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Cicadas & Other Hauntings

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Recommended Citation

Anastasi, Miriam J., "Cicadas & Other Hauntings" (2020). *Senior Projects Spring 2020*. 290.
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Bard

Cicadas & Other Hauntings

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Miriam J Anastasi

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2020

Preface

It is Saturday, May 9th of the year 2020, in Red Hook, New York, and it is snowing outside: quick, thick flurries, just beginning to accumulate on the hawthorne on the side of the gravel driveway leading up to our apartment, lending an eerie haze to the glow of late-day midspring sky. They are not forecasted to last long but seem to be putting a fine point on the suspended nature of this wild year. My partner, our roommate, and our two rabbits have been quarantined inside for at least eight weeks now in accordance with pandemic practices. This is an exceptionally strange moment in itself, let alone to be polishing off the following text, to be finishing my time at college, to be sitting down and reflecting on the time that is now behind me.

The work as follows is the product of the past year: in some ways, it is a love letter to the child I was. In others, it is a document of my passage — “transition,” if you like — into girlhood and womanhood as it has occurred over the past twenty-two years, though in particular how it has unfolded over the past four years, roughly coinciding with my beginning transgender hormone replacement therapy on July 7th 2016 and following through my corresponding-ongoing reformation of social-spiritual identity. In another way, it is a note of gratitude to my loved ones and my community, who have seen me and built me up throughout this process, lending their willingness to dream with me. Language is one of the strangest miracles I have found in this life, particularly in the hands of the freaks and the queers; for those of us against whom language has been levelled as a weapon, there is a unique and desperate joy that comes with rearticulating ourselves and our experiences on the page, perhaps in ways we have never seen when we needed them most. All I can hope to do is lay a beam of the foundation of the world I wish to one day live in — I hope you will meet me there.

Acknowledgements

This project could not have been what it is without the efforts of many, and I want to extend my gratitude towards the following:

The teachers and professors who have influenced me on my path to this project, including Christopher Miller, Susan Rogers, Dawn Lundy Martin, Elizabeth Holt, and Ziad Dallal, for the thoughtful engagement, dedication, and meaning they bring into their classrooms as well as Michael Ives in particular, for working alongside me on this project, and helping me step out of timidity and into my power as a writer —

Bel, whose presence finds its way vagabonding through these poems now and again, for the light, the consistent inspiration and the long companionship I will always cherish —

Hannah, for the intuitive conversation and the walks through the woods with the cat, for the unyielding good humor and understanding —

Emma, for the quiet comradeship and the annotations, for helping me break back into prose after a long time apart —

Claire, for the old times, and for letting me crash in her room in Utah and leading me up those mountains —

Andrew, Katy, Mom, and Dad —

And lastly, to Lafe, my heart, for all that you give and have shown me, and for making a home with me.

For Bel, who has been there for all of it —

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*“I begin
to believe
in a god
I could
build like
a porch.
I began
to have
a need
like that.”*

— Eileen Myles, “A Blue Jay”

Oh, Return to Me

At some point rose the tendency, call, or yearning, to return — to go back, revise, revisit, regress, repeat. Whether this came from the need to repeat or rewrite my own history is unknown to me, but from this side of the fissure it's simple to see the chasm between the abject, world-denied and -denying little girl, and the vessel I look out from now, the young woman sprung fully formed as if from seafoam or the godhead. We speak different tongues but I know her grief is bottomless. It haunts me, pulsing. An empty ribbon holding lost girlhood, one that trails me, now, working behind the deli counter, gold-lining my eyes in the mirror in the dark at daybreak, smiling to children in the checkout counter at the supermarket.

I inherit her taste in overdriven guitar music and her history, her parents in the wide bridge of her nose, hazel-green eyes & distaste for authority. I hold her, almond-colored and warm, & when I feel her stirring in the watery depths of my body, I want to tell her everything: that she is not her body; that this all will be over soon; that she will feel a love brimming in her beyond any capacity she could imagine. That the suffering inflicted on her is one older than most things born, & though not always and not flawlessly, one she has up til now survived. I want to tell her but my words are lost in the swirling currents of her ocean. I am left to hum to her, to lull and hold her, and hope the warm tone of my presence may resonate to the places her secret gleaming dreams escape.

An Inventory (after Ariana Reines)

Because I wasn't kicked out when I crawled into my mother's room
That one unslept morning to tell her I might be kind of a girl
Because I was born to upper middle class white Episcopalian liberals
In a D.C. suburb ranked highest in Municipal Equality
& Because my middle school counsellor
Had a copy of an *It Gets Better* collection on her bookshelf
With a single essay by a trans women in which
She writes explicitly about wanting to take her own
Life and the bitter isolation of it all alone on a cliffside among
Dozens of narratives of familial acceptance but ultimately
On good days she finds some symbolic closure in the ocean
The salt of its spray fogging the places her reflection deviates
From the image she holds within
& Because I grew up with practically unrestricted internet
Access & memorized acronyms like HRT and SRS &
Learned the one actual Truth hidden from most of us growing up
(That trans girls are authentically gorgeous)
With my own eyes long before I dared name any of my desires
Aloud

& Because I lived to see Laura Jane Grace coming
Out on the cover of Rolling Stone that photograph
Wet hair wrapped in a towel smooth-skinned tatted shoulders her
Guitar slumped over next to her
& I had an older brother who loved Against Me! mostly for the
Acoustic anarchy days & took me out to ice cream
In the gayborhood when I
Quietly forwarded him the article

("We should talk about this sometime")

To tell me he was down & loved me & I should probably tell our parents
 & Because the folk punk rattail masc on T who I
 Followed on Tumblr & was very afraid of was
 Kind to me when I came up to him in the
 Concrete backyard of my first ex's old house
 During the smoke break between sets at the gig
 & Introduced myself in adolescent D.C. summer two-beer stupor
 & Told him I had gotten close to making an
 Appointment at the clinic he went to but was
 Suddenly flooded with terror & he told me to just try
 Again & I did

& Because the barista
 At the coffee/gelato shop across from the clinic
 Where I sat trying to Process
 The Enormity of it All
 With my new photocopied estrogen scrip
 Folded in a notebook in my blue Jansport
 Was also trans and flirted with me in a gentle way
 That indicated to me that she saw we were on the same
 Team and really completed the sense that I was
 Finally being inducted into some invisible extrasensory
 Underground cult of hot people, who were
 Really everywhere, despite reports,
 Once you learned to adjust your eyes

(& Because this was several years before a South Carolina man fired three
 bullets from an assault rifle into a Tenleytown pizzeria on a Sunday afternoon believing

it was the home of the Clintons' child sex trafficking ring because it held punk shows in the back, people who threw punk shows out of their houses were still posting their home addresses online, meaning I could read Siken on the Red Line then walk half an hour to strangers' distortion-riddled homes which occasionally also held other young freaks, who I began to know and love and recognize myself by)

& Because I made it through my first year on the pills

With only a single sexual assault

& Chose to ritually smash glass in the woods

Every three months lying in that great

Autumned wood, sun dying orange and

Vibrant on the fallen yellow September

Foliage, my wet body curled in the crook of the

Dead willow strumming the

Same three notes over on the old acoustic

Waiting for language to

Come back to me

& Because I became invested in inventing languages as

Survival & making new myths where our word for bad

Is not derived from the Old English bæddel,

Meaning hermaphrodite, as in intersex, transsexual, monster;

Because I have the kind of father who

Today filed two forms I scanned and emailed him

With an embossed copy of my birth certificate and

A check for one hundred and sixty-five dollars at the

Circuit court back home with a clerk whose

Last name is freakishly the two names I am ditching

Stitched together — filed them so I

Don't have to walk to the sound of a
Dead kid's name at my graduation —
this vessel takes her shape here now.

