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COMMON BEASTS: A COLLECTION & OTHER POEMS

by

Sarah Cozort

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

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Contents

1 Preface: Solitary, I Was Wounded

Common Beasts: The Past

3 Recipe for Mauge

4 Lock of Hair

5 Voyeur

6 Mother, with a broad knife

7 A Child in the Forest of Women on Fire

Common Beasts: The Present

9 A Spell for My Mother's Memory

10 Heat Index

12 The Hairdryer

13 The lake

14 Skillet Chicken with Elderberry Sauce

15 In the Beginning: One

16 In the Beginning: Two

17 The Encroachment

18 Swan Dive

19 Pancake Lard

20 Side Hustle #1: Sex Work

21 Watcher in the Woods

22 Juvenila, a Flirtation

23 The Eye & Its Pupil

24 Common Beasts

25 Side Hustle #2: Cleaning House

26 The Witness

27 Two Lives

28 Desire Springs

Common Beasts: The Future

30 Two Dreams of a Horse

32 Cocktail Party in the Inventor's Honor

34 In the Future...

34 Before the Last Star Falls...

35 The Tooth

Other Poems

37 Wallace, a Young Girl, Dreamed...

39 The Cartographer is a Time Traveler

40 Summer House

41 The Orchid Becomes You

42 On the Death of My Polish Sister

43 Baby's On Fire

44 A Kindness
45 Still Life

Beach Suite: The Annette Funicello Story

47 Jesus was a Hologram
48 Little Sister, Don't You
49 Pop Cult

Seventh Summer of Eldest Creature Child

51 Key to Seventh Summer
52 Summer of Strep...
53 Father Eternal/Mother Entrail
54 We Two Birthed & Breathing
55 We Four in the Wake...
56 Dear Cub of Arthritic Ear...

Love Sonnets

58 Sonnet I
59 Sonnet II

Preface

Interpretation of the Old English Riddle, "The Shield," written between 960-990, first printed in The Book of Exeter. The passages on the left are direct translation, while the passages on the right are imaginative fragments inspired by the text.

Solitary, I Was Wounded

alone in the land of wind, wounded
by my own sword, helpmate. The acts
we committed when the enemy
was with me, left me satisfied but depleted.

We fought to see colors run
over the undulating
hills. Now I've given the earth
blood, there is no one to interrupt
my bright gleam as I turn, slow,
in the sun. My master's thoughts,
set in motion by his foot
across the earth's vast, rolling body,
are also my own. How, I envy the sky
who kissed her before me
& will continue after I die.

I bring the iron smith's art to justice.
At the ready for every wound,
I think past my enemy, to the time
when no herbs, on me, will work.

The Past

Recipe for Maugre

Can you imagine the birth of the maugre?
It's simple. About it there are no bones.
The recipe calls for a stone & a woman
to pluck it from the water's way. It must be
smoothed, a compound that shows no holes
& does not wash to the bay but weds the ground;
a utero & an egg. The woman—who, if tied,
will not float—wades in the water, chants or prays,
lifts her skirts at break of day, finds the stone
with her diving hand, like a bell that reverberates
in the water—its aftermath a small decay.
Even the witch's small triumphs tell
of life's spirit—burn & fray. She waits for night
with the water's child, until, again, she prays.

Lock of Hair

We began small as periods at the end
of childrens' simple sentences.
After the sprout—wisp that fits
curled in a thimble.

Once, the girl's mother
cut us. The girl cried from the shock.
I continued--soft & pliant
as a secret passed

through child whispers. Now, I am
clasped & hung in a metal heart,
far from the playground
where the wind moved me.

Voyeur

The rain has small hands such
they turn to fly to crush

themselves against your breast,
which brings my blood to rush.

Animal, again, I hide
among the thicket brush.

The minstrel sings of wheat;
a field-hand & a lush,

you drink & laugh & dance
& fall into the crush

of lips & thighs & petticoats—
the thicket hides my blush.

Mother, with a broad knife

sliced the hunk of muscle
before me. *Love, eat
of the tongue.* Barely
the blood cooked out, wet
as a lick from Bess's mouth
when it hung by sinew
at the back of her throat.
With this meat she bellowed.
Eat of the tongue, love.
I tasted the blood, sour--
thought to kiss the dead.
Shot in the yard,
how my father's mouth
bled. I kiss him to keep
his blood in me. *Love,
the August moon has come.
Frogs will fly to the trees
& sing as the dove.
To know the difference,
eat of the tongue.*

A Child in the Forest of Women on Fire

My mother, medicine woman, reduced
to a single stone. Looking both ways so fast
it seemed I had two heads with four eyes & two
mouths, I took her in my pocket as a rat a morsel
from the ground after the fair's clamor.
It was like a fair: the constable, a barker;
the entertainment, ignition of the world's grief.
One-hundred-thirty women tied to wood,
set to flame, secret knowledge from their heads
blazed to the sky--so much rewound snow.
I know this stone is my mother's eye. I know
it in my tender bones. All the roots & berries
& earth will not let her go, nor will I her eye.

