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The University of Southern Mississippi

THE PINE EFFECT

by

Andrea Kay Spofford

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2013

ABSTRACT

THE PINE EFFECT

by Andrea Kay Spofford

August 2013

This dissertation includes original poems written during my time at The University of Southern Mississippi.

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AUGUST 2013

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A Dissertation
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INTRODUCTION

“On journeys through the States we start,/(Ay through the world, urged by these songs,/Sailing henceforth to every land, to every sea,)/We willing learners of all, teachers of all, and lovers of all”—Walt Whitman, “On Journeys Through the States”

Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* has always been a keynote for me, a seminal text for my own poetics that I return to over and over again. The idea of travel and movement—this love song to America, an assertion that we are “learners,” “teachers,” and “lovers” of all—haunts me because, in many ways, it is both distinctly American and distinctly welcoming. In his poem “On Journeys Through the States” Whitman describes the American, saying that we should “dwell awhile and pass on, be copious, temperate, chaste, magnetic/And what [we] effuse may then return as the seasons return,/And may be just as much as the seasons” (8). This statement is, to me, what ties back to the openness and welcoming of *Leaves of Grass*—Whitman’s assertion that “what you effuse may then return as the seasons return” and his ideals of movement, of journeying through the States, influence my own work immensely. As a writer, I want to dwell awhile and then pass on, not lingering in one place too long but rather extolling and celebrating many; as a writer, I want to learn from Whitman and borrow his ecstatic language, the way he loves so deeply this American landscape.

A few years ago I spent most of my time outside in nature, exploring Colorado, then California, and then Texas. I have hiked the Rocky Mountains as snow falls and have nerve damage in my toes from an ill-planned trip to Sequoia National Park during Thanksgiving. I have taken my dog, my partners and friends, my new and old tents into

the wilderness, sometimes from the trunk of a car, other times packing in and packing out, once assembling a tent on large flat boulders alongside Koi Flats, and once scuba diving with Koi fish in a Florida natural spring. I remember hot showers after a few days outside and the rustle of tent zippers and cold boots, the way one particular hiking partner would place everything inside heavy black trash bags just outside our tent's door as a false precaution against bears. In less than a month I will go to Alaska for four weeks and assembling my gear—a bear canister, hand-warmers, freeze-dried meals, boots, and tent, and sub-freezing sleeping bag— all this makes me excited for the chance to explore a new place, a frontier and landscape I am a stranger to. Every few years I start to feel the urge to wander, and sometimes I give in to it.

My writing is heavily inspired by this urge to wander, by Whitman and Thoreau and Emerson, even Edward Albee and later Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, and Eleni Sikelianos, all writers who in some way embody this idea of American searching and travel. This tradition of writing is not just writing about nature, but writing within nature, and begins as early as John Smith. Smith's writing includes propagandistic narratives, the primary goal of which was to attract early settlers and "second-sons" to the colonies, but the secondary outcome was an exuberant description of the abundance of America. Washington Irving, too, noted that America "was full of youthful promise," a natural environment that included "mighty lakes, like oceans of liquid silver; mountains with their bright aerial tints; valleys teeming with wild fertility; tremendous cataracts, thundering in their solitudes" (Foerster 2). Even the first school of painting in America, founded in part by Thomas Cole, was that of landscape painting, panoramas that emphasized the largeness and beauty of the American landscape and the scope of

potential and drama included within this land.

To this end, my collection emerges from a tradition of landscape and of movement; taking cues from Westward expansion, Whitman's encouragement of travel, and even James Fenimore Cooper's attempt to capture, in a sense, a uniquely American essence through description—the “breathing stillness of the ancient woods, whose oaks and pines, free of the underbrush at the base, soar into the upper air” (5)—these poems try to engage with the outside world, that of nature and environment, while at the same time challenging how we interact with and perceive both.

Beginning with “Ruckus,” a modified ghazal, the collection is divided into three parts: the first addresses youth, what it means to be a girl, and the idea of staying; the second involves leaving, trajectory forward in life and in geography; the final section addresses “tectonic rupture,” or the point of upset, including poems that are anomalous within the collection and that deal with the fallout of both stagnation and of momentum.

“Ruckus” begins with forward movement, an invocation of iconic American Route 66 as well as historical representations and era-specific language:

You'll find me butter fresh, a collection of feathers in the grill of your car, sixty miles down the highway Burma shorn and bitten.

You'll find me nice, a friendly companion, a pressed and tidy traveler beside baroque hotel chairs and swimming pools and neon sign vacancies new and loud.

By invoking Route 66 and 1950s America I deviate from my Early American influences in terms of time, but not in terms of movement. The trajectory of the collection is established by these first two couplets; by finding “me butter fresh...sixty miles down the highway” and as “a pressed and tidy traveler,” the poem immediately invokes travel and

movement, setting up the expectation of a forward trajectory for the rest of the collection. The more archaic, almost tongue-in-cheek language of “Burma shorn” and “a pressed and tidy traveler beside baroque hotel chairs” sets the tone that establishes history, movement, and cataloguing as recurring tropes, demonstrating the importance of lists and objects (both natural and manufactured). Finally, by using a modified ghazal, I attempt to establish form as recurrent as well, also reflective of my Early American origins; the taking of a traditional form and changing it so that the poems hold their own again refers back to Whitman.