Bloodline in Misplaced Seafoam

I wish I could
dehistoricize myself
shed the odd sense of
duty I don't want to
be duty I don't
want the burden of the
investment I have an
indebted feeling to the
blood of the infertile mothers who
reared me across
time and space, fragments of song
carrying the heartbeats of
lives denied in other
times — or lives legible
 by untranslatable
 standards in other
 times, different
 codices of context —
the distinction of this
breakneck hurtling moment I
didn't exactly ask to live
in —
Moon mother
holy ghost-witness to
centuries of untold
lovers, give me more
than context --
Return me to a physical something

mud-born & wind in my nostrils
toes in the soil
as, one imagines, could have been before
the Anglo-Saxon took the land from the soil
sowed his seed in the blood of its descendents
& kept walking onward to
multiply, kill, produce & increase
-- though we know there was no
mythic before-place Eden really
& rather I would say
return me to the place
I was born that comes after
the last white supremacist regime
smolders down into a thick ash, the only fertilizer we will ever need again

Raisin Poem

I'm sitting here eating the raisins Gil left at our house in their living-out-of-their-car pantry donation while they catsit for a nice gay man in Paris for six weeks. They are from Vermont. Not Gil but the raisins. Buffalo Mountain Co-op in Hardwick. \$4.43 a pound. Having only been to its libertarian sister New Hampshire as a fully conscious being, Vermont is this misty young wood in my mind where instead of the Evangelicals driving to the liquor store on Sunday with no seatbelts there are apparently radical puppeteering communities like the one whose land Gil has been living on intermittently post-grad which are mostly sweaty queers playing mandolins in shitty tents or something. I'm eating these raisins — which I forgot have this sweet and gritty wholeness, an earthiness to them — and thinking about being a kid like I often am caught up in lately but instead of the typical amorphous fog of Time as viscous ribbon lurking deep beneath me

I'm remembering eating raisins on the playground in my bright red sweater embroidered CHRIST EPISCOPAL. Tiny handfuls from the little red box with the pretty girl in a white bonnet printed on it, long hair. The parcel like a tiny deck of cards. I think I remember my mom buying them in bulk and refilling the carton in the kitchen. I loved the feel of it, held onto it in my pocket all day. Picking the flap to open the deck. Raisins clumped sweet together, stained inner walls more visible with each one eaten. Purple-red. The girl on the cover, rosy-cheeked, sun behind her. An embodied intuition, similar to the spool that lets loose the logic of dreams, told me that if I

ate every raisin enough times I would grow into something that started to look like her — that warm glow in her cheeks, those long curls falling, red ribbon, my own sun behind me. It seemed inevitable as long as I emptied the box each recess; there was no reason for it not to be. A private truth rising from the inarticulable need to share in that light I only saw fall on others; a luminosity I only became more aware of and estranged from as I began to grow.

Terribly conscious of the givenness of that light and my expanding lack of it, I practiced simple hidden femininities in private places untouched by the cruel or indifferent faceless creature that kept those gates: holding onto that box of raisins in my denim jacket pocket; wrapping my body to the shoulders in a towel out of the shower rather than just my lower half, as I had been taught to do; letting my brown hair grow long and knotted rather than letting anyone touch it. There was no consciousness on my part of these practices as feminine at the time — no word yet for the effeminate that was not couched in shame — but it became increasingly clear to me that it was only in lonesomeness that I felt any inkling of proper alignment, in the place I had created in and around myself, sovereign to the meanings I made alone.

Deer Poem

I.

honestly my own feelings

exhaust me but my aesthetic is

absolutely where i want

it to be right now ... brown & black

w/ green eyes in autumn foliage

i can appreciate myself as part of a palette & i remember i possess this vessel with grace, actually, the

cool breeze & gathering clouds & the new Big Thief single undoing the summer of packs of

sweating men shouting at me from their pick-up trucks if i could have a scaffolding of life

rather than one of avoidance if i could have a break from performance dig down into my own

warm geosin-rich soil to wrap my palm around those deep sunken structures --

what would i find there? what could i see?

what creature lies at the bottom of the pit of indulgence

its claws scraping across the walls of my wings,

my shoulders

I hold a bird in my

palm for you I hold

I hold a warm crow

in my palm its

Corvidian intelligence spent emulating my (its mothers)

speech I am a many-titted deer creature with

unshorn antlers the mark

of my first sex held

high & sharp atop my head no scrutiny or impulse

to clip them for I am proud to have so visible a pain with which

I protect my brood

& my own hunger spinning inside
 of me sustains itself on
 the dew off the mountains &
 the sweat of the forest
 fungus hangs freely on my
 back an ornament of
 cyclical mourning a haze
 of rot hot across my eyes

Give me the cool dying orange
 of autumn

Give me a handful of
 ceylon & a loud room full
 of trans dykes & a breeze to cut my
 teeth on

Let me hear the mountain practicing its tinny head-voice or watch the river nick itself shaving

I want a silver maple to crack my back and get rid of these tension headaches

Moon mother holy ghost-witness to centuries of untold lovers, if we merely exist in the eyes
 of others please lend your sight for me to see myself by

In pursuit of the mundane I find truth

II.

My mind is endless my body is endless

I thirst for nothing I hunger for nothing

I saturate myself with the scent of the newness

I welcome myself to the scent of the new

I saturate myself in the love of becoming

I welcome myself to the hymns of the river

I find a holy place inside my body and at first the altar refuses me;

I find a holy place inside my body and I am rejected from the empty temple, massive doors barred with thorns and brambles;

The holy place I find inside my body holds high walls sharp and unscalable gnawing tempestuous;

I find a holy place inside my body and I sink down into its sewer-moat in search of hidden entryways through the many catacombs my atlas has led me to believe reside beneath: I dive and grope and sputter along its submerged walls but all the stone I find is undooored and smooth;

I hoist myself from the holy muck of this forgotten place inside my body and lay myself bare on its gleaming marble stairwell: the fetid river clings to my skin now, and it is only in this glorious putrescence that I am at last welcomed;

I find a holy place inside my body and its many barricades catch fire and come crashing down, no voice booming not to fear;

I find a holy place inside my body and my footsteps echo sharply within its massive vestibule along pillars of patterned goldwork and statues of long-past cephalophores, stone lips silent on stone heads in hands;