The Present

A Spell for My Mother's Memory

Bitter root, bitter root, you are the very thing
to take to my mother in Hargrove. She
has lost her way back to me, and does
not even remember the taste of our fights
when I was a child, let alone the child.
Bitter root, my one hope, give her mind
a flicker—a moment of recognition. It's all I ask:
for her to name a star a star, a possum a possum,
a daughter a daughter. I will shave you,
butter you, sugar you, & throw you in a pan.
We'll cook up a spell & take you in a pot
down the road to Hargrove, & even if she
looks at me—you on her tongue, warm
as the word love—& calls a daughter
a bird or a possum, the bitter root, for once,
will be sweet & warm in her mouth.

Heat Index

This is the last garden party; honeysuckles'
 gilded mouths open to weep. The peacock ruffles.
Embarrassed mimosas close their million fuchsia wings.

Always, at the end I am monied; my skin,
 a fine honeyed green. None of this matters
to the sky who's opened its silvered slit

to swallow my greed. I swear, this heat came on to me—
 bad shadow uncle who climbs the stair to end
any chance at relief. This must be how you felt

when the doctor said: "If it walks like a duck & talks like a duck,"
 & meant he found a tumor rooted in your gut.
In my mind, it snaked as Chinese wisteria chokes & creeps.

Then, I turned my eye to a scalpel's hard clean shine
 to dredge the mire of your blue blood & find a line of fault.
To pull a stop. The day before diagnosis,

when you thought of a mallard, you didn't think of a cartoon,
 & when you thought of a cartoon,
you hadn't thought of horror. We laughed at the Doctor's bedside

manner, as if he were the joke, quacking cool as your life
 sweated off to a corner—a bit gone AWOL into my mouth
in that head friends said held your eyes. I tried to write a litany,

then, of the years before I knew you, just so somewhere you'd keep:
 the poisonous amphibians singing in Saigon's trees;
 milk melons thrown in your face--your mother stretched
 out, acid trip weird, in that hothouse place.
 The marshes, thick, dark, & vast as God's latrine—
 or, perhaps, the bowels of God. You said,
 Those marshes were labyrinthine.
 A bomb that tried itself like a trick in the mess
 tent a minute before you left the barracks to eat.
 Telling the story, you said *No one suspected any of us.*

I was captain of the company baseball team.
Survivor's guilt, unflappable mockingbird, beats.
After that, London, swinging bone white
ankle boots; all the women before mother & me.

Then, the sky opened between you & Heathrow, the plane a piledriver
into the Bay's mountain of flowers—generation
of white-hot debris swept to Country's edge.

There, you said you woke from a dream
of a dream into another dream; I never asked
what each dream meant. Before, I was a daughter;

now, I am a pot half full just below boil, one of those frogs in me;
I cannot manage to conceive any one
thing unless I first conceive it as another.

For example, fear: a frog in a warm bath that quivers & jumps—it's tongue,
a quick spade jabbering. I wish you had told me,
before you died, it isn't the trees that sing.

The Hairdryer

Its slender handle a swan neck over the tub,
like a low bird or amphibian that lives to peer,
to lurk, to sleep. Its electric umbilicus rooted
to the wall. As with a new infant,

its head is oblong, unreasonably shaped;
its mouth wide as its face; its teeth, an iron grate
that howls in my ear in the early morning.
Steam rises from a new bath, and I immerse
my body, think of the man I've left,
& the first time he took me by the lake:
a swan, hidden by the tangled overgrowth
of a wild August, dove from a low cliff.
We were startled into love, having forgotten:
where there is Odette, there is Odile.

The lake

blue as my father's dead hand
with the bloat of blood,

estuary of the body—the body

a semblance of sharks.

In the pool where he threw me
to learn to swim,

we were far from infested water.
The word infestation unfair.

Sharks' own way in their own
space harbors no thought

to superfluity:
to move to kill to live.

When he threw me,
he knew I'd die

but not from drowning.
He knew, first, I'd thrash

to safety, skin by super pink
heat mottled as I heaved to shore.

Skillet Chicken with Elderberry Sauce

You asked if I liked chicken; "Yes," I said & headed off one weekend to your cabin
made of poems; poems you had poured your power into became that cabin
on a plot in the woods with a fire pit, stack of tinder, patch of elderberry in the back,
which you said (having invited me in, a graduate student,

a very young graduate student at that time)
had medicinal properties.

Driving the twisted drive to your cabin made of poems
(which were made of bears & fire & hearty morsels
& an indecipherable longing, a longing buried
so it seemed sometimes to fall
into caesuras, little divots crackling
with immediately previous phoneme's decay, dusting your longing
in the quality of television snow,

before it bounced from the shallow bottom
of that grout between the tight words, only to topple deeply
into the space between lines where we could not reach),

the edge of my sight where the high-beam stopped, abruptly, suggested a great deal
more out there or quite some drop; I did think of murder, but then you opened the door
to the smell of roast chicken & conveyed the virtue of elderberries.

