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Room Blooming Red

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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Room Blooming Red

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Master of Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008
Bachelor of Arts, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2003

Directors: David Wojahn, Professor, English and Gregory Donovan, Associate Professor and
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*for my grandparents
and my two soul mates, Ben Anderson and Jenny Peet*

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By Ashlyn Howell Anderson, MA

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This creative thesis explores identity and family.

“A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image.”

Joan Didion, *The White Album*

Heavenly Bodies

Freezing this morning,
Dark sky lightening to blue.
First rays of light
Draw in the spaces between fence posts
And you. And me.
Alive, but daydreaming.
Aunt Mary fell
Out of her wheelchair last night,
Trying to make her way back home
While I was up coughing so hard
I broke my rib.
When I can sleep in our bed again
I'll visit her –
Stroke her hair, ask her about exercise class
Between spurts of sleep,
Feeding her a meal
I think she'll never finish.
Hidden heater below my desk
Glow orange and fries the air,
A drop of blood
From my nose
To the keyboard.

Elegy in Diminuendo

She doesn't see me
Sneak into the studio,

Sifting her music
Through lower lenses,

Sunken off the house into begonia bushes.
Pendulum grounding, I hide under the piano

At Middle C, where every thirty seconds
My grandmother turns the cornered pages

And pumps the pedal,
A quiet puff of air released in an echo.

My chest rises with each crescendo and
Won't fall until

She's gone behind the fresh sheets on the laundry line,
Dogwood blooms corona her hair.

From Dallas at Dusk

1

Sky ablaze in ombre
Atop the clouds like
Lava oozing, burning through
A fresh cut –
A rivulet of blood
Rising to the surface...
I want you to leave him –
I know you won't.

2

At the JFK memorial,
We pretend he doesn't exist,
Until upstairs (phones allowed),
His manic texts scroll down the screen.
I stare at Jack and Jackie, giants in black and white,
Each comprised of miniatures of the other,
And with every message you type
I think of throwing your cell
From the museum's sixth floor,
Where I know it would
Land by the grassy knoll,
Crushed by the slow-moving cars of rubbernecks.

3

Many miles home, I wake
Gasping for air:
You were in the middle of that road,
Hovering over the freshly painted white X,
And I couldn't reach the cars fast enough.
I wrap myself in the nook of
My sleeping husband, and he
Kisses my head.
2:54 am: I won't call you back.

Monument I

Damn you for uprooting the dogwood
I climbed with my brother,
Rested beneath as petals
Fanned the breeze
And rearranged the light on our faces.
Your ornamental cacti
Bury years of treasures in dirt,
Children avoid your yard for
Fear of tearing hedges, beheading lilies.

Open House: \$449,000, 2700 square feet, built 1926
Scented candle, vanilla – cheap substitute
For candied yams and roast beef.
French doors reveal Grandmother's
Claw-footed table and sideboard replaced
By a glass bistro set, spotlight showing it's
Devoid of finger prints, cup rings, red roses.
A hole in the ceiling where a crystal chandelier once
Made prisms, a collage of Sunday dinners on the walls.

In the kitchen I rub the scar on my knee,
Tissue hardened to fossil,
Remembering the nail protruding from the chair.
It took forever to stop the bleeding.

I refuse to imagine you are real
As I behead your cacti, shatter your planters
And slip a loose cobblestone into my purse.
I hope I never see you enter the spotlight
Front door.

Wake

I watched you leave out the back door,
Too many nights gone,

Swatting lightning bugs from your path and
Remembered how summers ago

We would pull them apart,
Smear the luciferon on our

Ring fingers, and say
We were married to movie stars.

On the dock, listen to
The hum of boats at dusk,

Mating dragonflies atop my thigh,
I examine their fragile wings until they

Fly off, skip like stones atop the lake.
How anyone could leave

The water is a mystery to me.
Its seducing lull rocks me to sleep while

Cadence of cicadas and crickets
Sing the mysteries

Of ancient magnolias, buds
Opening and closing,

Puffs of perfume,
Your blue bikini, dry, on the branch.

All I've ever known is that I'd never leave you.
I see my reflection and imagine

You're finally floating to the top.
Several seconds I forget to breathe.