I find a holy place inside my body and I lay out the altar: an obsidian gargoyle bookend statue from the antique shop in Uptown, found without her mate:

crystal blue sea glass long-rounded on the granite beaches of New Hampshire:

the chunk of sun-bleached deer vertebrae Hannah found after catching her foot in the ribcage in the woods behind her house on my birthday:

granddad's old tobacco pipe, still ash-musked:

a dried bundle of purple amaranth, a crop suited for the warm times to come:

smoothed pebbles of fired, air-pocked clay washed up on the beaches at Rokeby from the brickyard across the river:

hair shed from the last pettings of Claire's big old red retriever, Hope, now at rest but whose soft smell and quiet panting still walks with me in my most silent troubled evenings;

I find a holy place inside my body and I fill its dry fountain bucket by bucket from the starshine trickling in the ceiling and in its red-empty waters I bathe, finding quiet solace and fruitful solitude;

I find a holy place inside my body and I ward the door with the smell of charcoal and my mother's

threadbare cardigan, for an unprotected silence is waiting to erupt again;
 I find a holy place inside my body and I hang tapestries upon its smooth red walls depicting each of my
 lovers, for each one I knew and know myself by;
 The sounds of my prayers echo through the high atrium of my holy body, quaking in crimson light
 with the humble weight of recognition;
 I find a holy place inside my body and I light a candle which places the shadow of Hope in my lap;
 I find a quiet place in the crystalline throngs of memory sprouting from the parapets, their glow is blue
 and cold and this time at last I feel no fear;
 I find a holy place in my body and it is lying in the Maryland ryegrass with my bike beside me
 stretching out my twisting hips to let the demons eke out between the seams, blue wind, black
 walnut, mourning dove;
 I find a holy place inside my body and I am down at the silt-flecked river again plucking nylon strings,
 singing the same song, my grief now warm and quite becoming;
 I find a holy place & it is me 12 or 14 kissing a boy on the cheek on his couch not because I am
 attracted to him exactly but because he is the only boy who is kind to me and sometimes he
 puts his hand on my head and I feel a visceral forbidden wretched kind of pretty and I have
 the sense that if I kiss him it will finally turn me into a girl;
 I find a holy place inside the feedbacking bass harmonic that says we miss you, please come home;
 In a dream Felix jumps into my car with shoplifted snacks from Whole Foods and we are driving to
 Philly to see Loone again;
 I lose myself in the susurrus of countless holy places;
 I find a holy continent of song surfacing from the water that has always been there & I knew its
 location from the start;
 I find a holy place in my body and it is smoking in the rain beneath the awning of streetlamp and red
 awning with my best friend when the threat of my blood clotting still felt utterly fictional;
 I find a holy place inside my body & it is after giving the platonic head which broke that long expanse
 of panicked untouchability & hearing on the fogged walk home Jay Som's I Think You're
 Alright and wanting desperately to be in love;

I find a holy place & it is the great violet river of radiance sludging forward and around and out from the amp connected to the pretty tall girl whose high bun and owl-shaped face I catch only a fragment of through the crowd: the river still flowing, now, years after, down the rocky cliffside into the river, leaving a torrent of gay worms in its wake; much later this girl lends me her distortion pedal and the exponential heat held in the footswitch is the highest pendent in the crystalline chain;

I find a holy place and it is hiding inside the blue spruce of my body around the corner from the deli reading *The Left Hand of Darkness* on my lunch break: I find a hagiography of Ian in there bound in gold and sprouted garlic, may his Scandinavian orchestral pianist girlfriend bring them both unimaginable wealth and prosperity;

I uncover hundreds of holy artifacts plumbing the crystalline depths & do not have space in my messenger bag to hold them & so I move on.

2.2.2020

things are back
in place. it is
sunday night & i
am drinking a hot
cup of maple ginger
tea at my desk while i
write & listen to emily
sprague's warm analog
drone beneath the light
of my lamp. trashbags
tied & tagged in the red hook
fashion & taken to the curb along
with bottles & cans; lunches
sit in tupperwares
in the refrigerator & dishes
dry on the rack; two rabbits
(sisters) twitching their noses
in their open-eyed sleep, in
tandem, beside one another;
K & L are talking
& laughing in the living room
& i feel rather than hear the
warmth of their voices lifting
thru the cracks between the
floorboards. & i feel
my neck soften, my ankles &
my shoulders untense with
the quiet knowing that this

house can & does hold me up,
that my feet are stable,
freely rooted on this ground.

Cicadas & Other Hauntings

IT STARTS IN the dark, as most things do in our era. A slow blue lull rolls over the town, children in parallel houses don identical nightshirts turned outward-inward in hopes of bringing snow; foreheads are kissed and lullabies hummed and candles extinguished. Doves retreat to nests to rest their throats and dream of morning's cooing. Stars shimmer winterly over pine-needled boughs and at last: the hair is brushed and last book-covers are shut and the final light dies out. All creation seems asleep but for the child.

The child lies wide-eyed in the moonlit blue-filled room. She lies unmoving except for her breath slowly rising and falling beneath her flanneled sheets. She wonders if she has woken in the night or if she never slept at all, her eyes swimming in deep and marvelous blue. The room she has memorized in the light of day and lamp — the room she knows the dimensions and colors of, the wooly texture of the carpeting and the screech of the door opening and her pencil-drawings on its white-painted wood, the sloped ceiling her bed lies beneath, the shape of her bed when her mother is beside her reading to her and the shape of its frame when she is alone — that room is made unfamiliar in this shadowy luminosity, where all seems dipped in ink.

Wind rattles the windowpanes as she lets her eyes drift from corner to corner. Where she knows her bookshelf sits, holding her favorite picture-books, is now the vague recesses of some dark shape. She strains her eyes to adjust, conjuring the idea of what she knows is there, but can not will her eyes to see it. As she looks beyond the edge of the bookshelf, toward the far corner of the room, something unaccounted for shines at her. A shard of moonlight falling from her window lands squarely on the far wall, its pale light illuminating an old button-up sweater. It looks small and shriveled to her and she can not remember ever wearing it. On its knitted surface she can decipher the

suggestion of an animal — or animals, she finds, as she looks deeper to see the antlered pattern of a buck repeated.

The sweater hangs from a small, circular knob — the more she looks, the more she realizes it hangs on a section of the wall cut away from the rest, sitting slightly behind it in a frame. It is a door, she realizes. Though a very small one. Much smaller than any door she had seen before, coming barely up to the knee of the door to the hallway: almost sized perfectly to the child who may have fit in that sweater. Until now her life had been easily contained in these four walls, a structure explained to and familiar to her — she had had little cause yet to wonder, discover. Her mind races with possibilities of what lay beyond the door. Rats, she thinks, having some understanding of the sorts of creatures that lived in walls. In her mind she saw their bristled hair and gnawing teeth. Rats, at least the size of the sweater. Maybe hundreds. Or bugs, worms. Crickets like the ones who poured from the basement ceiling that one afternoon a panel fell down. Cicadas like the chitinous shells she found clinging to the trees on the way to school. All of these and more, running together in a stream, a river of pulsing filth and danger.