In the Beginning: One

First, there were merely clear surface oscillations.
Then, a brook that babbled, & when you rolled up
your sleeve & reached to the bottom--rough stones
rounded to the essential. Fish, of variegated sheen,

lent themselves to the drive to capture--to overcome their inherent slick. Your instinct: to build a dam, but once your plan was made, you could not bear it. So, catch and release, you went on until it became enough to admire the water. This was the point your eye began to travel up the banks. Your eye's center turned—of a sudden—lacuna, where once the babble's foam glistened, transmogrified.

In the Beginning: Two

I see you drive through the backcountry, your position at the university newly cemented, the fresh hairs of a new beard, finally, working themselves out of your boyish countenance. You had always been

a man of the woods. A fly fisherman first, a poet second,
a man of the woods before the count began. You drove
through the byroads in your vintage impala, the babble
never far behind. Tenure had come easily. For a while,
the fire eye continued to turn the world to crystalline
objects. You drove & saw a macaw at the edge of a plot,
or so your story goes, which landed on the top of a realtor's
sign. "Wooded & dark as the black forest," you later
said, where you had written your first book on a grant.
It was then, the fire, whose ember had lost its blue,
began to grow hot again; the lacuna elided itself.
You dreamed to clear a space in that wood where your eye
might travel to capture a piece of the land.

The Encroachment

Your hand, rough as lightning and as sure,
started my thigh as the morning dew to clover.
Then, it darted away rabbit-like; you were
your own man and not your own; a fly

fisherman out of his element. I was young,
but not under-age; this is not exactly invective.
the night wore on, & I saw your confused glances
at my thigh where your hand had briefly been;
nevertheless, I am marked. I was branded
by the hot hand that held your eye--transmogrifier.
Its heat leaves a void not unlike the heat of a meteor,
which divots the earth but is, itself, unmarked.

Swan Dive

Behind the jam factory the high school girls
shot gunned pot—exhalations wed to plant exhaust

that rose to join the greater air. Cool tongued,

they quipped about Jesus' lashes: *How pretty they must have been.*

For the love of me, as my mother said, I didn't know
what lashes meant. Every lash a wish addressed
to the prince in Golden Books kept on the table
of our family optometrist. Every wish a leather jacket with a boy
inside 'til I traded them in for a man with a quiet stash
of snow to be thrown in the snuffbox pocket between joints.
We fell into tender habits. Runs to Piggly Wiggly for cigs.
The checkout lady's goodbye song, "Have a blessed day"—
ominous on that old hog blood scent. I thought of her when I stole
the keys to the pickup—imagined she knew lashes
are secrets—wishes in suspense, as in the Brill Building tune,
He Hit Me & It felt Like a Kiss; a woman belonged to a man
when he turned her by hand to a piece of cold stone fruit
to taste & spit. I pitied men, then, never to have been
caught off guard by a lover eruptive enough to spark anger
hot & thick as an industrial vat of stewed fruit ready
to be jarred & shipped. Sometimes, we girls would sneak through a vent,
which opened above a steaming pool of gloss—an invitation to dive.

Pancake Lard

My role here is not so small.
Although the woman who dropped
me in this pan called
me a "dollop" & poured the batter

on me. She also said, “This, here,
makes the difference.” I heard
her just before I sizzled—
or would have if I still had ears.

(They’re in a jar now,
in the cool, dark pantry.
How the vinegar tingles.)
It’s a satisfying end, really:

Once, I was large & filthy;
now, I make the cake—
a nuanced denouement.

Side Hustle #1: Sex Work

The sex worker imagines her client, a government official,
as industrious water rodent.

The client texts: “tussle tonight?” Ever the professional, I respond, non sequitur: “This town makes me sad.”
He reminds me of an animal. An animal with an urge to build & acquire. A dam

inside me strains. My dress caught in stakes. Now, every time I put it back on, I wish never to take it off. "No one can make someone else happy," I claim. I see his wheels grind on my screen in reply; his thoughts percolate: *I can make a cake, a hotel reservation, a boater's knot, a bid; surely, I can make a woman happy.* The verb, "to make" replaces the verb "to be" for him--it slips between uses, unchanging, slick as a beaver slips through sticks. Sometimes, when forced to look at his face, I think of an eager beaver. When I slip my underwear off, I think of a dam. "You're wrong," he finally responds, "It takes two to tango." Tonight, I'll be caught & trundled off to the beaver's ball across the water on their prickly backs, their tails at work against the current. I sigh into the screen as if it might detect, decipher, transfer my distress, for which there is no emoji. "Let's not talk any longer," I type, "The town is fine.

You beavers are fine in your beaver congress. I'll see you at the dance, later, in The Great Hall of Beavers.
God, I love how the light gets in through the structure you built. Let's try the paddle tonight."