The idea of cataloguing continues and, once again, is inspired by and influenced by Early American catalogues of nature including those of William Bartram’s and Thomas Jefferson’s naturalist texts. My poems become poems of accumulation and naturalism in the sense that they borrow these small details—an attentiveness that Early American writers paid to the environment and their surrounding landscape, as well as a fondness for naming. Poems like “*Oncorhynchus mykiss*” and “*Equus caballus*” directly borrow from Latinate taxonomy structures, whereas my poem “Pollen Light” eventually accumulates into a commentary on the shift from dirt into pavement as a road crew builds a road, starting with a simple description of the transitional space itself:

Smooth blacktop meets houses and the street
changes into sand 400 yards after the stop sign.

Along the side of the road there are granite boulders, a spine
and ending:

Before the stop sign, a highway crew packs gravel into tar
sweats by the roadside, the sun slips quick, bends

shadows of trees around the car
a basin of cornfields, sugar beets, cotton tented
inward, all windows open to radio.

The crew moves slowly forward, straw into gold, dirt into pavement.

The blacktop both begins and ends this poem; at the beginning it is undone, blacktop into sand, while the end goes from dirt into pavement. The purpose of this is not only to provide circularity and containment for the poem itself, but also to equate the blacktop and the sand, the dirt and the pavement. There is no hierarchy in this poem, just a shifting from one thing into another, an alchemical movement from manufactured to natural and back again.

This poem—a modified sonnet of fourteen lines—collides both the natural and the manufactured, taking a car and driving directions and thrusting them into a “basin of cornfields, sugar beets, [and] cotton tented,” the road crew itself not aggressive, but rather a medium of translation, the men “mov[ing] slowly forward” and the road turning from “straw into gold.” Once again, movement is symbolized through the road as well as the translation or shift of the road into something else; in this case sand. Through accumulation, this poem attempts to take stock of the landscape and also celebrate it—the way that the road becomes “soon fields with remnant corn husks, cattle in the heat/of late afternoon, pollen light, colli[d]ing to evening” and “Pines/mingl[ing] with horses along the field’s edges.”

The poem “1934:Everett” makes a similar move toward accumulation, a device directly inspired by naturalistic tendencies in Early American writing. What separates this poem from the more naturalistic writing in this collection, however, is the idea of

“leaving” and what is left behind. The emphasis in this poem is not the accumulation or description building toward a climax, but rather the contrast between this accumulation and the simple fact of a teenager’s disappearance. The poem is broken into three stanzas, but the idea of leaving is represented in two parts: the first part introduces the material objects that are left behind when Everett Ruess disappears, and the second part introduces reasons he may have left. The poem begins:

A boulder is propped by concrete along each side,
a gather of sand and water, a precarious perching, a tumble.
On the four-by-four road I think of your burros,
two of them with leather saddlebags, boots, blankets,
a camp stove and matches, a canteen full, your socks folded
one into the other.

The accumulated objects and gear that Ruess has brought into the desert with him—the camp stove and matches, the canteen, the socks, saddlebags, boots, and blankets—become unimportant, and though they are tangible, become disposable. The poem continues:

You left it all in a box canyon near Escalante, left
for a Navajo girl with beaded wrists, to be *nemo*
in the desert, left for the Spider Woman rock, coyote
in the summertime, left Kapirowitze Plateau, left wanderlusting
mesas, alongside daylight bound feral dogs, red rock washes,
heat stroke, you left sunburned and spectacled, you left the burros,
enough grass, enough water, you left.

By contrasting Ruess' gear, that which is left behind, with intangible or natural reasons for leaving—an imagined Navajo girl, to be *nemo*, for Spider Woman Rock, for coyote, for mesas and feral dogs—I attempt to build this poem out of objects both natural and manufactured, the desert itself as well as what Ruess brought into the desert. Through listing and repetition this poem attempts to emphasize Ruess' loss, that of his equipment and burros when he left and also that of himself, his disappearance into and reclamation by the desert he sought.

When I consider my own writing and the role that the varied American landscape plays within it, I find it difficult to separate myself from the Early American writers I admire. I cannot compare myself to them, but in terms of influence I want to think that their hands are present in my writing and that I am a daughter of theirs. I feel a compulsion to include this geography of America within my poems because it is so diverse, because I have seen so much and yet so little of it, and because I feel borne from it.

In *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America* Don Scheese notes a moment in American history when “a paradigmatic shift in attitude among intellectuals and artists toward nature became noticeable,” a shift that came as “the factory system proliferated [and] a nostalgic pastoral longing for nature became common” (20). In a sense, as America become more populated and mechanized, artists and intellectuals reached into the wilderness and back toward an idealized version of the environment. At the same time, Romanticism began to influence American writing, birthing a version of “romantic natural history” that demonstrated “another romantic influence on the genre [and] the increasing tendency to celebrate the self” (20); as a result, “natural history

writing became more autobiographical” (21). As an example, Scheese cites John James Audubon’s accounts and travels throughout the south, notes on the abundant nature that proliferated the southern United States and also Audubon’s own reactions and interactions with the environment. What is notable about this brief and paraphrased history, and relevant to my own poetic influences, is the intrusion of self and personal experience into the landscape of American nature writing; no more is writing about landscape tied only to descriptions of natural abundance or beauty. Rather, it becomes intricately tied to an experience of self, a celebration of how we are inextricably related to the landscapes we inhabit.

And so I return again to Whitman and to *Leaves of Grass*, how Whitman describes an interaction with a child and the way he is both himself as well as the grass that surrounds him:

A child said *what is the grass?* Fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any
more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green
stuff woven (28).