All night the images gnaw and gnaw at her, fear ultimately yielding to a gentler exhilaration. A whole house of its own could lie behind it, maybe inhabited by the owner of the sweater; maybe there was a child like her, her shadow, who lived on the other side. A child like her though a little older, one acclimated to this dark world of windswept silence, one who already knew her secrets and would hold them close; maybe there was a whole world beyond that house, too, and it was one where she would never be lonely, never forced into uncomfortable clothes or subject to bathing. The more she thought of the girl beyond the door the more her wild delight grew. She became sure that one night the door would slide open with a woody rattling and the girl would emerge, quietly leading her by the hand

through an umber tunnel lit only by sparse torches, beyond which their life would begin. She would become something new. She steeled herself for the moment and vowed to keep her vigil. Though not sure of its details, she had at least heard of prayer, and offered up her first one to bring safe and swift passage to her companion. Her eyes remained fixed on the door in alert reverence until the first rays of misty sun accompanied the cooing of the doves, the silhouetted limbs of the red maple slowly climbing through the room, banishing that shard of precious moonlight.



SHE CARRIED THAT wild hope everywhere, wrapping herself in that dream like a cloak. The blue perfume of moonlight clung to her, insulating her from the world lying beyond the routine of day. A film of sleeplessness lay glossily over all things perceived, softening their edges with warmth. The few hours between the arrival of dawn's light and her father's alarm bringing him to wake her for school became the brief window where, curled upside-down at the foot of her bed and trembling with exhaustion, she sunk into a bright unconsciousness. Then came the knock on the door and the morning inevitably followed: toast and orange juice, toothbrush and school uniform with its collared shirt, embroidered red sweater, khaki pants. Shoelaces tied on the back stoop and the short walk across the dew-laden lawn-grass, through the short wooded thicket where the last currents of dawn's mist caught rays of sun streaming between Virginia pines. Squirrels chittering and rattling branches above. Often silent deer or rabbits grooming themselves in the places roots lay exposed over soil, at least robins, sparrows, crows. At the end of the path lay the schoolyard, and then the school; to the left extended a deeper swathe of wood.

Folded in the cloak of her dream, she was surprised to find that the things which usually bristled against a nameless place within her remained silent. Walking into morning chapel, she found little of the usual discomfort when the boys were filtered into one side, and the girls another; sitting amongst the boys, as always, she found the stiffness of her collar did not bother her, as it usually did; the wooliness of the sweater less itchy, the fit of the pants somewhat more bearable. It was not that there was pleasure where there once was discomfort — rather, that the discomfort, still lurking, became numb once she turned her thoughts back to the door. Even the length of the meandering sermon did not bother her this morning. She instead became grateful for the expanse of time with which to paint the images inside her mind of the world which she knew waited ahead of her: the gold of its sunlit rivers, the blue-gray eyes of the girl, journeying now to find her. She saw its deep woods and peaceful valleys take shape beneath the vaulted ceilings of the chapel. Flower-thronged vines stretched from pew to pulpit; wild grasses and their attendant insects spread over the red carpet of the aisles. Lost in the shimmering light of the sun's play on the surface of a rivulet, she became certain: this is where, once she crossed to the other side, her companion would lead her — where she would submerge herself in its bright waters and find herself born anew.

With a jolt the timbre of the organ began and drew her from her daydreams — river, vines and grasses glittered into nothingness as chaplain, cross, and acolyte began their slow movement through the space where they had once hung. She found herself in her earthly body and willed it into line with the others around her, joining the movement of blazers and tartan skirts into the day beyond.

SHE CARRIED THAT wild hope everywhere: in the twin gray under-eye crescents looking back at her from the mirror as she brushed her teeth in the morning, testament to her nightlong vigil; clenched in the fists she held in her red corduroy jacket pockets as other children swarmed around her on the wood-chipped loam at recess; in the margin-scrawled drawings she began losing herself in rather than memorize her times tables. There seemed little reason to invest in the world around her, the world she could touch, when every minute just brought closer that night of rapture. Every night that her eyes remained rapt on the door without the appearance of her companion only served to strengthen her conviction, further fueling her visions of what lay beyond the door. Surely the girl, her girl, had been listening to her constant prayer; surely she would see her for who she truly was. No matter the myriad troubles of the day, each one faded into meaninglessness as her bedroom door was shut for the night and she was again drenched in that sweet solitude of the wait.

On these nights she increasingly found herself drawn to the window from which moonlight fell, rather than its destination. Her steps were at first delicate and measured over the wood-beams she knew to creak easily, an alarm that would surely bring her parents to investigate and bar her from her journey — though as the nights where she pressed her face to the glass til dawn began to outnumber the nights she lay in bed, those tepid footfalls began finding surer footing. Passing ghostly over the few rows of wood-beams, she would hoist herself to the top of her dresser and sit cross-legged against the windowpane, its sheer glass cold on her small palms. From this perch she looked out over the sleeping street and through the arms of the red maple watched the moon wax and wane from season to season. First the final light of the bedroom in the house across the street would cease, the house's vinyl siding sinking into its familiar tone of lavender in darkness; the final cars would tuck themselves into their driveways, red brake-lights fading; then at last the rhythm of her father's snoring would float down the

hall and the air would be filled with blue. Staring intently at the piercing, now lone light of the moon, her breath left a growing blot of fog on the window's glass — the evidence of her respiration that both contained and extended the moon's cerulean glow.



“EAT IT! IF you don't eat it I'm telling everyone you're a girl!”

The words scraped against a quiet wind inside of her as she felt herself looking over the five or seven gray-brown husks in the trembling boy's-hand before her. The three boys had convinced her to help them gather those crisp cicada shells all recess — knowing that she would know best where to find them — under the guise of friendship. The blonde-haired one had feigned kindness as they picked husks from bark side-by-side and listened to her stammer red-faced through the story of the girl waiting for her beyond the forgotten door, smiling as the pile began to fill the upturned baseball cap they used as a basket. She found herself feeling warm under his small eyes, his curls that fell on his shoulders — she began to wonder if maybe he, too, had a secret girl living inside of him, one who would only arrive one distant day in moonlight. The thought made her neck hot and filled her head with an unfamiliar dizziness, though luckily the task required little in the form of eye contact. She kept herself busy scanning the rippled bark for those six-legged near-translucent amber skeletons, scarcely larger than a knuckle, though if one looked closely they could see the tear across its backside where the molting insect had slipped out. She loved to roll that word around on her tongue. *Molting*. She knew they only came up every seventeen years. She had been fascinated by the first shell she had seen, pointed out to her by her father on a morning walk to school, though only once, much later, had she

seen the creature that resulted from it. The insect itself repulsed her — its huge, blind, red eyes, the alien glossiness webbing its wings, the erratic movement held in its impossibly sinuous limbs — but the shells themselves thrilled her in their lifeless intricacy. She delighted in being the only one on the playground who appreciated them, having them all to herself — all to herself until today.