Watcher in the Woods

Love, do you recall the quiet before the cul-de-sac?
Through the first chill of fall, in my little red sweater,
I drove to your hideout. Later, the supper dishes
dried & put away, you turned from me to stare
into the quickening blackness of a picture window,

& said: "Never begin a poem with a question."
I sipped my tea & laughed; I never guessed
that through that glass, where I saw only wild, you viewed
encroaching menace: a distant glint of the fully formed.
That winter I became your "dear," alert & faun-like,
ears at attention, whose hide you used for warmth
until the next fall, when the men in electric yellow
came & paved a cul-de-sac just around the knotted bend
behind your lot, in preparation for construction.
By night, they worked to carve it out, as the maker
of crop circles works to mat the wheat.
Some nights, we'd drive & fight & find ourselves
stopped in that roundabout, where, leaving the car to walk,
we'd begin to circle back on one another.
It was as if the men in yellow had made a proper ring
for us to spark and snarl. That's when the early snow began—
light as a child's dream of Christmas.
Perhaps, there was a child witness, parting the snowfall
with her sharp eye, who came upon this: two adults—
hunched & turning entropic, as if our fibers knew
each of our possible combinations, which, in that circle,
cast their own golden heat. One holds the other's eye,
which glows & burns & wards against the cold.
Perhaps, this child, in search of blood berries,
knowing they are poison & finding them, nonetheless,
beautiful—has dreamed of kisses unlike kisses
a mother gives—but clueless as to the form
this other kind of kiss might take, mistakes
our movement as a moment before just such a kiss.

Juvenilia, a Flirtation

What do you think your mind is, some rich, colossal find—
contents of which we'll have some giant book to bind
one thought to another, our pleasures to our chores?
Professor, make it heavy but make not a book that bores.

The Eye & its Pupil

To see eye-to-eye, one must first make eye contact,
which means *to interface* or *to read* – rather than *to touch*.

A meeting of one mind's eye & another often occurs
between those who make eyes. Sometimes, one only has eyes for the other

who feels the eye's aim at one's chest or head, like a laser
at the end of a scope. My father, a scholar like you, had green eyes.

At his wake, the department chair looked me in the eye & said,
"You have your father's eyes." At first, I thought he accused me

of taking what was not mine. I read him wrong--or did I? There is the pupil
& there is the pupula duplex; there is the eye & there is the evil eye,

in Old French called: the maugre, or *bad pleasure*; unlike guilty pleasure,
it is sin without guilt--sin that sins again. I have heard, "It is easier for a camel to pass

through the eye of a needle than for a person to enter the kingdom of heaven."
Perhaps, it was not *a person* but *a rich man*. Perhaps, it was not a needle but a straw.

Perhaps, the straw was the straw that broke the camel's back.
Perhaps, I was the camel who carried the water, the picnic basket,

& the notebook, while you carried the camera. Let us say, stretching our legs
after a long drive or on one of our amateur ornithological expeditions,

gently, as if to remove a speck of dust or a crumb from your lapel,
I take the camera from your hand; I command the aperture.

To do so would be to believe that the eye has to travel. To do so
would make one like the witch referred to as the *biter of the eye*.

Common Beasts

Audacious gait without wobble, I begin
to follow them. I, in hot pursuit, a panther
who slinks fast down city sidewalks,
lithe silver stalk who bends round corners,

just to catch a hot breath quicken. To watch
how they breath about it. The first time one
passes, I turn on a heel to clip behind.
The red sweater clung to broad swimmer
shoulders snags my eye--I know to focus
on one piece to desire. *Damn, that's a fine
sweater*, I growl under my breath. In my head.
I search for signs of tension in his shoulders
to worm in, his sixth sense to wind him
taught as a top who might whirl round
at any moment & flip the script
on my creep or spin him so fast he flies
to where I can't keep up, but I get no reaction.
I wonder what to do differently. I've lusted
after the fit of a vintage Levi, a shapely
Spanish heel that clicks, a smartish
Ostrich feather tucked into the most
unlikely jaunty hat, yet all for naught.
They saunter on without one nod
to fear. Knowing, if I peeled back
the layers of style, I'd find more or less
beauty than I'd find inside the shell
of an egg fallen to the pavement,
cracked & oozing with half-formed
organs & bone, I could stare at this
all afternoon. I cannot conceive
to look harder, make demands, try to touch
one; If I did, I fear I'd spend a life
awestruck by these common beasts.

Side Hustle #2: Cleaning House

Oh, spirit of ablution, I scatter abrasive, sprinkle peroxide, anoint with lavender this sacred
space. I wait for alchemy to lift what lives in grooves
& thumb through my feed where I spy a meme

made from two ham sandwiches. The ham on the right is tucked between slices of focaccia, neat
as a freshly made hospital bed; ripples of ham glisten & flare as if to escape
the second. I admit, the latter compels me to think, *Damn,*

that's a fine looking sandwich. The right sandwich is captioned, "my daughters"; the sandwich
on the left, "Taylor Swift." I daydream a nightmare of women girded
in chastity belts, stamped *good ham & bad,*

where fathers pass keys to men anointed to cut the mustard. The shower floor bubbles, still.

Do you mean to tell me, along with *you can be anything you want
to be, & girls should be seen & not heard,*

& well-behaved women rarely make history, no one said: *if you try to swallow the world,
someone will pretend to be the world trying to swallow you,
just to spit you out?* If stickers were long

as bumpers, I could pull a sticker off a bumper & wear it as a sash--a new kind
of pageant winner. I remember a story from childhood about a beetle
who crawled into a man's ear; to kill the insect,

the man picked up a letter opener & dug himself. It might be nice if ears closed
easily as mouths. This tincture's work done, I wash it away & bend
to the drain to pull a stranger's hair.