As this collection attempts to move through the American landscape and to incorporate elements of environmental conservation, the experience of different geographies, and the way that landscape envelopes, intrudes upon, and contains our selves, I continue to come back to this grass. Whitman cannot explain the grass: it is a part of him, the “hopeful green stuff” of his disposition. Ultimately, I hope this collection demonstrates the way I

have learned from these experiences, the “you” and “we” and landscapes that have indelibly marked my experience of America. I hope too that my ecstatic love for these landscapes—and my sadness and longing for them once they are passed—is obviously demonstrated.

This collection ends with the poem “Santa Ana,” a love song to mountains and to landscapes that I have known, a poem that ends with “I miss you sage and scrub and rings of mountains, endless ranges and borderlands of tectonic rupture.” This line comes at the end of an accumulation, another list of moments, pieces, and landscapes; I end with this poem because the “you,” a personification of landscape, is also a “me,” the way this landscape has permanently altered my sense of self, and while Whitman is so certainly composed of this abundant and “hopeful green stuff” I am made of this borderland, the moments I write about live between the natural and manufactured, a place of tension that follows—in hope of preservation—the tradition of American writers before me.

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THE SAME EVERY DAY

RUCKUS

You'll find me butter fresh, a collection of feathers in the grill of your car, sixty miles down the highway Burma shorn and bitten.

You'll find me nice, a friendly companion, a pressed and tidy traveler beside baroque hotel chairs and swimming pools and neon sign vacancies new and loud.

You'll find me properly gloved, bejeweled, pearled divine, penning letters to your mother, deep lipsticked plum or red.

You'll find I know of many things: Napoleon, philosophy, nail polish, Pledge, all when it comes to conversation, small talk of teeth and tongues.

You'll find I carry Band-Aids, breath mints, Kleenex, a .22 and buttons, an emergency box of floss, magazines for pleasure or for fun.

You'll find a most effective means of noting time and place, a recorder, perhaps a stenographer with slicked thin legs, pumped and long.

You'll find me quiet one day—Andrea, Amanda, Amy, Alexandra—a toppled chair.

MY LIFE I WAS ENTIRELY DISTRACTED BY THE FACTS, NAMELY THAT
TIME IS GOING BY

To be human
assemble a basket,
glossy paper, something
to tie everything together,
a combination of rayon
silk, thread, yarn, tendon
thick and wet.

Collect buttons,
an air proof canister,
air-raid sirens, hurricane sirens,
the branches after storms.

Outside a girl walks
under a ladder.
The building maintenance
man sways atop
and you think
how many days until May?

EVERYTHING COMBUSTIBLE

Make your own fun in a small town.
Lay your back along the airport runway,
the tarmac hot as leather from the sun,
drink Boone's strawberry wine from the bottle,
talk about the girl who drowned
everyone wet last August, she pulled
streaming and delivered alongside tall pines,
a jet ski casualty, a townie, a mermaid
with long hair dripping wet grass
loosened from braids, legs splayed,
heavy, trailing through bank moss,
so green the ends of her cutoffs.

You consider apple pie moonshine
her foot so clean and white and glowing
as it slid through mud, everything acidic on your tongue
beneath crop dusters and on this runway you imagine
floods, water hissing along the asphalt,
the way everything must always rise,
mosquitoes in your ears and everything combustible
in the summer night lying along the tarmac.

PIKE'S PEAK

There was the week my mother drove from Texas to Colorado
with her parents, her sister on the jump seat in the back of the station wagon
the trunk itself bountied full of sunflowers my child mother picked roadside
wrought with ants that crept from the petals but how could she know?
She never saw them.

When they got to Pike's Peak her mother swam the lake
in a swimsuit pink and faded, hair slicked back against her head
face washed free and eyelashed
invisible blonde and newborn.

Small waves splashed on the stones as she climbed from the water
towels quickly in her hands, on her children, and sometimes my mother remembers
how later she wanted to see her, the woman from the water
again just dripped, just bright, just blurred in the sun
so fresh and vibrantly rendered.

WOLVES

We crush fleas
one by one, small red fleas
crawling from the lawn overgrown,
flowing into cave mouths, systems into
the ground twisting corkscrew into granite.
Your claws beget your lolling
tongue, your wildling pups
beget the pads of your feet, your slick gray
hairs beget the roundness
of your molars, beget the fondness
for dark places, the forgetting
of my name begetting a clipping,
your past life, your softness, and the thick sweet
smell of the den, the fleas in the grass.

FISH

Elizabeth caught a fish and she set that fish free, watched it tumble to ocean. Every summer I cast lines to canals, salinity concentrated, and my eyes burn upon the splash, because there is no closing to water, the world only blur. I have jumped from the dock and I have seen dolphins catching redfish leaping and I have cut my fingers on hooks, salt and blood in my mouth.

Two summers ago sand trout flooded the canals, fed by the Laguna Madre, and I kept trout in my freezer for months, driving from Texas to Mississippi with dry ice and a cooler. The fish swarmed the bottom. I will always keep the trout, their shimmer lined along the measuring stick, the water hose releasing part of them back to the water as splashing, blood and salt.

TO GLOW ALL GREEN

This woman is not a wanton fish, a marsh light near the river, the glow all green and shimmering outside of docks. Twitchy, wishing, this spirit of a fisher, a creel at her feet bountied and plumb, bursting with the slick ones, they all wet and thrashing. To be tempted is to falter, her eyes bright. She is not goddess, nor temptress, not Calliope in the stars; she is muddied and foul, a bird-watcher, a collector of shells, a set of hands wrist deep into grit, a puller of clams from the shore, pry fingers and grasping, a shifting thing, her hair worn above her and ears smeared with ink, the leftovers. To gather and sacrifice this brackish creature, her breasts affright and tumbled, tightened against her chest, her feet a rushing, all parts outside, she nothing but a ghost against the beached boards, driftwood knocking her ankles and legs, is to be the halocline, a collision of sweet to salt.