“Eat it!” the blonde-haired boy yelled again, spittle flying from his lips. The other two boys stood silently behind him at his shoulders. “I’m telling everyone unless you eat them all.”

The words hung soundlessly in the air as the girl felt her eyes look past the boy’s palm and into the mulch-coated soil. The smell of wet earth stung hot in her nostrils. Time seemed to slow as the pattern of the wood chips and soil began to rearrange itself into a harsh static, like sun-reflecting snow too bright to be seen. Even if words rose to the top of her, she knew she would not be able to will them out.

“Are you stupid?” the blonde-haired boy taunted.

“Maybe we should leave him alone,” mumbled the boy on his right. The blonde-haired boy remained silent, his little hand only moving closer and closer to her face.

The harsh wind died inside of her and the dust began to settle. Something began to fall into place, as the way light creeps across a room. Without speaking, she raised her head and took the husks from the blonde-haired boy’s hand. The first one was the most difficult. Crunchy, as she expected, dry and unyielding. Woody. A struggle to mull the thorax down into something to be swallowed. She took her time chewing, keeping her eyes locked on the blonde boy, his soft chin, his cheekbones.

The boys broke into abrupt laughter. “He’s eating them!”

By the third she began to enjoy them, finding an almost pleasant nuttiness to them, rich with the scent of bark. She threw four through seven into her mouth all at once, then walked over to the

upturned baseball cap filled to the brim with them, and began shoving them into her mouth in large handfuls. Chitinous legs and heads were cleaved unceremoniously from their bodies as her molars worked the fragments down into thick pulp. She remembered reading in a newsprint magazine that, after molting, some insects would eat their former skins to regain the lost protein. So why shouldn't she? Something had lit the kindling of those countless sleepless nights, something lurking behind those distant eyes, like wrath, or ruin. The sun shone sharper on her skin and the blue of the sky rang electric.

Long after the three boys had backed away in fear from her, she continued to wolf down hand after handfull, now alone at the edge of the playground where the wood began to grow. Skin glowing with that caustic warmth, her empty hands in fists at her side, she took a quick look around her then began to sprint into the wooded path ahead, turning up piles of dead leaves as she leapt from root to root, sun laughing in her eyes.

Coda: On Bad Desire

The protagonist of the above is represented as knowing, in her own way, that she is a girl despite the world around her lending her every acknowledgement to the contrary. Despite the fact of uniforms, classmates, doctors, teachers, and parents enforcing maleness on to her, she knows this to be true; the narrator refers to her throughout with “she,” in accordance with her truth. I do this because it is linguistically convenient for what I wish to create and for the kind of story which chose me to tell it — I do feel the need, however, to point out the historicity of “the child who always knew,” a prevalent trope in trans narrative that has had very material stakes for living trans people and a phantom I feel lurking around this prose.

The trope has been long employed in the medical model of determining which trans people are ‘fit’ for treatment in the United States. Until the relatively recent emergence of the informed consent model, trans people were evaluated on a range of criteria probing the depths of their personal and sexual lives to determine if they were ‘trans enough’ to receive hormone replacement therapy and other gender-affirming services. The necessity of these services is well-documented: they drastically reduce the exceptionally high rates of suicide among trans youth, for example, meaning it is no stretch to call them life-saving.¹ Until 2011, the 2001 World Professional Association for Transgender Health’s Standards of Care — a series of guidelines regarding the treatment of transgender people — required those who sought hormone therapy to either complete three months of intensive psychotherapy or three months of so-called “Real-Life Experience,” in which one was expected to spontaneously begin a

¹ See “Transgender Adolescent Suicide Behavior”, Russell B. Toomey, Amy K. Syvertsen and Maura Shramko, in the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. It also seems worth noting that, at our present historical juncture, the right is seeking to criminalize the act of dispensing gender-affirming care to trans youth; see South Dakota bill HB1057 and Idaho HB500.

new life as their target gender in the public eye without the benefits of hormone therapy;² the further back one looks, the more draconian the requirements, including the mandatory urological exams which were on the books until 1990.³ It's also not difficult to imagine the sort of individuals who — in an era where the United States' skeletal healthcare system would never dream of funding any aspect of a sex change — would be able to financially access these extensive psychotherapy sessions, expensive feminizing surgeries, voice lessons, cosmetics and flattering wardrobes which are often required for a successful performance of femininity.

The implicit logic behind the series of hoops that constitute the gatekeeper model is that it is a matter of medical necessity that only the right kind of trans person be granted access to lifesaving healthcare. This hypothetical ideal candidate was expected to display traits and interests that coincided with the patriarchal model of femininity — she was expected to show up to her psychotherapy sessions lacking obvious or prominent male sex characteristics and presenting herself appropriately femininely; show attributes like passivity, sensitivity, and deference to male leadership; primarily have friendships with cisgender women and be exclusively attracted to men; have dreamt all her life of the glamour and fulfillment of housewifery. Each instance of the WPATH Standards of Care's dozens of "eligibility" and "readiness" checkpoints presents an opportunity for her to be rejected based upon her failure to perform the role. This is the context that produces the constant refrain in early trans memoirs of having known one's true gender "all of one's life" — while I would never doubt the words of a transgender woman in describing her own experience, it is clear that these disclosures are made under coercion: insisting on the innate immutability of one's gender identity becomes a method of survival.

² The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association's Standards Of Care For Gender Identity Disorders, Sixth Version. Feb 2001.

³ Winters, Kelley. "New Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People." *GID Reform*. Sept 2011.

But this insistence on the primordality of gender is also bound up with the long history of sexual pathologization — making trans identity an illness to be probed, prodded, dissected, in order to be “understood” — which makes up the bedrock of how we think of transgender identity.

One rather persistent theorist of transsexuality, Ray Blanchard, presents a similar bifurcation of transgender women along the lines of the fit and the unfit as the gatekeeping Standards of Care, but his distinction rests almost entirely on the patient’s experience of desire.⁴ Many have already debunked the faulty science behind Blanchard’s study,⁵ particularly his lack of a cisgender female control group, but his decades of writing on the theory has made his framework one of the few enduring theoretical models for making meaning of trans identity, particularly in academic contexts. While his work has proven to fail in establishing an objective topology of transsexuality or providing insight into the lived experience of trans people, Blanchard’s theory of autogynephilia is useful in its illustration of the way that the desire of transgender women is unilaterally constructed as a weapon against them.

In Blanchard’s theory, first put forward in 1989, the “homosexual [*sic*] transsexual”⁶ is exclusively attracted to men, feminine without being effeminate in behavior and appearance, and pursues medical transition to access the normative role for attraction to men. This category is poised against the “autogynephilic transsexual,” whose motivation for pursuing transition is construed as mere fetish: the sexual fantasy of inhabiting a female body, indicative of some underlying sexual pathology. While for Blanchard, both the homosexual transsexual and the autogynephile are thought to psychologically benefit from accessing gender-affirming healthcare, the mechanism at work is clear:

⁴ Blanchard, Ray. (1989). The Concept of Autogynephilia and the Typology of Male Gender Dysphoria. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*. 177. 616-23.

