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THE CHANGING

By

SABRINA BRIDGET BLACK

Bachelor of Arts, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, 2019

Thesis

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for the degree of

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Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Sean Hill, Chair
English

Keetje Kuipers
English

Beth Hubble
Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies

The Changing

Chairperson: Sean Hill

In poems that center on experiences of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, *The Changing* explores the formation of identity and the malleability of the self. Sabrina Black writes into the spaces between people—at times finding connection there and at times isolation. Throughout the collection, the speaker reflects on complicated relationships with family members, classmates, and friends; on the ways those relationships have shaped her; and, most of all, on her relationship with that elusive thing called the self.

In a series of “Dear Advice Columnist” poems scattered throughout the manuscript, Black shifts focus away from personal experience, adopting the persona of an anonymous advice-seeker whose troubles and uncertainties further the collection’s examination of the unspoken rules of social behavior. Black’s poems employ lenses ranging from gender to topology to consider the complex factors that shape identity. Her writing is often colloquial, at times wry, at times earnest, propelled by repetition. Forms such as the sestina and duplex find their homes alongside free verse couplets in poems that travel from middle-school hallways to German trains. Through its many angles, *The Changing* brings readers to consider what it means to live among and with others, to be a self among selves, to know and be known.

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Dear Advice Columnist

These days, I read the agony column to relax.
I find comfort in faux-pas, in awkward
invitations and estranged relationships.

I know what it's like to make my own problem
so big I need the world to read about it,
require a seasoned advice-giver to kindly

put me in my place. Go ahead
and put me there—just tell me, first,
that every story is really a story problem

and you have the answer key.
Tell me there's an answer key.

I

Sometimes I Miss Being High-School Sad

Culver's is where we end up after the one football game
where I don't wipe out or hit myself in the head with my flag.
In our matching jackets, in a blue booth,
the two of us who were girls together
become girls together, savoring the good grease,
watching half the marching band
make as much noise as a whole marching band.
We don't sit at the same table in the cafeteria these days
and we've never been more than third-tier friends,
but for the first time we swap close sorrows
 the kind we suspect we shouldn't feel so deep at 17
 rumors and fallings out and being born sad.
 Things we're not used to saying out loud.
We get the flavor of the day and let it melt,
talk about the big future until our rides come.
Climb into separate cars. How little we know
about most people—about ourselves.

Childproofing

The neighborhood kids walked to school,
but my mother always drove me.
If I left my lunchbox in the car,
she managed to drop it off. Firefighters

came to school, but only to make an ice rink
in the field. I'm sorry, reader:
sometimes I send my bucket into the well
of my past and it comes up dry.

The only trouble my parents let me get into
was their trouble. Sent to my room
to think about what I'd done, not allowed
dessert that night. These are the parents

who kept me in a car seat through middle school,
had me wear kneepads to ride a bike.
That I was a girl they couldn't help,
so my younger brother walked me home

at night. My parents put foam bumpers
on the sharp corners of our coffee table, but
the bumpers made the whole room
seem smaller. When I page through

pictures of myself as a toddler at the end
of a wrist strap—not a leash, my mother
insists—she says they only needed it
because I was a runner. Because they never knew

when I'd take off or where I'd go.

Fallen Ode to My Suitcase

These days, more than ever, I imagine grief
like reaching for my suitcase in a crowded concourse
and grasping absence. No realization this time
that I checked my bag at the desk. No relief.
I don't let myself get too far when I imagine grief.

I'm worried I've let myself get too far
from home: I'm always carrying travel with me,
my toiletries in a Ziploc. I've boarded so many flights
away from the people who love me, believing
they will be there to love when I get back.

I've stopped believing that. How often have I
checked my imaginary grief at the desk? Leaving
Germany once, I reached for the word *scale* and
found instead I was asking to borrow a cradle.
Cradle is a word that only comes to me by accident.

Dear Advice Columnist

What I'm most afraid of today are the people
who write to you so sure you'll tell them
what they already know: anger

is a reward and they've earned it.
I imagine these people march around

with notepads, tallying slights.
Sure, I like being right,
but I like more being silent.