Ringer

She still hasn't dyed her hair,
Blazing white –
A constant reminder of
The stroke down her left side.
I kiss her gaunt cheek
And see life reawaken in her auburn eyes.

We toss horseshoes, and
I cheer for her as if
She is a child achieving her first throw –
I hear myself make baby talk, and I cannot stop.

Her hand, a tightened clasp in the cold.
I give her a little wine, then
A little bit more until
She begins heavy talk and
Her thin body slouches,
Bones so obvious I'm embarrassed.

I tuck her into my coat
Where she drifts on the hammock,
Skyline of family back and forth.

Elegy for Summer With a Bird Still Humming in October

Darwin's arm hairs
Sipping his tea, he watches
A leaf float down with attitude,
Stop to swirl a bit, then
Hammock in mid-air.
Emma cannot stand
The thought of summer's slow decay.
She rushes outside,
Buries the leaf.
She knows it's still there,
Echoing humid breezes,
Moonlight on warm water,
Skinny dipping in September.
Ten species of birds whistle their regrets,
And soon the tree will burst into flame.

1929: Redcrest Moves to Hawaii

The ocean breathes in the sun,
Slowly,
Savoring its palette of rouged peppers

While tepid half waves break
Over my toes, my red polish shines,
A bird flaps overhead.

Paradise: where the palm fronds sway,
Backlit by the moon,
Beautiful white droplets scattered on the ocean.

On the walk home, my hand slides to yours
Down to just your ring finger,
Lush green lawn beside us hosts a pair of cardinals.

The Redcrests have taken flight from Brazil,
I snap a reel of images for framing,
Flashes of red and brown.

You sneak a finger or limb into a shot or two,
My face flushing with irritation while I swat you away,
Though I can't help laughing.

Sideways across the sheets, lanai crosswinds enticing
We talk of staying on –
Grow pineapples and lick their juice dripping from my palms,

Build our bungalow and sleep naked, moonlight clinging like spills of silk to my curves;
We'll bathe in the tides and gasp every morning
When the sun wakes up hungry.

Heat Lightning

You told me heat lightning
Is not caused by heat at all,

But when the sky bursts white,
You are silhouetted black against the screen

A drop of sweat catches up with another –
A rivulet down your temple.

Sandbridge, 1984

Slathered in sunscreen, my tanned body
Glistens as I ride waves to their break
On the smoothly mixed sand batter, set to bake in the sun.

Brandon under the umbrella in his diaper,
Pats the powdery grains, squints blue eyes
And opens them wide when I run up to bring him shells

Our mother extracts energy from the sun
While partially reclined, book held up, shading her face,
Other pinky finger in my brother's small grip.

With every crab our father catches, I feel safer
Until they scratch the sides of the boiling pot,
Knocked down by the lid.

Choosing the top bunk, I fluff the sheets,
Certain that crabs may still reach me, I call to my father
To double-check the space I cannot reach with my feet.

Your Hand in Mine

Your suspenders and my velvet dress,
Christmas 1983

Your hand in mine as I back away
From Santa.

You pull me forward, and we sit,
Legs dangling, stars in our eyes.

Sports jacket and my velvet dress,
Homecoming 1997

Your hand in mine as I'm introduced
On court.

You pull me forward, and we dance,
The loose curls around my face like swings
As we circle, and I flush, and
You pull me closer.

Your fatigues and my suit,
Fall 2003

Your hand on a gun, mine on a keyboard.

You push me away,

My pen exploding on letters to you,

Your heart exploding with cocaine.

We accelerate in opposite directions.

In your uniform and my black dress,
Winter 2005

Where you lay, your lifeless hand in mine.

Ritual, For Luck

Candle glow waltzes over my aunt's face,
As her half-working hand
Navigates the gravy pond with a spoon.
Her hair has turned to straw since last year,
Brittle and light, but growing again.
The table bows in the middle –
A palette of yams, squash, and egg noodles.
My aunt eats all the leftover pie,
Though the crust is not nearly as good as hers.
When the turkey platter
Revolves between cousins,
I watch my uncle cut meat into the baby bites
He feeds her with a practiced hand.
A bit of gravy dribbles down her chin, but
She does not notice until he gently wipes her face.
Reaching for the salt, she knocks it over –
Candlelight fires the granules into sparks,
I sprinkle her food then
Pour a bit into her hand to
Toss over her shoulder.