⁵ See: Serano, Julia M. (2010) 'The Case Against Autogynephilia', *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 12:3, 176-187

⁶ Clearly his terminology is misguided, operating under the assumption that the transgender person’s sex assigned at birth is what should be thought of in terms of same-sex desire, rather than their actual gender; I use his terms here solely for clarity of argument.

for trans women, there is good desire, and there is bad desire. Good desire provides supporting evidence for one's claim to womanhood and indicates the potential to be assimilated into a traditional feminine social role; bad desire makes one abject, deviant, a predator, indicates their desire to transition is founded only in sexual perversion, and obliterates one's claim to female gender identity.

Experiencing good desire — or putting on a convincing performance of that experience — grants a check-mark on the candidate's application for transition, bringing them one step closer to accessing healthcare, while experiencing bad desire could be enough to have their application rejected.

A common pattern Blanchard draws is that the homosexual transsexual tends to transition early in life, while the autogynephilic transsexual typically transitions later. These different life-stages are significant in their construction of meaning around these two categories of trans woman: good desire is deliberately constructed by the exclusion of bad desire. Bad desire is made bad because its genesis is fetish and eroticism as they emerge in an adult context, the assumed perversion undermining and delegitimizing any claim to identity and bringing to mind images of the fetishistic transvestite, whose private "cross-gender" fantasy is solely a shameful bedroom secret; the identity becomes inextricable from that deviant eroticism. Good desire, in contrast, is presented in explicitly pre-sexual terms and discussed in terms of social role. By locating the genesis of good desire in childhood, through the use of the "child who always knew", the claim to femininity is desexualized, naturalized, and made innocent. It is not the spontaneous emergence of a perversion in adulthood, which the psychoanalyst can trace back to some developmental experience; it is seen more as the natural expression of one's identity and the yearning for its corresponding normative social role, something much easier for the psychoanalyst to wrap his head around.

I do not look to this labeling of desire under the gatekeeping model to condemn transgender women who have conformed or do conform to womanhood as it is constructed by hetero-patriarchy — millions of cisgender women do so every day, and the desires of many may authentically map to the roles prescribed to them at birth. I would also never begrudge a transgender woman for playing the oppressor’s game in order to survive, gain access to healthcare, acceptance or tolerance in a world that makes it abundantly clear that transfeminine transgression is punishable by death; nor would I blame a sister for internalizing that which is presented to us as the immutable fact of our existence. Rather I know that there is much at stake in this pseudo-scientific belaboring of bad desire and the subsequent manufacturing of shame. Why would decades of medical establishment regulations and theory do all that they could to contain non-heteronormative trans desire, preventing generations of transgender women from coming into being, at least by legal methods? What is it about the idea of being aroused by a feminine self-image that is so threatening that Blanchard writes theory after theory about its pathology? What does it mean that he fails entirely to imagine any form of desire between trans people, the mere possibility of a trans dyke?

The simplest answer is that transgender female sexuality has undergone the same suppression as all female sexualities under patriarchy. Audre Lorde has made the meaning behind such suppression clear: “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire”⁷; “In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort these various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change”⁸. But the consequences for transgender women are also unique, in that the stigma placed upon them in

⁷ Lorde, Audre. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” *Sister Outsider*. 54.

⁸ *Ibid*, 53.

dominant culture stems from their casting as sexual abberations. The realm of the sexual has so long been used to punish us that for many, if not all of us, navigating eroticism and intimacy can be nightmares of shame, fear, and humiliation. We are taught that our bodies are incriminating and can be used against us to justify violence. Our place as the object of study has long robbed us of the capacity to experience private desire, stemming from our own bodies, without the multitude of meanings heft upon us by our surrounding society. The autogynephile is so stigmatized because the idea of experiencing sexual fulfillment in a transgender body is so alien and so dangerous to a cisgender world that needs us to experience ourselves as broken, damaged, mismatched. To have the confidence in ourselves to break the yoke of shame and find ourselves desirable and capable of desiring, and to desire each other for who we are, rather than how we might compare to the cisgender mold, is create totally new forms of relating to and being with one another, which are at once as old as our oldest ancestors. And in that desire is the kindling of a fire which holds great potential and great risk to all forms of domination, especially the economic domination of capitalism, which has long propped up the heterosexual nuclear family as the only possible kinship unit — and for that, we should rejoice.

...

I trawl through this history here due to the risk that those with little understanding of trans history or experience will take the words of one transsexual poet as universal fact, as is often the case when this territory falls under cis gazes. I speak for an aspect of myself and by no means for the wildly diverse beings and experiences that fall under the umbrella of transgender — “Meanwhile,” writes my foremother Casey Plett, “we continue to go about the world: mundane, beautiful, wholly un-Jesus-like, having every kind of dream”⁹.

⁹ Plett, “The Rise of the Gender Novel,” 2015.

Hello Silver

maple the
green shimmer
swallows galloping
over your
bright waters.
You've
seen me for
years now thru
the lot of
it & I guess
I want to
know where
you see me,
walking in
this all-black-
wearing andro-fag
w/ glitter on
reading H.D.
from some
dusty tome
crosslegged in
the grass
in the
sun — now
this futchy/
femme I
guess I can
say femme now
gay lady heading
back to her
partnered
apartment
in the
same baggy
sweaters
more jewelry
the hair
long

a tattoo
tits.
It's prob-
ably more
uncomfort-
able for
me than
you, you
this thick-
barked old
thing
already
holding
most
sexes
& me
forever
amending
the program
editing
the play-
write's name
w/ some
gold-sealed
court
document
rewriting
the same
first few
lines each
time. Total
pagan ritual
rebirth becomes
an unsustainable
coping mechanism
once you
deplete your
store of
things to

annihilate &
local bodies
of water to
douse your-
self in
— find
yourself
holding
anything
familiar
up for
sacrifice
high in
the lonely
cathedral of
your vaulted
body.
You mean
I don't
need to
make my-
self a
martyr?
Hard to
see when
you most
often see
yourself
killed in
media &
they make
you ride the
Jesus pony
on Palm Sunday
in kindergarten
but that old
fear typically
seems to
outstrip

the threat
these days
& no
one seems
to police
my gender
as much as
I always
seem to do.
& here —
I am
alone out
here & the
play of
the swallows
iridescent
feathers
& the
sound of
the fresh
riverwet
wind.
I guess
I put
my weathered
palm up
to your
cold bark
& hum to
you & listen
back. Help
me find
a daily
sustainable
holiness
again
please. I'm
listening.

What are the words you do not yet have?¹⁰

Words for the gnawing pain of being born in the wrong-sexed body, language I have sought to create, language for less the viscerality of bodily disjunction as sublingual estrogen has as always given me this first rebirth and ability to form a body-concept of myself to see into the future with, as always lifesaving and the necessity of access which I insist upon, red highlighter on my cheekbones —

Days like these are in need of something closer to the sense of inheritance of that lifelong disjunction, the ways that empty space continues to haunt my changed body, how I am always at once my present self and also that young denied girl.