WELD COUNTY

In August she'll grow tomatoes but here is this doormat in dirt, this plot of land at her doorstep, these spilled buttons melting quick. Things have really gone awry. She Nancy Drews her way across the ground, through gravel and grass, a flashlight in one hand. She will find and so she hunches, a shoe undone, dangling, a dragging of her heel. She should see clues here in the soil before the sun sets and the day breaks, long before the boog-a-loo, the gypsum, the electric sliding of twilight to dawn and all the lights go out and her flashlight shades to dark. She should land in a neon motel. She should consider what happens when she collects the hair clippings, the letters, the bits of herself and finds something of yours as she crawls back inside the trailer, her arms full of pieces.

IN BOULDER

We turned right. There were heavy-headed bison behind a high fence and you thought we were so lost. We watched a wedding, it rained fatly and you wore wear a gray suit, drank propped by the bar, your jacket open, predicted who would cheat on their wife next, which of our friends would be divorced, how many sweet cherries the bartender owed you. I danced with a redheaded seventeen-year-old named Olivia, my hands on her waist, and her hands on mine, our arms together. Later you and I drove in the dark down the same hill and you said *those dresses are really purple* and we spent the night in a La Quinta before leaving early for Denver. In the morning outside light was gray, my flowers were in a hotel glass half-filled, and your thumbprints marred my thighs, a decoration of scratches and peppered bruises. And that was all.

HOW TO BE A GIRL

The red cup, plastic, salt,
washed on the shore,
small barnacles gray and pink,
purple in some places,
sharp and dry.

I watched her stack sand,
watched it slip down again,
piling in different places,
arrangements,
the soft white grains like strands,
like hair through her fingers,

watched a sea bird diving
the splash repeating
over the dip, the dart,
the empty beak

while the girl on shore
arranged the sand
the same every day.

LEAVING

NO ONE'S SERIOUS AT SEVENTEEN

We wonder what it is like to believe something
more than green trees forward and forward.

BRYCE, OR JUST OUTSIDE

Here between flat-topped hills, carved sandstone cave systems are hidden behind chain link and pines. Kids drink and smoke and build bonfires all blackening the cave roofs, layer and carve names and dates, pock the walls and fingerprint the stones. If I walk further away from daylight outside I don't hear the rush of traffic, ice cream bells, the roadside stand, the shift of blankets, the stacking of silver and turquoise, the haggling, German and English and Spanish, the sunbeat of warmth on the top of my head. The stone is cool and the air is cool because though early June it snowed just yesterday in Bryce and we ran the Best Western parking lot into the gift shop, out of the weather and furious wind. I want to put my name next to each of theirs on the walls but I hate them for marking the stone, their ease, their pocket knives, the way you tossed yours into the trashcan in the airport effortlessly and without care.

Toward the daylight I catch on the ledge and slide, squinting to where you handstand against the cliff side, your feet kicking off the wall, your body pitching forward and forward at the precipice, a brink, and your gravel stuck fingers.

POLLEN LIGHT

Smooth blacktop meets houses and the street
changes into sand 400 yards after the stop sign.
Along the side of the road there are granite boulders, a spine
jointed, stones linking gravel, concrete
driveways, and soon fields with remnant corn husks, cattle in the heat
of late afternoon, pollen light, collision to evening. Pines
mingle with horses along the field's edges, the car's engine whines
uphill. To turn, go left, repeat.
Before the stop sign, a highway crew packs gravel into tar
sweats by the roadside, the sun slips quick, bends
shadows of trees around the car
a basin of cornfields, sugar beets, cotton tented
inward, all windows open to radio.
The crew moves slowly forward, straw into gold, dirt into pavement.

FAULT

Sometimes I worry about elephants, how they've been changed by human intervention, how poaching has selectively bred out tusks. I worry about what this will do the environment, to elephant eating habits, to their ability to forage for food.

My friend Kate worries about earthquakes. She watches CNN obsessively, scanning for news about fault lines. She calls me sometimes with information on disasters, at-risk locations, news about Japan. When we lived in California she searched for seismographic data, tried to read the peaks and lows.

The New Madrid Seismic Zone is a fault line near the Mississippi River. There is little to no activity along the fault line, but movement would be devastating. When Kate calls to tell me about the fault, how my house in Mississippi is not earthquake proof, that the structure is likely not attached to the foundation, that the whole thing will just slide downhill, I tell her I will run outside, uphill, and watch everything go. You can't just do what you would do in L.A., she says. While she talks I look up videos of dogs in Japan, elephants playing in a plastic pool.

PEAR BLOSSOM HIGHWAY

When I visit Llano del Rio,
socialist colony in ruins,
I come across my friend Stephen,
his friend Katie, atop the chimneys,
river rock remnants,
the stones round and smooth,
bleached white.

They climb the chimneys in summer.
In pictures the sky is so dark,
so blue it looks like paint,
thick and wet and deep,
so much paint to swim in,
our bodies bright blue
and gleaming.

When I visit Llano del Rio
Stephen points to the top,
says he got stuck,
couldn't climb down,
the rocks were too smooth,
too worn,
his shoes too slick.

The stones against the sky are stark
and white, the bricks
inside the chimney still stained
black fading gray.

I know he isn't there,
Stephen on top of the chimney,
this lot otherwise empty
with scrub grass
creosote and rings of cacti.

The sky is so blue
in pictures
more so than when we stood
beneath the chimneys
off Pear Blossom Highway
looking into bright whiteness.