When I Ran Away

Flat on my back, I hid
Under the magnolia's embrace,
Curved, sleek leaves
Wrapped around me and stars
Cut through the open nooks
To warm me with their scattered lights.
The blossoms' drunken scent told a story
Of a time before bees.

Billie Holiday and Me

I push the dining chairs together,
stretch out across them,
brussel sprouts on the table
grow colder and more shriveled.
The smell of peach pie wafts
from the window sill,
catches me from dozing,
and then your voice:
You can't leave until your plate is clean.

The clock's minutes seem slower,
Ice in my lemonade warms to a clear
Layer atop pulp, and the broken
Voice of Billie Holiday
carries from the studio
Through the kitchen to living room
and onto the street
Where strangers, for a moment, pause.

Waiting

Obstetrics, floor 3,
Baby Max stares at me with
Glossy blue eyes beneath
Eyelashes the women envy.
His back weighs heavily on my arm.
I shift and
Thumb through
Parenting Magazine.
How old is he?
1 month, maybe 2?
Oh, he's not yours?
I am ten years old.
I've known since I was eight I was
Developing quicker than
The other girls –
Breasts plump and tender
In my training bras,
And cramping monthly too,
Afraid to swim in the pool.
I know the mechanics of sex,
The way a finger goes in and out
Of the “ok” hand gesture – the boys
Show us at recess.
My face flushes thinking about it,
worried the receptionist
Still has her eye on me.

Monument II

Stop and start of piano lessons,
Morning light through wispy curtains,
Setting the antique vases afire, the room blooming red.
Bacon curing around snaps, scent of bathroom
Powder puffs, serenade from the studio,
Pedals pressed, a duet that takes me back to dancing
Atop my grandfather's feet, as his pipe tobacco sweetens the air.
Alone on the couch, I stare into the fireplace,
Left arm on his rest, seated where he often fell asleep.
In church he stroked a chord on the organ, slightly slumped,
Pedals in mid-pump, stops pulled out and everyone
Wanted to cry but also to applaud because
No passing could be more perfect.

For the sake of the dead

The lily bulb sat buried
in my guest bathtub full of mulch,
star petals gazing from within,
a kinesthetic tick-tock,
the precipice of bursting
into bloom.

Lake Norman

I'm sorry I missed the landscape
That folds in half at lake's edge,
Where trees mirror
And birds dive at themselves.

I would have touched my finger to the water
And sent Morse code to you –
Ripples would grow wider with the urgency
Of my message: *You can't leave.*

Though, I fear the pontoon would slice my plea
And create wake that would overtake the dock.
And you'd glide further away,
Trying to catch the sunset.

Marking

You're calling again.

The room spins a vodka cyclone,

The smell of a half empty cocktail

On my bedstand making me gag.

Vibrating off the bed, my phone

Falls to the floor, lands beneath him, sleeping above.

My hands scuffle to silence the glow.

He shifts, and I shift, hoping he did not notice

It's been months since I last saw you,

Felt your weight press against me, your hands

Tangle my hair, low moan in my ear.

My roommate's headboard beats against the wall.

Sweet Dreams are Made of This

Running across the street,
Away from the bar near Tom's Market,
Men whistle and stare at my body
Just starting to take shape in the glass,
Measuring hours of hope that it would.
I choke on cigarette smoke spilling from
The door, and try not to stare back.
Hairy, pale stomachs
Overflowing atop their jeans.

It's seems it's always getting dark
When Mom sends me for milk.
Shadows sprawl the sidewalks,
Wavering with the breeze,
Startling me and the squirrels.
My steps accelerate, and I wheeze,
Breath loud in my ears.

Inside the market I'm safe,
Bright lights, the smiling
face of an elderly neighbor.
Walking back, I jump over every
Crack in the concrete.
The lanterns flicker, my house aglow.

Maybe She Was Born With It.

She told me she moved to LA so she could dye her hair & be in a band. A couple of years after that someone told me she'd quit her band to go to cosmetology school.– StoryPeople

They parted ways as soon as she arrived.
I guess it was easier to give up music
than to give up the hair.