Words for the silent rage that follows me at having that year of rebirth taken advantage of, my body inscribed with violence. A decidedly hyperreal weariness. Another beginning in the old gold notebook, glimmer. Finding shelter alone in words streaming into paper out of mouth over water music and into bare feet in the river, no fear of being heard, no fear of that goddamn weighted range exposing me in the rudimentary joy of noise. The need to make a racket.

Language to put me back in touch with that shimmering freshness which seems to seep between my fingers as sand. The pressure put upon the trans body to represent itself, tell the Truth, a story. My story. The tired tropes of transition narratives. There is this way of clawing over the scraps to be the first of something, something they sell you, something you buy into to survive something. The hollowness of representation as an end in itself.

¹⁰ Language drawn from “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” by Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

Descent

I sidle down
along the cliff-
face of the
valley, into
the forbidding
wilderness of
my lost heart.
I hear its
thrumming thrown
back and back
at me along
its rocky wind-
etched walls, the
sky whistling its
high azure. My
knapsack:
another cord of
coiled rope, old journals,
my blood, & old
poems marking the
way of the last
one lost down
here: all her
old names & forgotten
growth spurts
drawn into
the canyon
memory.

Old rhythms holding
portraits of lighthouses,
granite shard
sea-shores &
the she-creatures
who spin its
looms; diagrams
of the bayou & its
eternal swaddled newborn,
skin still holding
dew -- & that
jagged path w/
lyre strapped to
its back where
undug graves
rattle their
wordless
hymns. Here
the sky shines
with its horrific
glint of sun in
winter & yet,
in snow-prints
refilling themselves,
a violet twilight
creeping.
I hold
these four
within me

ankles dragging
along the edge
of the precipice --
hope these old
stories of
forbidden homes warm
me in the
coming night.
Come back
to me,
return
for the
first time.

Reflections on Desiring

Opening oneself up to desiring is terrifying. Distinct from the raw, embodied energy of desire itself, desiring is the process by which we experience, acknowledge, and make room for that which we lust after, yearn for, dream repeatedly. For queers, its horrors are well-known: queer desiring has been so thoroughly policed that most if not all of us have inherited, in myriad ways, the mechanisms of the cultures which strive for our disappearance and elimination. We are taught in violences, the body's most effective tutor. We learn from the pervasive messages in our cultures that our desire is what makes us dangerous, a threat to be contained. The space within us where our desire breathes, where we can reflect and see our most fundamental selves, is colonized with hypervigilance, lest we slip and incriminate ourselves. For some, wealth and whiteness can purchase entry into the high-walled palace of unremarkability, but for those of us on the margins, our desire can become difficult to separate from the pain and danger it brings into our lives.

In surviving, in particular, sexual violence, the wellspring of our energy and longing becomes something we are taught to fear. Concerning the desire of survivors, Clementine Morrigan writes, "We can feel unworthy of our desires and see our unmet desires as evidence of our inferiority. If our traumas taught us that wanting made us vulnerable then we may continue to feel unsafe in our desire." In experiencing deep violence wearing the disguise of desire, our thoroughly overloaded nervous systems attempt to make sense of events through a haze of adrenaline. Because we cannot control the harm inflicted on us, our survival instincts attempt to take control of the narrative around that harm. It can be easier to process the possibility that I experienced this violence because of something wrong with me, rather than the possibility that those in the world around us — often those who we believe we can trust most — are capable of perpetrating such harm. This forms the belief that I am unworthy,

that I am damaged, repulsive, unlovable. It is in this context that we become terrified of what lies insides of us, of our own capacity to be vulnerable and wanting.

“WHEN YOU BECOME POWERFUL,” artist Yumi Sakugawa writes, “IT IS OKAY TO TAKE A MOMENT TO GRIEVE THE LOSS OF COMFORT YOU FELT IN BEING POWERLESS.” In accepting the powerlessness that comes with internalizing this narrative of victimhood, there is the unparalleled solace of hermeneutic simplicity — the world gives and I have no choice but to accept. Relinquishing my infinitely dizzying human vocabulary of choice frees me from the weight of my desires, the awful trials of self-knowing and the chance of two forms of oblivion in having my desires being fulfilled or rejected: rejected because of the shame of being partially seen, having made myself vulnerable, and being discarded; fulfilled because of the terror of looking into what lies at the core of me, accepting it, and being willing to receive that acceptance from another. If I close myself off from the interior world of my desires, I avert the risk of shame coming to me from the outside — to silence them is to bypass the world’s multitudinous judgements and manufacture that shame myself, innoculating myself with my own self-loathing.

This is not to say that the well-being of all survivors simply lies in “reclaiming” their sexuality — there are as many different paths to healing as there are wounds. I have been lost in a version of the violet twilight of these woods myself, and forging the path through the thicket is a work more vicious than most. The work of healing shame is a deep work, sinking to the bottom of our darkneses, brandishing our lanterns, bringing grief and love to light. What I do know is this: restoring the connections to our bodily intuitions, especially those we have been most convinced to be ashamed of, lends us the power of an altogether different, unvenerated holiness — that of dreaming of more than what is outlined in the scripts prescribed to us by our capitalist, consumption-driven culture, and

finding the energy to manifest those desires. So what would it be to choose to hear them, and know that they are ours? To risk finding the seeds of abjection at the bottom of our collective soil — to sift through the layers of these learned and taught shames, and face the glittering bedrock of our realities; to learn the many ruptured languages of our bodies; to know that we are, above all, worthy of desire and desiring. That the hidden rhythms pulsing in our bodies can guide us to where we want to be if only we listen to them; that they can teach us that old grace of seeing ourselves and allowing ourselves to be seen. If we have done all of this before — and I know we have — then it can be done again. The pathways and tunnelwork always remain, even when we lose our way.

Sunday

When I
climax I
lie alone
in my
own fluid
for a
moment.

It is Sunday
& the breeze
is picking up —
my rose plant
loses its
leaves at
the same
rapid pace
it replaces
them and
the shelf
is littered
with its
shriveled petals.

The new
buds die
purple and
unbloomed
& none of
them have
flowered since
I brought it
from your house
to mine.

I digress —
the breeze
carries the
dead petals
& their
dry soil

to my
bedsheets,
naked &
atop which
I watch
my cum
pool from
my stomach
to my
navel &
catch the
sunlight filtering
thru the
blinds. It
shimmers, really,
and I think
it is beautiful.
I feel like a
daughter of
the sun. I'm
writing to
say I
love you,
as is the
usual by
now.
I could
bend these
lines in plenty
of directions —
over, backward,
towards the many
external currents of
meaning which circle my
body, and your
body, and our
two bodies together,
which seems to
be what the

academy expects
of me these
days —
but it is
refreshing to
be free of
all those
signifiers for
a moment,
just a warm
body lying here,
nearly dozing,
listening
to the wind
rustle the white
dogwood out
front. I
think I'll
clean up,
stroll over
to the gas
station for
another pack
of cigarettes,
then get some
aromatics browning
on the stove
for the time
you arrive:
diced yellow
onion, carrot,
celery cooked
slow in plentiful
olive oil.