OFF BLUE: THE COLOR AND THE ACT

I.

When I was twenty I knew a girl who wrote about color—the quickening of shades as her house burned, her sister dying, the baby she did have, her move from Los Angeles to Boston and back, the sky shifting from neon to dusty cornflower and then to blue so deep she mistook sky for water. We went skinny dipping once off the beach with bonfires outside city limits and it was dark and blue and everyone was drunk on dollar beers and silver-blue cans of Dale's, our fingers all ringed in turquoise.

II.

Beautiful things: pens in a jar, bottle blue, your eyes in half-light, everything as it rains, and blue is always water, the columbine, pesticide along the highway, bleach and chlorine—these are blue and blue and blue. Jerome, Arizona is stark blue, a waterfall—the blue of run-off, of chemicals, of dye, of copper ore in piles. The only thing to do there is to shutter yourself, to go where the men are bearded gray inside a tin bar off the freeway, where the windows are closed and it is always dark, where the water tumbles but can't be seen.

III.

A rush of blue: Midnight blue and Cadmium spiced like cardamom on your tongue tastes blue. Soon everything's blue as Lapis lazuli, as reflection, as the way of shading, the crystal structure of "The Great Wave off Kanagawa," the chemistry of paint, the composite nature of Egyptian Blue turning to Cerulean.

IV.

Pacific differs from Atlantic in terms of shade, in terms of temperature. Flying over the Sierras the sky is white and brown and on clear days you see mountains from the city. White is the hottest flame, highest frequency, and here sky is empty. In airplanes I think of the cornflower girl and her daughter on the East coast, blue hidden in brightness, their feet against slick rocks and tide-pools, how we left the water that night covered in scratches and trailing seaweed, our fingertips blue and cold.

ESCHSCHOLZIA CALIFORNICA

Waxy orange, poison, neon flower gull-bait:
the five crawls South-bound,
inches along borders, a heart rate bleating
this goat-like melt into cliff sides,
like the foam-drowned snap of waves,
relentless and always rushing.

Citrus orange the wax flower bows heavy-petaled,
this poppy as place, as delicately grounded,
a web of leaves along spring roadsides, marching
and scattered. Cupertino to Azusa, Atwater
Village, Cerritos—names like:
poppy, pronghorn, Palos Verdes Blue.

Every fall the hillsides light
and inside the haze the butterfly will wing
the orange poppy, this short-lived bloom,
and all else will crowd around it.

CINDY AVENUE

You know it's on the minute you get in the car, you drive an hour to see him,
you park, think about turning around, you are here one interstate two freeways
in this cul-de-sac and roses by the gate abloom.
You are in California. You are young.

You are full with this, you will burst, you will linger outside until the flowers close,
until the oak behind the house is stark and black against the sky.
Everything about this place, everything is the tree outlined black,
the oak tree, the trees that covered the hillside at your house,
the tree like the one the neighbor boy caught afire,
the tree that burned, the way it plumed upward, the alarm, the doorbell,
everyone rushing and the water, the tree itself a shadow in daylight, a ghost.

BURNING

If the kitchen burned we could watch ashes drift
softly around us, a snowstorm, an apocalypse lit by campfires
as if moths caught pines alight outside and orange
sparked the air, always a-shimmer.

If we pictured tomorrow, everything burning like this house
and the smell of logs lodged deep into our fibers,
our skin, our hair, and pieces, everything would be as warmth,
as a place by a forest, an evacuation, and as camping in the woods.

TUCSON

My mother talks about the succulents in her backyard, how she overflowed the pool because she forgot to turn off the water, my father's new job at Rainbird, how she's worried, at 57, she's too old for this. In April they will install a safe in the floor of their house in Texas, a place to keep photographs and firearms. He will buy a humidifier. She will drive across the desert with their cocker spaniel. On one trip she will bring their bicycles but it is too hot. They track road tar across the carpets.

IMMODERATE ROMANTICISM

Look, the place of lovers,
green as an uncut field,
in a room too small,
this vignette too transparent
a frame to contain us.

Shut out this departure, balanced
by final absence, dead fathers,
a window too high blue and earth-deep,
marked by excesses of sunny hillsides,
bright green valleys,
and the cabin itself as the perfect exit of souls.

Sleep, now, and dream of grasses,
and all these gravel washes,
our impulses evident through structures
existing only in talk,
cutting and spilling into one another.

FRENCHMAN'S FLAT

When the sun sets everything lingering before it disappears—a rock, the trees, you—
outlined by black, orange against gray. Bats flash in the dim light.

At Frenchman's Flat on Piru Creek there are large flat boulders. If you jump into the
water stones will hit the arches of your feet and you will buoy back, light.

In Texas river country bats flock at night, cover bridges, rush from mouths of caves,
chase remnant sun.

Sometimes I think about the tall grass along the river and beer from the bottle,
the dirt road Tiki Motel where we listen to cowboy songs, curtains open to neon.

Mexican free-tailed bats pour from Bracken Cave, clicking softly, swirling upward
toward shadow branches in heady swarms. They cover the sky, fracturing light.

There are thirty-one kinds of bats in Texas. In California only one, a small colony, snub-
nosed like dogs, nests in the rafters of my porch. They eat felled peaches, fly just past
daylight.

I would like to tell you about sinking ships—Andrea Doria, Monitor, RMS Rhone.
I would like to tell you about black holes, Cueva de la Boca, twenty-million bats in
darkness.

We never see bats. We go to Frenchman's Flat and sit on the rocks, but the water is cold.
Instead of swimming we lie on the stones, prone to light.