Her name doesn't belong here anyway –
She left in a hurry, a melody
in her bracelets and chain-link belt.

She should be a flip book of snapshots,
flirtatious glimpses over her shoulder.

Maybelline thinks pink hair in L.A. is
much easier than in Richmond,
especially at her age.

Guitar slung low across her back,
I watched her leave – a clichéd
Saunter, spurs clanking.

Jeans hugging hips, she boarded the Airstream,
Set to tour with the Pink Cougars.

Naughty Pine Paneling

Staring at me as I undress,
I follow your eyes down the wall
in an oak wine haze.

As I bend over to peel off my stockings,
swinging chandelier earrings,
I catch you upside down, winking.

One of your eyes, lazy, so I gaze into the
Seasoned one, according to the
Rings around it.

You've invited your friends, and
You're everywhere I turn.
Cycloning, collapsing on the tousled bed,
I wink in back.

Because Pessoa Says I'm an Artist

I awoke to spring
And saw snow falling slowly
Into cherry blossoms.
Your eyes,
The blue sky palette
Heating to white with summer,
Light green leaves darkening to
Canopy the forest,
The red spectrum nested
Below a crunch of ice and snow.

Danaus Plexippus

Damp North Carolina July, homemade milkshakes
And *I love you* the first words in the door.
Bill and Margie stay hours on the porch
Where I swing with them through summer,
My toes clenching at cigarette burns
On the plastic green grass carpet.
Little old blue hairs and butterscotch,
A clamoring of Sunday dinner.

If you see a monarch, it's my great-grandmother.
On her wings, our family tree branches orange, yellow, and black.
She's fragile, as I remember, but she moves freely.
I planted buddleia to draw her close, as she mostly hovers above me.
From time to time I catch a flash of orange.

Friday Night on Walker Street

Smoke rings encircle the dancers
Who concede to juke box love songs.
A regular slides off the his stool,
Slurring, *All y'all are beautiful.*
Heavy eyelids darken with dormant pain.
Choking on smoke, dancers puff
At the other end of burnt cigarette tips
Whose fire died long ago.
Storms rage and calm before last call when
Warm fluid bodies stagger towards the door.
An excited dog on the sidewalk wags his tail.
Some smile, pat his head, and keep walking.
The sky flashes.

Painting Miles

for Ben

I fall asleep to a loop of Miles Davis,
Feeling Kind of Blue.

Trumpet crying and cadence of crickets,
I dream of a St. Louis in sepia.

Wind blowing sideways into the Arch,
My shirt hugging my curves.

Splashing a palette of warm hues on the water, the
Sunset reflects upon my hair, more golden,
Amber flickers in my eyes.

A breeze carries the sound across the river as
I awake, sunbeams glistening in my irises, to All Blues.

No matter where I go,
The music sounds better when I'm with you.

Mermaids

“Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!...” –Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*

And the too-sweet scent of her goldi-sunshine-locks
Falling around him as he honey-suckles the
Sweetness out of her like the parching summer
His mosquito-enticing cologne
Pours into her senses like bay breeze,
Sticks on her skin like sea salt.

Retreating alongside the waves,
She rolls into the sea,
Swallows the sun falling into the horizon
And lights a path for the moon.
He wants to follow but does not,
Dries into the sand as the day's past warmth.

Lines for Her to Cross

for Riley

Tic-tac-toes wiggle and wave,
Form lines for her to cross,

Paths with changing horizons,
Winding staircases, eyes blue to green.

One step and stumble closer to running,
Her mouth agape with surprise,

Grabbing the fraying carpet with pudgy hands,
Anything to soothe cut gums.

Making sure we're still watching,
Excited arms bounce, wispy curls shake.

Fog outside settles around drains, gold leaf speckles her eyes –
Sunrise cuts a ray through the window.