What these strands might make if I undid knot after knot & asked the owner
of their former scalp to give consent--as this poem is her work, too.

The Witness

Clouds' shadows move across the earth as grief across a mother's face—

the play of shadow paves the daughter's way.

Tenuous lines create the perimeter of a search—the arc of childhood, a fugue state;

the quiver of a forehead's lines, her mother's grace.

Her brother, stillborn, buried with no name. Sometimes a marriage hollows.
Its ghost flies up to ceiling cracks filled
with all the golden hours whose light the human heart cannot contain. At six,
her mother brought the good news over eggs:
“the bitch has had its day.” Fast, she flew to see the birth and saw the new man take
a shovel to “put the runt away.”
There were teeth in the hog’s belly, snakes in the hay. At nine, she took the lantern
to run at break of day. Her eyes, to the dark,
well-trained, as if helium suspended, surveying the day’s remains.

Two Lives

There are two lives that I imagine with you.
In the first, you divorce your wife, the playwright,
upon your early retirement, and I go with you
on your extended sabbatical to Madrid

in a halter bathing suit made from ethically sourced
materials with a high French cut thigh.
Your friend, the Cuban poet, meets us
with his cigars and his strong voice
and tells us stories until we're drunk with laughs.
The night grows thick with sweat and shadow,
and I become your wife, taking joy or no joy
from our sex but reckoning my life to your old age.
In the second life, I see you at AWP where you
tell me about your wife, the playwright,
who is "mad" at you, although you have no idea
why she might be, but you've "come to expect
these periods." We'll say our goodnights & see
each other again at one of these things,
but your light will dim; I will have taken the eye.

Desire Springs

No shame to admit lack
of consent is your turn on.

Who knows from where desire

springs. Everyday up
from the bottom of that dark
well, I climb a rope.
I climb & pray. I am
Kali, flying. Watch!
All my hands burn
away. I climb to the light
to dine with my friend
who uses bread in lieu
of a knife to push
her food across the plate.
Tonight's discussion:
assassination. It's hard
to shoot down a well
as a barrel. *I think*
this murder should happen,
I hear myself say,
quiet as a cancelation,
before I swallow my first bite.

The Future

Two Dreams of a Horse

Once, my husband died;
 it was a dream. It is morning—
I hear him breathe.

In his dream, a stallion runs
at me. In mine, he is the ghost
of a stallion. His hooves

tamp
the earth to my heartbeat.

If I could hear only
my own rhythm—
I'd turn my heart to the village;

walk into the village without
the race of wind
as he flew past for no reason

but to crush the wild strawberry
I plan to pick to eat.

I stand still in a field
near earth's edge in my dream,
my eyes all that's moved

in me, 'till I see him
reach the point of parallax.
There, he is two in himself,

two in one, as he says
his god has brought he
& I to be. His god

has never been to me. If a man *falls off*
a horse, a man who is a horse
falls over the edge

of the world. This is fact, now,

known to be true
as the ocean's tide

when the earth was round,
& we lived by the sea.

A Cocktail Party in the Inventor's Honor

"Last night, in the orange grove," said the doctor's wife
to the woman in kitten heels with a dirty martini, two olives.
"A wild success, I heard," gushed the well-heeled vixen.

Just then, a waft of wisteria through the french doors off
the south garden cued Old Blue Eyes on the gramophone.
“You were the model,” purred the woman, a columnist,

who popped an olive, modestly, into her
screwed up pucker. “Enquiring minds want to know!”
Before the wife could answer, her husband slid an arm

‘round her waist, one hand cut above a slender jut
of hip. “A model womb, my Maggie!” “As good as any
other,” the wife demurred, then set her breath

to ask about a recent garden show, but onward pushed
the stalwart doctor: “Plenty of nannies secure
in their jobs tonight,” a boast and chuckle

from the Warm Invention™ man, himself. “Bavarian
fruit bread,” the girl came ‘round with the pewter tray,
eyebrows raised. He nodded and watched

the swell of her hip beneath a tidy waist
he’d *saved* just yesterday with the success
of his Warm Invention™. “An electric womb!

Runs on solar power! What will my boy think
of next,” bellowed the grand dame, the doctor’s
mother, holding court on the sofa.

That night, alone in an empty house-- he, his wife,
and gummed to her breast the fruit of the Warm Invention™--
that grand dame’s son turned bilious, drained of love.

In the Future, We Will Meet at the Ceremony Where all the Girls are Born

Perhaps, it’s funny, the way we make babies
in the future. We do it this way for sister Shulamith,
who was found in her armchair decayed, half-eaten

by her cats — how love and pragmatism show themselves
at odds. Another example: me and the philosopher king--
I was love, he was pragmatism. He thought

I was part of a practical arrangement. Just because he figured
how to float the womb over my head, out of body,
he didn't have to send all of his love with it.