VICTORIA, TEXAS

I. This spring in Texas in the outskirts of town the wind is so harsh, the sky so white, the girls in bright purple dresses drift across the hillside above the river like blossoms blown from trees, shades changing in the sun and shadows.

II. This spring in Texas the Guadalupe River is full and green, oak trees swim on submerged banks all mossy and damp, each flanking pathways of sinking red brick staircases tumbling into thick heavy water churned up and up by wind and current, swirling leaves reflecting white skies.

III. This spring in Texas we drive at eight over bridges and roads that quake and bend, blind hills and curves over tall grasses and there is a wild turkey in the field, feathers upright against the wind, the sky quickening dark blue to heady drops of rain down and down upon seven girls and spinning.

ON THE ELECTRODYNAMICS OF MOVING BODIES

In the space before thunderstorm
everything hot, so humid, we wait
for collision, tornado siren,
something to stop condensation.

We are elementary particles
bending rays of light,
dilating gravitational fields,
frame-dragging
chiral phenomena,
expanding faster than the universe.

Briefly it is warmer still, my skin wet,
you trace grass, it stands on end,
and we listen for the siren's tonal whine.

Gravitomagnetism,
quantum entanglement
spinning up and down,
spatial separation,
and an electron explodes
tens of thousands of light years away.

It is the dark we watch,
the first drops falling slowly,
rain hovering between ground and sky.

THUNDERSTORMS

Think about building a fire in the dust.
Chimney swifts cheep against the storm,
warble electricity into the air,
cumulonimbus clouds build
and bow echoes line echoes wave patterns.

Shelter these swifts against the storm,
assemble the span of lightning, acoustic
as crashing, the huddled basement and the ceiling shake.

I keep coming back to storms,
architecture, the momentary glow of outside
beyond us and how
we are here and electricity is out.
Listen, it is every summer.

PLACER COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

The rain was oiled green and purple, roadsides
 slickwet in winter. Red mud slid down golden hills
 and the grass was green briefly. This was the house on Armes Lane
 with gnarled, bent, low-branched pear trees.
 An orchard. Six of them mottled brown.
 This same winter the floor of the house collapsed,

not from mud sliding, oiling. A collapse
 of old boards, potbelly stove, termites chewing, audible from roadsides.
 I was always tempted to throw rocks at the windows of the brown-
 shingled building locked from the inside. I sat uphill,
 thought about the crash, glass in the mud. There were chairs inside and the trees
 were full of fruit, remnants of larger farms on the lane.

There were no lawn chairs at the end of the lane,
 no inhabitants, no idea of when the house was built, no remnants of pre-collapse.
 When the mud first slid downward through the empty floorboards it pooled around the
 trees,
 chair legs and rugs drawn up alongside the road
 swept into the flow. A train ran pre-dawn on the hilltop,
 tracks to town. The only change was in the pears, the way their skin went from green to
 brown,

first along the edges and then toward the center, green first, brown
 spotted along the stem. The pears were sour, unripe, eventually falling onto the lane
 to rot. I climbed behind the house, or took the horses, horse, hill
 all parallel, leaning into the incline. The train ran until the bridge collapsed,
 old railway ties and rusted nails larger than my hand. It didn't matter. The train ran
 roadside
 instead, louder than before, whistle no longer muffled by the trees.

There were so many—pine, maple, heritage California Oak Trees
 measured in endless rings, protected by statutes and declarations. These tall brown
 bastions of golden hills, forbidden to fall, ran alongside roads,
 through roads, cities built around them. Armes Lane
 itself built around oak and pear trees, the street as guard against their collapse,
 marching hillside.

Placer County: alluvial deposit. Valuable mineral. Gold in the hills.
 Mid-stride, a horse ate a pear from the tree,
 chewed once, spat the collapsed
 fruit onto ivy and grass. The inside was brown,
 fermented, thick smelling, but sweet, the remnants of Armes Lane
 Pear Farms, like wine turned to vinegar. Water washed the pear onto the road.

When the house across the street collapsed, slowly, it was more than the floor. The hills rushed into the building, the road became a sea, the house froze, briefly, and the pear trees' brown limbs were shaken of leaves. Red mud swallowed everything, the entire lane.

SPRAWL

When she falls she slips,
girl down side of horse,
the shaking in the grass a startle
and buck and bow of spine beneath
saddle, her landing, her slide, her arms
loose, bridle loose, stirrups
lose traction, she who stands
atop the horses' backs downhill
barnside, feet bare and balanced
along Appaloosa brown and spotted.
She is the one who falls.

ONCORHYNCHUS MYKISS

Trout's belly slick twisted so smooth,
and wet your tongue,
fog your mouth against my ear
like fingertips freezing red to purple,
numbed cold and sparking fire.

We should tingle in cold air, burn later.
Naked in snow we are nothing—
slick fish twisting through water, sharp finned, horrific.

VERTIGO

When navigating underwater
we become useless
to landmarks, to markers, to the cutoff
of seawall and the fans large
and delicate as paper snowflakes
as watching the needle of compass
spin vertigo along drop offs
trenches blending red and orange
into blue and blue and blue.

We are lost, exhaling
bubbles and nitrogen, our tanks
lighter as we sink, as pressure
as watching our air rising
finding which way is up.

BONES

I didn't tell your mother I never wore the necklace because it burned and itched my neck, left welted scratches from chin to collarbones. I never wore the necklace because it was ugly, because it was cheap hearts stacked and centered, because you left the price tag in the box, because I asked for it. There was this thing you did once where you put your hand behind my head, cradled the back from ears along scalp, kissed me tipping us both backward toward the snow. Everything was so clear and bright. The dogs ran breathless and steaming over the tall banks in December. Where did you learn that?