Boarded

Nashville-bound,
The attendant buckles into
Her seat by the emergency exit.
Facing me a few rows up, she
Lodges ear buds and
Peers from the window –
The sky a humid white,
Clouds reflected on her glasses
Glare runway for miles.
We semicircle to take off
And I get sleepy –
The hum of the engine circulates
Cool air on my face.
She catches me
Finding her so lovely, jet black hair
Graying at her temples,
Curls meet in full circles to
Frame her long face,
Smooth dark skin,
Lips puckered into a heart.
She's another Jackie Joyner-Kersey,
My hero: Olympic medalist
Running through asthma,
Muscles bulging off her thighs
Like drawing outside the lines.
She can fly anywhere –
Business class, for business or pleasure.

Buongiorno

After that first morning
In Florence,
I returned daily to see the
Shrinking elderly couple
Sipping café lattes,
Reading *Corriere delle Alpi*,
Skinny legs crossed,
Their tiny voices greeting in
Seasoned Italian swansong.
My glass mug held up
In cheers for Ben to
Capture a picture
Of them behind us.
She smiled, winked at me,
Soft gray curls pinned gingerly
About her round face.
Stockings every day,
A flush of rouge, and he:
Hat, slacks, collared shirt,
Hand guiding her to their table.
I imagine where they must live:
Down the stone road
Beyond that turquoise window,
Ablaze with coral trim
Where they eat mozzarella caprese,
And lick the aged balsamic
That drips down their arms.

California

Either you bring the water to L.A. or you bring L.A. to the water. –Chinatown

There's an ocean under this land.
I perch my chin atop the window sill and
wait for you to emerge from shadows.
Crumpled brown leaves whisk by,
Circling into the whiteness.

Your voice slips in with the wind
Through faded, slanted blinds
And creeps up to warm my bare shoulders.

The flooding does not cure the drought.
We used to watch water release
Into aridity, power-washing
Trash and planets in its way,
Drain and dry in an hour.

When the parched land burst open with moisture,
the beads landed upon our backs,
warmed into rivulets on my thighs
and wept down your hairline,
our life collaged into each prismatic droplet.

You spun me in circles, geyser crashing upon us.
We were the eye of this great storm.
I was embarrassed but forgot quickly,
As my head fell back with laughter.

Rain absorbs into desert beneath my toes,
Where you glow with pulse below the surface.

Rhubarb

The way your sweetness quickens
Into a tang that stings
And my lips purse with that dark delight
Disappointed until I taste you again.

Broken Summer: Submissions

I can't remember the name of the free weekly read during club sandwich and sweet tea lunch breaks at Becky's, mesmerizing me with locals' admissions: *I'd do anything to take it back, baby*. Hourly job barely paid the rent, but the callers made it worthwhile. *I walked in on my sister doing the dog, and Mom was watching*. The smoke break gossip (I didn't ever smoke), initiated with a cigarette raised between fingers. *4th miscarriage: rest in peace Baby D*. My boss closing the laptop as I walked in. *I work full-time but meet clients at Embassy Suites on my lunch breaks*. The apartment shared with strangers, only necessities: bed, computer (*When do you log on?*) red lip gloss, Bud Light, and those wedged heels that made my calf muscles curve just right. *No matter where I go, the music sounds better when I'm with you*. One night I woke up with a roach crawling on me, gun shots in the alley. A neighbor's husband caught her screwing Cowboy, the homeless Grace Street fixture. Her disclosure: *He rocked me like nobody ever had*.

My submission: *Those bullets could've come right through my window*.

Elegy for Sunshine
for MB

I'll draw a circle
Of life
An *Oh* of exhaustion
Traced around the base my glass –
Forced as any explanation
For why she's gone:

Pressure of poise drained her smile.
It was an accident.
She was expecting to be saved.

The phone will always ring without answer.

Sunbeams stuck
Behind blinds
Goldenrod nightstand
unbrightened by the day to lemon
Her Catholic cup runneth empty

Smell: The scent linked most to emotion –
Lilies assail my nose and heart.

Headlights of passing cars,
Bright flashes of imagined details:
In the hallway,
Her wavy hair draped
Across her still face
Phone spilled down the stairs.
Twinkling bangles –
Wind chimes cascading down her arms

And collected at the bottom
Of my lemonade-drained tumbler,
I imagine a smiling, sugar profile of Maggie.

