Some are for dolls,
others for taxidermy.