SCHWARZSCHILD RADIUS

Everything starts with gravitational collapse.
In May your eyelashes
stand on end, spark neon.

Our sun's lifecycle is almost half done.
In five billion years our star will be a red giant,
a white dwarf, supernova, degenerate matter,
proton decay.

What is left is an equation:
The Schwarzschild radius,
when light cannot escape,
when we are trapped.

Our sun is too small for massive displays,
neon fractionally distilled.
We are atmospherically emptied,
but you, you are electric, splitting
streams of charged green.

WILSHIRE BLVD.

The pavement reflects sky and mirrors
every shoe lined against slick blacktop.
You bend to the ground to kiss the street itself
first lips, then tongue, you swallow the gravel,
the tar, the sun as it strikes you. At night
there is a line of flags, Ernst & Young
a bus stop below the Grand and through windows
you sit on the ledge inside, cold against panes,
because you are naked with your fresh gravel
skin bumping against the glass like crunching,
like burning, like wanting. You are this
empty hotel room, seven hours on the phone waiting,
airport promises, and empty cups lining the runway.
You are skyline. You are city.
You are the rolling metal of the concert hall.
The green white street sign.
The man, there, red sweatered against the dark.

ROAD KILL

An armadillo today on the side of the road,
prone upon street and grass all swollen
and stretched to dry in the sun.
No smell, a surprise
the dog wanted to see, to feel
the warm armadillo. Instead we looked
from distances away
to the skin as leather
five fingers in the sun
light so hot on the tops of our heads.

1934: EVERETT

A boulder is propped by concrete along each side,
a gather of sand and water, a precarious perching, a tumble.
On the four-by-four road I think of your burros,

two of them with leather saddlebags, boots, blankets,
a camp stove and matches, a canteen full, your socks folded
one into the other.

You left it all in a box canyon near Escalante, left
for a Navajo girl with beaded wrists, to be *nemo*
in the desert, left for the Spider Woman rock, coyote
in the summertime, left Kapirowitze Plateau, left wanderlusting
mesas, alongside daylight bound feral dogs, red rock washes,
heat stroke, you left sunburned and spectacled, you left the burros,
enough grass, enough water, you left.

TECTONIC RUPTURE

MAPS TO LASSEN

In Copemish, Michigan tree farms clone
redwoods, sequoias, oaks, and cedars.
In this geography there is question, dissonance,
the sequoia in the too far north,
where you consider the road, rivers and tall grasses,
love songs to mountains you have known.
What does it mean to leave?

Here black bears stumble the woods,
lumbering, brown-snouted ungulates tip-toe
and this meadow is but a sprawling, official and haphazard,
the John Muir Wilderness in Southern California,
the place you see these trees alive.

To wander is ninety miles of Sierra Mountains,
581,000 acres of land, and the beetle swarming
all red and black upon the tree sides,
a feasting of midsummer and a migration to the forest.

BEAR LAKE WINTER TRAILS

Like lavender and split pine
harsh mouthed sap of slick mint

like sunned beer
mileage to getting here this winter

like who you think I am
a fawning bent legged and spotted

like a warm neon body pliable as nylon
as splashing as sailboats drifting forward

like physics of tomorrow
Wednesday in mountains and Sunday at home

like breath cold hands on tabletops
tapping out my plains, my places, my foothills

like tonguing the distance
a sleeping, a tousling across hillsides barefoot

like the texture of this water just reminder
feet full of snow slipping the break

like the coursing of campgrounds through forest
a stack of cairns, a trip to a spring, a blossoming

like tomorrow, tomorrow, you here.
I am gone from the rooftops swaddled and sketched in fleece.

SUNDAY

We limped around the house today,
you and I both broken,
the dog loose and quiet.

Today was windows open,
scuffed hiking boots,
an empty cup left overnight.

I have not yet done the dishes,
the dog is stretched lengthwise,
you are asleep.

It is Sunday,
soft and quiet,
dark outside beyond the streetlamps.

TAXONOMIES

Today I read about taxonomy,
Willem Cornelis van Heurn,
a quilt of domestic dog skins,
a landscape pinned together.

Today I mail rats
in an envelope, European
moles laid flat, five-fingered paws,
fingernails unclipped and long.

What happens to eggs
when kept in the dark?
Do they collect like rocks?

Today I collect taxonomies,
names, uncurated miscellany:
a jar of pigs, a snake, slugs whole
and wet, a double apple, a mouse.

EQUUS CABALLUS

Ferus is to fierce,
is to wild,
cruel, uncultivated animal.

Equus is to anis,
smells like fresh licorice
in the sun, hot and strange
as eucalyptus crushed,
as chlorophyll on skin,
as fingerprints dirt green.

Caballus is to quickness and growing,
trash trees and windbreakers,
is to dust solid against horsehide,
against the domestic,
against ancient hoofed equines.

A MERMAID

Start with this: the water, salinity thirty-five parts per thousand, a landscape of landfill and landmine, post-apocalyptic metaphors, a measure of distance, a flip of scaled and glittered tail. Here she is ashine with salt, floating atop shark skin, shuttered full waves, yellow cream foam, adrift. She spares her young a yawning, awakens in a stream, a brook as if she were child, an ocean of water and grasses, canals between Oso boat crossings, the intercoastal, Laguna Madre, a mother ocean, a place from which to pull gold, a place from which to pull. She is this gilled thing, glimpse of horizon, a spin of fine silver and nervous tingle, tumble skin, firm and refinished, the only softness her swallow, her fingertips, her children breaking fresh teeth before their birth, a tangle inside of her, alive and bursting.