To My Twenties

Men that wouldn't commit
Fleeing from my bed,
Faking love.
Corner Bar filled
with the smell of
vodka shooters,
Jenny recording on
cocktail napkins
my absurd lines,
laughter drawing tears,
flux of friends
on a Sunday night
into Monday,
group photos
on my dorm door.
A last stand with the ex
I thought I'd marry
until he said he was
screwing that girl in the country –
but *wearing a condom*.
Engaged after
unsure years:
Manic highs –
He only holds hands
With fingers intertwined
And lows –
crying into my sweaters
hanging in the closet
Agreeing to civility
Mom and Dad and Me
Together watch the chef
Create an onion volcano
that smokes and erupts with fire,
and we all clap and pose
For a photo:
Happy birthday, Ashlyn-San
October 29, 2005

Gillespie

Cigarette tip burns into the plush sofa,
releasing circular puffs of smoke.
Smudgy black eyelid winks, *come over*

Wine thins the blood that's rushing to her feet
In patent stilettos, she stamps a
Red lipstick kiss on his cheek.

Crash of thunder,
Dizzy soundtrack to our scene,
Rainbow on the wall draws my eye to her ring

I'd like to channel the stored wind in Gillespie's cheeks,
Use it for time travel.

My martini sweats and slides towards my hand.
Pashmina slips off my shoulder, grays on the horizon,
And the rainbow, the music, everything goes black.

On Cough Syrup With Codeine

1

I'm picking at my ear,
Second hole piercing,
Tiny lump of scar tissue
Like a bead
Between my fingers.
It thickens, and the hole widens,
Opens like a cervix and
Births a fingertip
With painted nail,
Pale and pruned.

2

Ground beef mask on my face,
Moving like television static,
Pink maggots devour grease
And impurities, the itch unbearable.
I will it to stop: Now, a thin white layer
Penetrated amilliontimes by erect blackheads
Standing at attention, a bed of nails.

3

Most people don't dream in color.
Walking quickly to our neighbor's basement,
I know I won't want to see:
Grandmother strapped into
An electric chair, screaming,
Crying, sweating, clothes stuck to her skin,
A man in leather stares at me
When axing off her head,
Bright rainbow splatters the walls.

Elegy for West Franklin Street, 1987
for DT

You never notice me until the end of the day. -Ai

July Fourth games: Tied to your ankles,
Balloons – kids try to stomp them until

You hyperventilate – we circle you.
Your mother breaks through with a paper bag

You inflate with hot breath, sweating,
Hair matted to your head.

Last month they found you
In your apartment:

Dead nearly a week
After a lengthy battle with bipolar disorder

At your service, all our parents twenty years older:
We're not supposed to bury our children

With your sister and brother in fall,
The last time I saw you since ten years old:

Tepid hug, empty eyes
I'm not sure you ever realized who I am.

Autumn

A breeze slipping through
Limbs, below and atop leaves
Like a strand of pearls
Bobbing on the ocean –
A line to the moon –
Then I'm back
In the lifeguard stand,
Sandy, with a splinter
Buried in my toe,
Bronze shoulders and
Hoping to share this
Sinking moon with you.

Warm Day in January

In every year, expectant,
We wait in its certainty.
Like the season, I'm promised
A walk to the river
Where the Buttermilk Trail
Will take us. I will sit,
Waiting, until startled
By a flapping overhead:
A flock of geese cutting through the silence,
A small rustling of leaves.
The distant train chugging like
A crowd of conversations.

Keepsake

Remembrance is a fire in a drawer. – Beckian Fritz Goldberg

Behind the small rocking chair
made for me by my great-grandfather, I hide,
bandaging its wounded leg with my blanket.
If rocked, it will topple, I will topple...
Not wanting my mother to see,
I tuck the broken bone in my pocket.

Wispy seeds have fallen from the dandelion
in my childhood scrapbook and left me
wishless without breath. I gather the stems
and scatter them out my window,
holding one back from the breeze to
place under the magnifying glass –
It's a road on which
I'm veering between shadows, waning and waxing,
The windshield starbursts, its cracks take me
Through the bathroom window where

The stall reads:

I've had a bad day for a couple years,
And I understand but pretend not to when
Juliana tells me she's moving to Indiana –
I only know that's somewhere west of here.
I hear her vomiting and flush the toilet.
On the way back to class, I uproot my dandelion from her hair.