Or, perhaps, he misplaced it entirely — threw it all in
to his warm invention. Last night, in the orange grove,
we cast away our little dream. The womb, like a golden globe

hugged your electric form whose pulse rose
and glowed with all the others — the sky a field of fire,
as in a dream of life. Bubble burst, water broke,

and you slid down to us, little fount.
You were a wriggle lead by your gum,
and I was the giant breast, but all his love was gone—

the first man hysteria took.

Before the Last Star Falls, the Woods will be Petrified and Made of Women

i.

Long before her body became artifact, petrified specimen,
she knew the bones' truth--her grandmother's stories
of girls who'd gone to the woods never to return;

one star falls, the others yearn to follow.

Every year, another girl gone to the dark wood
since the beginning of everything, her grandmother said.
Everything was wider than the sky,
and the girls' had tried to swallow that--

animal O-gapes lifted; their bright faces lifted
as they wandered into the wilderness, as if lead by the song
of the forest, which one day, not long before the day
when the last star falls, will be petrified.

ii.

*Mother, why do you kneel in the snow white wood
to kiss the dove*

*Mother, why do you kneel in the wood
to kiss the snow white dove*

And so on and so on, until the ancient song was her own,
and she followed it as if it sprung from a place inside herself.

iii.

Her feet planted and sunk into the black earth.
Her feet began to grow out, deep into the ground,
into her sisters' tangled roots, a system of nerves below the earth's surface.

Any man who digs is caught
 in their tender hooks,
 the earth's ecstatic undertow.

The Tooth

I'm strong. Chewing & chewing away
at life, simple as a scrap, salted
& screwed, into a piece of rawhide.

I'm the answer to a crossword
clue where sometimes I share
a letter with you.

I sew, sometimes, & when I'm good,
I knit life. I'm language that hurts
when you smile into a mirror

where you see life grind
your smile away. Some call
my veneer enamel--

but they're wrong. Those people
who can't bear to look
too long at any one

part, misname.

Other Poems

Wallace, a Young Girl, Dreamed of Damask and Roses

She was led here to bonnie England, through:
two husbands with tongues
dumb as lead.

Her little countenance filled the room & puffed
their iron fists with jealousy: how she ruled
with just the tip

of a little finger, a single flourish in the air
around her face, augmenting her burbling articulations.
She was led here, also,

by a mother on the Blue Ridge, who said she'd never speak
the way a "woman of quality" might. The irony
being: it took two husbands

with tongues dumb as ancient ancestors' wooden clubs
to get her to that perfect pitch—the kind,
once breathed, so light it charms

& snakes a corridor, sharp as a moorish draft.
A woman of quality, no matter her sharp mind,
sharp style, crystalline speech,

even sotto voce,
is dumb in the face of two husbands with fists
steady but blue as her body after they touched her.

Her body, knocked blank, ached for the future in England
she did not yet know waited. Once arrived,
she settled—

weary from the work of being
both Pygmalion and scullery maid—
for the man

who would give
a kingdom for a horse
to ride to the edge of love.

The Cartographer is a Time Traveler

Maps – like childhood impressions
of light and sound – foreign now

as his grandmother's tongue.
He can no longer dream of the thing

from which he has been separated--
only of the separation.

He sleeps in the space between lanes –

lulled by the wheels' weird wind –
and dreams of a bridge.

Summer House

This woman stands in profile at the end
of a hall, against the gold filigree
of a mirror, which faces
another mirror at the other end
of the hall, and so I am the washer

woman on the floor, looking through
a mirror, in which the woman
goes on forever
in her turtleneck and slacks,
her Tutankhamun cheekbones
pointed to the corners
where the room meets
the high ceiling; she holds that home together
with her head, rules it by her face--
shifts its frame by nod or tilt,
and Oh, to make her laugh,
and see it shake! I relax
into the floorboards, old and made to give.
We warm to each other--a sinking in.
I think of butter on mashed potatoes,
and *how long have I been on this floor,*
and *where do I begin?*
She speaks
of her daughter, "dead two years,"
who was "wonderful," and died
of an aneurysm on a jog
"near the University of Virginia,
on a day not unlike today."
"Verdant," she says, and the word
is a gentle tarp that drops
on us til summer comes,
and she goes on forever once again.

The Orchid Becomes You

For instance, you're at my stoop in your favorite mustard colored vest.
I open the door. In your hair it's tucked-- a white blue veined orchid.
Its petals hide my lips against your ear.

Your dove-colored arms, pasty from so much Swedish blood, shine in the light.

Your skin, which always seemed a plaster I could not break into, bleeds red seams.
Every time, behind your head, hangs a portrait of a pale flower with a shock of blue.

Once, at the zoo, the baby makes rhymes. The zebra is white. The zebra is white and blue.
She laughs into your red face—bigger, to her, than a moon. I look at her, then you.
Your arms are raised, green, covered in dew. Your head: spray of whiteness gathered at the neck.

After the orchid becomes you, everything else becomes the orchid with veins of blue.
Even a bomb's mushroom cloud becomes just another bloom.
Every scenario's items transformed—bevel edged, clean, and sparsely striped.