MORRO BAY HARBOR

Surf gnar, wave bellied, and kelping foam
your chest spread inside neoprene
my closet full of wetsuits rubber and salt
neon lights wasted on your belt buckle
in spray sun rising
six early and half-lit
all water cool sixty-five
the wave of thermocline almost halocline
almost inside the crest of tumble
of rushing to fill your ears and mine
this cold water full, garibaldi orange fish
sucking seafloor to wind
between the seagrass
and toes to the nose you split
coasting the line between break
until you crash to shore, cold, sanded, dripped
bruised beneath wetsuit
and again gray lit nose into heavies
you dive, wiped out over mine
oversea, oversea and salted your skin.

TO TRAIL, TO BOOTS, TO HER HAIR IN A BRAID

Not as déjà vu, the glance from a screen, or a window, or the way a light from behind creates an outline of black, her body familiar because you knew it once as it walked ahead of you on a trail, the shape of her calves where they met the top of her socks, her socks to boots and her hair in a braid. Undone, this girl as steam, this girl as a place to begin, this person who looks like someone recognized, the pitch of ears slight and her nose turned different, the mole on her neck fallen, homeliness next to godliness, voice seated in her chest and fingers scratched between each knuckle, a tattoo across her shoulders, but there is no picturing her naked because something is slightly awry, the way she falls to her knees without a stumble, the slither of each leg as she climbs back up, the faultless cant of her teeth, contained and narrow, sharp and toned, enough to make one wonder about twins, how even identical people do not share fingerprints.

AFIELD

There was a time when the digging
needles into skin, the wedge of sharp
beneath wood, the upheaval sudden
and splintering, full
beneath thumbprints, caused pause
reminders to be careful when running
asunder, over and tearing upon planks
and fences and broken, leveled,
scattered old buildings.

In this field—a good field
full of hay rolls and heavy bent grasses,
flush with seeds and foxtail pods,
behind a new fence we climbed
upward, the shorn and weathered
oak wood ahead of us,
you the barn, gray and sunburned
me the sheep here and there
across the scattered fields,
the splinters and shards sunk deep
nothing to this barn, this field, these fences.

AFAR

This farm is yours, is mine, this pastoral herd a battened flock and woolen, all hairs a scattered collection, dainty toed and muffled, minutia packed into heavy down. I will tend my wards, my deep-blue blinking, welled and watered, a bit of every little thing: the notes my mother sent, script a wrinkled floating word, a chatter of crows, a button not crumpled but powdered.

At night these things are upsetting, the sheep a rustle in the barn, light quieted, a fire dead. In the morning I will awaken, this dreamlike slumber in the not-yet-dark, eyelashes a span of sharp toned branches, a squealing. I dreamt a text, once, and my slack face quieted, numbed and sweet, beholden only to quickness and light, the settling of embers along the horizon, the barn against a backdrop of green.

TRANSLATION

Grampo de Linha—
the staple line.
A bracelet: chain,
embroidery floss.

I have been reading about crafting,
making, creating things out of ordinary
objects, things lying around the house,
words I have to translate.

Staple line.
In Portuguese it is a gold bracelet.
Thick chain with red, blue, yellow thread.
In English it is literal:
a metallic line, silver.

The staple line.
Translation. I think about
stapling a paper,
weaving thread,
silk and cotton.

Grampo de Linha—
the line is nothing about textiles,
the way the chain falls on the girl's wrist,
here so small
as if she is about to catch something falling.

ACRONICTA LEPORINA

Miller moths creep—nocturnal, sometimes not—cutworms laid in soil,
tall grasses, marshlands. They emerge from cocoons, wet and dark.

Powdered wings damp, they dry slowly, unfolding as if thousands.
They breathe through their eyes, leave pupa remnants, red, dark

like dried blood on walls, like stains on windowsills.
They fill traps of bright lights, buckets with soapy water, wings soaked dark.

In May birds feed, tree swallows tearing moths in two,
a solid sound, collision, just before sunset.

LARREA TRIDENTATA

This chaparral is street sign, is dust mote, is ancient ring. The dust is not open space, is not broken branches, stiff twisted creosote. The dust is mesquite and low desert dwellers bent into the sand wind. Mojave, Sonoran, Chihuahan. Mountain above desert. Californicum, Californicus, California. Because I am not the only one. Because I remember straight branches, yellow flowers bursting and unscented, like water in a glass, like dry tar crumbled, like linoleum. *Larrea tridentata* in ancient toothed rings. Because I remember hydraulic mining and empty red hills, Malakoff, Pear Blossom Highway, Llano del Rio, colonies of creosote in rings around ruined bricks. *Larrea tridentata* as incantation. Repeat. *Larrea tridentata*. The Spanish, the teeth, the governess of water.

SANTA ANA

I miss you creosote and neon pines, pronghorn
elk, branches pliant beneath snow
vernal pools, raindrops full, threadbare blankets
nylon tent sides, bicycles broken down—no front
tires—the back of a Subaru, Toyota, hood ornaments
missing, Thai food and Love's sushi, California sunburned
more heat than humidity, born of brackish water, broken stacks
of cairn stones.

I miss you star thistle hills boiling and blossoming outward
foothills, you low-shouldered expanse
you past the hot gold, yellow sand on Joshua Trees
yucca brevifolia, seaspray air, the rising Transverse
St. Lucia, Lassen, Shasta, Medicine Lake.

I miss you sage and scrub and rings of mountains, endless ranges
and borderlands of tectonic rupture.