How else to avoid becoming the villain
of a newspaper anecdote?

I keep my dirty laundry folded,
and I won't tell you where.
No, let's not look there.

Writing Woodruff, Utah

On the mink farm, good raisin's meant swapping Postum
for coffee when Elder Turner dropped by. Meant a family
playing rummy every night. Knowing how a story knits

people together. On the mink farm, the best kind of girl was one
who'd pull a shed down with her bare hands. Who didn't mind
a freezer full of untanned pelts. Strung-up starling heads

in the attic, a bounty on each one. None of these details mine.
I've never been to the mink farm, don't know if it's still there.
All I have of that place a list of Uncle Art's sayings collected

in my phone. *Neighbor's meaner than an acre of snakes,*
he told my mom, young trespasser. His way, she tells me,
of keeping her on the right side of the property line.

Not all stories are this easy to tell. Words, a means
of creating a boundary—also a means of crossing one.

How Not to Write a Love Poem

Growing up, we were always shouting
our unseemly love for the neighbors to hear,

or maybe just our rage. Our animal sounds:
pterodactyl screech, bull moose roar, thunderous charge

to our separate corners of the house. I didn't like how love
was a word that meant different things

to different people, I who measured words
in other words, poured meanings

from one container into another. What did it mean
to me? I asked each friend who fell

in love to tell me how they knew: *Because*
I'd throw my body in front of a bus

for him. Or: I looked at her one night
and I just knew. Not helpful.

Love is just an emotion, one friend said. You feel it
like any other emotion. Most days, what I felt was

okay or not bad or tired. Nothing else I named.
There were so many emotions I was ashamed

to experience: anger, jealousy, homesickness.
What more was I than what I felt?

Inside me, a tap I couldn't wrench all the way
to the off position. A relentless drip.

I was so used to it, I hardly heard it at all.

Dear Advice Columnist

Some days I don't think I believe
in good decisions anymore. All I see
ahead of me are wrong turns,

and I'm not even sure where
my destination is—but somehow
I know I'm getting farther away

from it. I expected my life
to be a one-way street
with no intersections.

I think when I write to you, what
I really mean is: I will follow anyone,
even the person behind me.

I don't care where I end up.
And if I get rear-ended
on my way there, at least

it won't be my fault.

Case Notes of the Young Investigator

I always loved a mystery fingerprinted
the Tooth Fairy's note I knew the
difference between a code and a
cipher sounded out words like *fug-it-*
ive I kidnapped my own dolls (not
because they were girls but because
they were sleuths) then helped them
escape got caught helping them
escape past my bedtime. I wanted
tailing-a-suspect danger not stranger
danger to learn to defend myself from
assailants but only to be assailed
because I was hot on a case.
Because I was a girl I could not be a girl
detective always had to have a heedful
chaperone. The only way I ever got to
fight crime: trying not to
grow up to be a missing woman.

Listen, Hear

Some days, I'm the seashell
people whisper their secrets into.

Secrets and problems. I know
what the world is made of,

though I try to forget.
I know that sand is

a collection of crushed things
that used to be whole.

And I nod, and I take in words
like packages I stack

unopened by the door.
Watch leaning lives

tilt toward collapse.
When I have nothing

nice to think about the world,
I don't think anything at all.

An empty shell: an exoskeleton
where something used to live.

Go on, hold me
to your ear.

Self-Portrait as Portrait of Other People

My parents joked that they knew I was theirs
because there was no shape too simple
for me to warp. Like them, I
never had the gift for collapsing
dimensions onto the page. (None of us
wanted to be on each other's team
for Pictionary.) Any portrait I drew
might make you ask,
Has she never seen a person before?
I studied people so closely, measuring for myself
the relations between parts, how it all
came together, but it didn't come together
for me. In drawings, I never managed
to replicate anything more
than my own confused looking.