On the Death of my Polish Sister

In the picture of my sister on the last day I saw her,
she is twenty-three, just married to a man named Androvich.
For years, her smile mocked me, till I set a kettle on her likeness,
and the mouth molded over. Androvich, suddenly, seemed peaceful.
It did not make me suffer to hear of her death at the age of seventy-six.

She was my older sister, my polish sister,
who drank from a jar of stolen potato whiskey
hidden under her side of the bed. Her feet were icicles that poked repeatedly.
When she died, an overstuffed cousin, smelling of nuts,
came with kifles and news. She stayed for thirty-five minutes of tears,
so much water on the floor, and told me the hour
of my sister's death. To think, at her last moment,
I had been naked on my roof, my wrinkled breast for no one but the sun.

Baby's on Fire

She thinks she'll pose for a photograph like in the ladies' magazines.
"Can you take a picture?" she asks the milkman.
She shifts her weight, leans into one hip, staccato,
like there's some rock n' roll in her head.

"What you got in mind?" He throws his eyes across the newly cut lawn, sees

a girl set against an orange sky, an enormous bruised pout stuck to her face.
She tries to speak but the lips are sewn together;
he puts a big whip in her cat's claw hands.

"O, I dunno," she says, "Somethin' for my husband."
"Yeah, maybe." He kisses her and recalls his mother who cradled
a sack of chicken feed like a child for forty years. She is bent at the waist.
she sways and clucks above the packed, brown earth.

He searches for the smell that goes with that woman, but instead
the air is full of something like sulfur, charred flesh and bone,
the accidental oil spill of some neighboring patio,
smells that indicate all is well. Summer comes again to America.

"I got some plums inside. They're real cool and juicy," she says.
"You should try one." He follows her, watches her weight shift, little repetitive
motions that seem to sing "forever, forever..." or just "da, dee, da..."
She opens the fridge. "He must of ate 'em," she says.

A Kindness

I found the crow
that ate your soul.

I took a knife
to its belly.

It was empty –
except for the bones

of some vermin.

Still Life

*After Yasumasa Morimura's Criticism and the Lover A
after Cézanne's Apples and Oranges*

I.

I am the monstrous object dropped

into the painting; the painting is a snapshot.
The snapshot was taken by a boy from up
in the tree. I was the fruit he kicked:
a crabapple, green as sick & arrested now
in a trundle blanket. This is his view,
which is a snapshot, which is the painting
of a cart covered by a cloth covered with fruit,
during the period in which I was a crabapple.

II.

To inhabit the apples and oranges, I come
to this table; I am the eye in the foot of God.
The pith of life I will infect with venom,
& you will be none the wiser. For, after the first bite,
I will pass through you as the Holy Spirit
will pass your house, once you have brought
it into your body—my electric hiss.

III.

Angelica waits in the wings of the lecture hall
where we are alone, while I contemplate Cezanne's
Apples & Oranges. Her face has infected the fruit;
I rise through facsimile & rue the day she'll leave,
when I am alone with my work
& sixteen flat replicas of her muted
likeness. I am the one who has muted her,
envious of the man with the trumpet
she gawked at the night we met on the edge
of the Seine, & so my work is her face,
again & again, arrested on a trundle sheet.

Beach Suite: the Annette Funicello Story

Jesus was a Hologram

The animated is put to rest, yet with a wish,
a flick of the wrist, one mouse click,
I can still make it dance--

teen romance without pregnancy;
bikini crack without sand;

bike-gangs without heroin or bloodlust.

When you were a little girl in prayer--
before tutus and tiaras, Donnie and Frankie,
Bambi eyes and sweater breasts,

did you ever wonder if Jesus
was a hologram?

Little Sister, Don't You

The beach ball is over-sized and concrete.
The photographer, a sex-offender.
The girl, a tongue great as the white way.

The make-up artist is a witch from Michigan
by way of Miami, with long black claws,

religiously maintained.

Sometimes, the witch walks into frame,
finishes it all off with white powder,
and walks away.

When it's done, the girl with the tongue
slips on a fur, kisses everyone,
and exits the building.

Pop Cult

I remember, through TV, the deal you made with Disney,
to grow up slow: No belly button, no pictures

with Elvis, and no songs with minor chords.

O, Annette, you strapped on your high wadded
and went to work.

You really did give Shirley Temple a low blow.
In the end, she was an ambassador,
a woman who showed

how to move through
constriction and construct.
Reticently, women have come to vision

who wear their skin we ease
and leave their buttons under question.
Perhaps, they're tender.

Seventh Summer of Eldest Creature Child: A Retrospect

Key to Seventh Summer

We is My and My's brother. You is My's brother.

Colors are flesh because flesh is colors. Flesh can also be touch,
but in the absence of touch it is only colors.

We four people are animals, combinations of animal parts, faces, gestures,

vocalizations. Mother is sea-creature, spider, beaver, once
disquieting muse, urchin, and one of the two full-sexed animals.

Father is snake, fur-monument, self-proclaimed thought-god,
one of the two full-sexed animals, and also he with aspects
of deer & wolf.

The house father builds is spider's web, home, beaver den,
whale's belly, sludge-haven, blood-bound commune, hollow space
of empty reverberations, and arc of menagerie.