Birdsong (after James Schuyler)**I.**

I lie down in the bath
after having some sort
of argument with
the muted representation
of you. The water is warm
steaming yellow-gold lapping
over and over me. I sink into
my closed eyes' impressions of
light. I turn over in the water
to stretch my shoulder
— my head titled sideways, nostrils
just above the surface —
when sleep descends on me
as a heavy, alien creature. I
feel my numb body slip
under, my limbs deaf to my pleas.

I hear your voice
as I struggle to will mine
out. The actual you
wakes me, recognizing
that old way of my body
in its whimper and
thrash. You know the way
of these by now. It is just
the first blue of fog-riddled
dawn, the earliest notes

of the songbird's chorus.

We go back to bed and

I sleep none at all and then

late. When I wake

I am alone. Brush my

teeth and assemble myself.

I notice the redwing blackbirds

are back, watery chirrups

in the midday air.

II.

Enough of that blue
light. Clearly we weren't wired for small
personal suns in our pocket at
all times. I'm wet-haired and
good-smelling on a towel
reading Schuyler, the boyfriend
slurring small praises
in their weighty
Friday sleep. Now I peck
away at this infernal
device, squandering my
dwindling sight in these
midnight-oil hopes that
the words will arrange themselves
before me properly again
please. There's a hunger
in it all I'm
beginning to
think. Tonight I made Bel's
noodle recipe, having "had a
sufficiency" as grandma Amanda
would say, and still! the same
want always clogging my
thoughts, an appetite
for pure continuation.
I've scoured any potential
deficiencies — iron, water,

B12, attention, salt —
and no leads. I
just crave more. In
times of great necessity the
gap between food and
sex collapses — to
subsist on one alone... !
Regardless of wherever
the fogginess filming my
eyelids may originate, the great radiant
catastrophe of sky still wheels
over and above me with
her attendant pair of
merlins, surely sleeping,
now, (long since
I saw them on the walk back
from the laundromat)
silhouetted against the wild
scattered tapestries of her
fancied playthings, moon-silver
glinting in tandem with
the faded memories of stars.

III.

Here I am my pajama'd
feet up on the coffee table
sun bright diffuse behind thick gray
cloud layer my scarf on still
the damp smell of earth and
rain far too much caffeine
in my system for this much
confined aimlessness. Let
me build a pattern up
again like that moment the
huge juvenile mottled accipiter
took her afternoon respite
in the big tree
in the yard — the first
sort of moment in weeks that the
present in its coursing
Charybdal immensity seemed to
slacken its grip a bit its
many colorful terrors receding
until it was just you, and you,
and I, marveling at this
massive sharp-beaked creature,
mottled plumage peeling
off in the wind,
who had chosen for
her secret reasons this
tiny patch of

land to spend another
quiet moment, then
fly on.

IV.

Last walk with Hannah before packing
 up the UHaul back to Chattanooga
 in the midst of all this:
 her mother came up here & rented the last
 house out down Stonybrook just past the water
 tower, a left at that highwayside Catholic
 cemetery & its severe granite
 (not the lion statues on Lasher, no),
 past the cow then horse pastures, before
 the little bridge that is & has been out for years.

Opposite sides of the long curve of road: two-three dozen wild turkeys
 sleek-black feathers & naked red heads, cyan eyemasks & those clawfoot
 spindles loping baroquely under the hole in the fence at the edge of the
 pasture & scattering under the skirt-pleats of the pines when spotted.
 The edge of the property is scum-filmed wetland & the creek doubling
 back, the orange plastic netting & generic hazard signs & massive
 caterpillar excavator slumbering on
 its immense dust-caked treads
 glassed cockpit intact, crane lolling
 sideways over the senseless array of gravel
 & concrete that may one day yield
 bridge: here:

Hannah & I sit & toss those
 gray-blue stones, flat & long,
 at one another when the yawning
 silence paralytic eclipses the spaces
 language tries to grow & I

try to listen for half-remembered
birdsong pattern-fragments, & hurl
rotting moss-speckled branches into
the creek until I look down
at this one
gray & blue lichen
see the tiny glint of dime-sized
glossy near-black orb next to my
hand, &, slowly
coaxing itself out of shock
into full miniscule slugdom, twin eyestalks wriggling & all.

V.

mask up for the pharmacy drive-thru. This violet cold wears down my joints. you need not shy away from the stream. i grant you permission to dive in, even one digit at a time. wake up, little one — that radiant orange warmth pouring out and over me — it is time to begin. where have you gone? or do i merely no longer listen, drowned out in overlapping commodity distraction, further & further from the actual. that couple out in the sun-choked fields. nibbling. so many moments on that bike — did you take your medicine? the cold wet wind filling my airways, contract and expand. the crow diving into the barren hay-cut gray, the crow clutching the crown of the pine at the height of storm careening forward and back, the merlin battered emeraldly in those fierce winds, feeling that april coarseness caught hard against my spokes & nearly flattening me on the high curve of rokeby — the blonde dog lounging beneath the little willow, the gnash of chainsaw logging & backyard goose screams echoing out & over the municipal lot where bel & i sit six feet apart on our separate bike & skateboard like delinquent teens. i need to lower the capacity. i must reduce the scale. a splash of vinegar in the rice cooker. i must stoke the hearth, the embers in the ashen pits at the bottom of me. old wood flares brightest in the coming gloom. lay down your dirge and eulogy — new life already roosts in those branches, if you only lift your eyes to see.

Small Eulogy for Hope Richters

You live in a one-story white house at the top of a hill with your dad, where two wooded roads convene. Your gravel driveway is too steep and narrow for me to trust reversing down it so I park the old blue station wagon by the mailbox at the bottom where your now-gone mother still receives newspaper catalogs and magazines. It is the final night before you and I go apart to separate inconceivable world-corners, one of those purple-clouded Maryland summer nights with promise in the wind. You and I walk around in the deep dark along the road in that stoned mixture of teenaged bewilderments, only the rare glow of faded amber streetlamp dangling to mark each crossroads. The Virginia pines lining the roadside are enormous tonight, painfully so. I look up into the dark-needled branches rippling in the indigo wind, each crown tilting gently as if in courtesy. I feel their immensity, tonight: when I look up, I feel my size next to theirs, humbled, gently.

Back in your room we sit on the mattress on the floor. Here is where I always return: your two huge dogs lay down with us, the yellow-white one lounging on the ground in ripples of fur, the great square reddish one with gray-flecked underbelly and short soft fur sits up as a human would sit between us, panting loudly and smiling her Retriever smile. "Just feel her," you say, putting your hand on her white-tufted torso, closing your eyes. I do the same, and beneath my palm I feel the warm, red heart of Hope beating, and beating gently, through layers of bone, dog muscle, simple fur. My eyes stay closed and she holds me unknowingly in the infinite pulse of her.