In Middle School, I Learned to Obsess

over boys. And boy, was I good at it:
committing each overanalyzed interaction

to my diary, wishing on eyelashes
and lucky stars, wishing my eyelashes

were the kind that drew eyes. Just
one person's eyes. I didn't want

to be looked at so much as I wanted
to be seen. Protested my disdain

for makeup and tight clothes
and secretly longed to be made over

like in any teen movie. I was
always wary of becoming an object

of desire, but wasn't desire the easiest
kind of wanting? And If I just had someone

who wanted to be around me,
I wouldn't have to worry about

whether I wanted to be around myself.
Wouldn't have to be around myself

by myself. Oh, I had such stamina for pining.

Our Group Photo Fell off My Wall Today

We expect only belated birthday wishes
from each other now, don't know a thing

about each other's lives in the months between
our catch-up calls. At some point, the word *best*

fell away, but we used to share our lives like the apple
we passed back and forth during AP Gov

one period, each of us biting right in.
Planned each other's outfits, practiced

conversations we'd have with crushes.
With sharp laughter, we taught each other

what to be embarrassed of, what
behavior was *so typical of you*.

We used to squeeze together so tight
that we were all uncomfortable

in order to fit on the same couch.
Through all those days spent learning

how to change, each of us was a personality test
we watched the others take, memorizing

every answer.

Parental Controls: Off

There was a time when my world was so contained,
the only way in was through my parents:

I was lulled by the CDs they chose to lull me,
listened to the stories they wanted me to hear.

They introduced me to each beloved stuffed animal
before I gave it a name. (What names I knew,

I knew from them.) And I swallowed it all
so hungrily, like my first tastes of their favorite foods.

If I fell and cut my chin on my jacket's fastening,
of course my parents came undone.

Wasn't it their idea to bring me to this place
full of dangers I'd have to learn to understand?

I watched and rewatched *The Sound of Music*, and each time
my mom turned it off when the Nazis came.

Life Plan

In middle school, our futures end
by 35, when we ought to know

who we wind up marrying,
what we wind up being:

software developer, gym teacher,
market research analyst. All our

possibilities opened up
by a multiple-choice career test.

We want to know it all,
turn to tween-girl divination,

Magic 8 Balls and pulling petals
off of daisies as we relish

not knowing, thrilled and threatened
by the indeterminacy of every theory.

By the unruliness of our potential.
Always the urge to flip forward

to read what hasn't been
written yet. This chapter

can't go on forever, can it?

Looking at My Notifications, I Remember Being Gone

In Germany, the news alerts find me at odd hours. I wake in the dark
to see them blinking, try to seal myself back into a cocoon of sleep.
Each morning I study what the night has brought
during my 6 A.M. train ride, burrow through links.
I choose that way of learning over the teacher's-lounge *Did you hear*
about the amok-run in Texas? Don't want to feel like a bad American,
my colleagues' idea of a good American.
I used to think history was a train
that keeps racing in the same direction toward its destination
and maybe one day even gets there. After the news
alert, I listen to other passengers not talk about the news alert.
After the news alert, I try to climb back into my shrinking belief
in that fabled goodness like a cousin
you vouch for who ends up taking the car
in the night and driving away and even you can see how it looks
as though she might have been stealing it.
In school, I become the news alert. My students see me flashing
and ask about guns and primaries. I teach the news alert.
For my fifth-graders the news is the groundhog's shadow,
learning to pronounce *Punxsutawney*. I ignore the news alert
until it's replaced by another. I stop opening
news alerts. Isn't that why I came to Germany?
I have often related in conversation how many train conductors
develop PTSD from watching accidents, trapped aboard
hurtling death and unable to stop. I don't remember
where I learned that. On my first day in their class, twelfth-graders wanted to know,
Do you like Trump? Are you proud to be an American?
Sixth- and seventh-graders had other questions: *Do you know Mr. Bean?*
What's your favorite sweet? The boy whose hand was raised the highest
asked, *Do you like railroads?* He meant model trains.

Dear Advice Columnist

Why does my mind open to you when I sit down
to fashion a meaning out of words? They mean things
already, of course, the words that appeal,

no, clamor—plead?—to be part of an order
I give them. Most of the letters you receive must go
unanswered. So how do you decide which problems

will interest us this week? Some days I imagine
you log each query in a spreadsheet and let
the numbers guide you; some days I imagine

it's an artist's knack. Your every response,
a life tilted slightly on its axis, or not.
Tell me: which frightens you more?