We are spiders' young, cubs, flames, saplings, & grandchildren
of the sun, We's father's father, who has also been Starfish,
cannot be other than Starfish, as We, mother, & father may.

My lives in a foreign land on the outskirts of a rural Midwestern
college town.

My's is a shifting world of colors, shapes, & sound.

The world is out of balance, it shifts quickly and rhythmically
as a small boat, each aspect of this world in constant accelerated
mutation. Her father never made a boat.

Sickness is strep that could not be escaped, as sound
and light cannot be shook.

Summer of Strep that Father Built the Scratch-House

Sickness stuck, then passed between us—
central nickel in some kissing game.

It was the country summer that stripped us bare
to child's frames.

That season made mother hide her oblong head
under premature widow's web,

respite-meant sac; pink-gnawing teathed trap.
Who knew spider's young catch wind & fly.

Once caught, again, they are mistaken for slow-savor
delicacies by the spider, their mother, who blew them away.

Father Eternal and Mother Entrails

Where did father go to bloom into muscle?
Cut brick from lump against the dawn.

We awe-peeked -- witnessed patterned skin, meant to ward off
predatory hawks, land-sharks, hungry leviathans, shed -- through cracks

between tightening stick-and-mud lattice-work; hoof, antler,
jagged nail, tooth-formed home.

From our genesis to cubs' memory's birth, he: academic,
chronically old yet time-resistant. Weren't we grudge-gifted

a word later? Yes; "trans-historical." Grandfather Starfish Sun,
only constant creature in animal world, worked on him
as we received dosage

in heart of beaver's den. Our mother in perpetual bed,
tonic spoon in crab's foot hand.

I cursed her, shrilled in "Club of Big Cuss"
her name strung-up with pearls -- smooth and expletive --

gathered in witness to our father's groans
over wild woods-got injuries.

We Two Birthed and Breathing

To turn then turn again in tiny space without rhyme or direction,
little injurious flames of two failed solitudes,

sticky mix of one part once disquieting muse, one part self-proclaimed
thought-God, meant to reconcile urchin and bear --

their real, full-stripped creature selves.

So much hope contained in whale's belly, pulse cavern
of no light, bone, refuse.

Air-need, clear water-need, need of everything beyond
fast in dead fish-full sludge-haven. Need so long

not-known by the two full-sexed animals task-stuck with our inarticulate
wiggles, unpracticed claws, unstoppable nest-bound sinew stretch.
Their mucus bulge-full sockets covered in behold-fear

of once glow-full one another withered to almost-sod, with cracked river
beds down their pink-turned-brown-gray due to unstoppable flash
floods' force; innumerable breaks of their lid-dams.

We Four in the Wake of the Urchin's Miscarriages

Blood-bound commune's ache testament to nine non-births, nine soft acrid-night
non-cries, nine blood-gob perhaps dispelled sans creature crawl.
Two saplings who could not place stench

akin to city smog, gray-faced mechanics, failed cosmetologists, fallen

trapeze artists, liquid voiced Appalachian soothsayers slow
out-burns -- all those deaths, which our parents carried

to this hollow space of reverberations. Song of song
of song no longer music. Music -- known for tempt,
sooth, small movement-sweeten --

transmuted to not-music. Room alone for animal howl, carcass
crunch, crinkled owl hoot's dissonant drudge.

Dear Cub of Arthritic Ear

Your little donkey's ears, smooth as two shells, utterly useless,
as if the gene of defect, which crippled mother's hand,
escaped to progeny's hopeful orb on first hold.

You did not shape terrain makers nor mold crucial burbles.

Two head flaps grasped as seem to anemones' hands, with a force
their own, without reason, comprehension, or shame.

Urchin and fur-monument assumed you worked. You moved twelve veiled seasons
through a world of half-light, mere shape, animal O-gapes. Impressions
that could not hit, sway, mark the fibrous pink folds upon folds
in sculpt behind your wide kitten's face.

Finally, rocks that impeded sound-threat shook out by scalpel-help
from you, mere mewer, and your button snout; little bear-urchin-hybrid
joined liquid menagerie of song of song of song.

Love Sonnets

Sonnet One

Now, in these new days, which are life
sprung into itself & back again, calling
the world by its name with its little bounce,
spring in the couch let go from ancient
upholstery & also brook that babbles
cool & sweet as a new child tries out a life

of words before the words come to his mouth,
little tongue & lungs that love the air
to bursting, I tread light as a new foal
or besotted mermaid. With each bare footed
step, possible tears, as if my feet were just
becoming acquainted with my head,
distant relative, which holds my eyes above
the earth, ripe offer knitting self to self.

Sonnet Two

I have met a match who does not strike
out to seek to be made, although he makes
so much throughout his day that ends
with stories over supper. The whole day's
goal: to warm ourselves before we come
together. In the morning, he spins the legs

of a new chair; at noon, he throws electricity
into a house's old bones; then, he stops
to lunch on leftover fish whose insides make
tomorrow's broth. He leaves no stone
unturned. My valves & gears begin to work.
Tonight, dishes put away, he'll take me
apart & put me back together again--
his way with all the pieces of the world.