From the Passenger Seat

Today, my biggest peeve with myself is how embarrassed I am
to admit I don't have a license and it's not because I don't want to drive

up carbon emissions or because I couldn't afford the class.
My parents paid for it, for a driving instructor

to save both our lives repeatedly with her chicken brake,
but I never made it past empty roads and straight lines.

Sixteen passed and you were still my ride. Out of your way to my house
for every adventure. Your shuddery old car with the broken heat.

Both of us shivering, me in your passenger-seat garbage pile you making wrong turns.
The cheapest and most remote grocery store, your grandma's house:

I'd go anywhere with you to go somewhere with you
and you'd go anywhere with me to get out of your house.

I wasn't in the car when you drove fifteen hours to your new life.

A lease, a credit card, a salary: you got them all
while I never went anywhere that wasn't in walking distance.

Why I never could turn without veering: fear, of course.
Vehicular manslaughter all my fault

a mess of mangled metal an entire family crushed, babies on board.
But under that, another fear: being alone in a car,

powering down Highway 100 at the speed limit
on my way to where I'm not meeting anyone.

Where will I go? How will I find the way?
The same questions that excited you,

but I'm so good at relying on someone else to deliver me.
Let me be somebody's passenger if not yours.

Self-Portrait as Ship of Theseus

I faced early the impossibility
of being my best self:
I did not know what *best* meant.

So I let it mean my best-liked self.
I knew people who wanted to like me
would be happy to replace my parts:

mannerisms, interests, sense of humor.
What kept me afloat was the idea
that people wanted to like me.

I guess what I mean by *identity*
is it's always the same me
allowing myself to be dismantled.

At 15, I Looked Like a Vampire

I didn't believe my skin had turned green.

When I looked in the mirror,
I didn't see anything.

Not the shivering in a sun-sweltered car,
borrowing hoodies from anyone
who offered, tucking ice into my cheek
like cotton wool before oral surgery. Shivering
at Girl Scout meetings, shivering in exams. Up
before the sky even knew it was tomorrow.
Running late for carpool, running last in gym,
remembering only what I wrote
on flashcards. No wonder I was shivering:
I ate ice cubes to fill silence, organized
the bake sale and forgot to pack lunch. And I
was letting people carry things for me
because I fell asleep in Global Studies
because my veins glowed in the dark.
Tissues as my talisman, shivering at State.
Soaking ice in water so I wouldn't break
my teeth. My skin always tearing—I knew the air
was dry—I wore gloves of Band-Aids,
didn't breathe outside. Braces breaking
monthly, wire embedded in my gums,
trying to rattle quietly the ice that kept me numb. No time
for second drafts, no time for WebMD.
Shivering in the freezer trying to fix the ice machine.

My parents told me to stop.
The dentist told me to stop.

So used to the ache in my throat
I didn't know it was there.

So used to being fragile
I let myself become it.

Suburban Landscape in March

Ice doesn't keep secrets.
What's frozen will thaw.

What's frozen? It will thaw.
Even dead animals look forward to spring.

Even spring is dead. Animals look forward to nothing.
Only food sates their hunger.

There's a hunger food won't sate.
Squirrels don't recover all they hoard.

What squirrels lose will sprout
if snowmelt leaves it be.

Snowmelt carries debris alongside yellow lawn.
There's a thirst water won't slake.

There's a thirst only ice will slake.
But ice doesn't keep secrets.

Deficiency

In high school, I carved a new self out of ice
and tried to keep her from melting. She went to my locker
every morning, untrained in the use of flat irons
and eyelash curlers. Still, she dressed up like an adult
who didn't remember what it was to be small
or hold secret words in her throat.

I never was good at pushing a loud voice out of my throat,
instead let words rattle inside me like ice
in my glass. I knew how to make myself small,
to be emptier than I was, to twirl a lock
of hair around my finger. That was the trick to all adults
except my parents, who knew I was forged from iron

like they were. But every metal has a melting point, even iron,
even if it's 2,800 degrees. Every throat
gets sore sometimes. My shame when adults
reprimanded me for crunching down my ice
cubes—I, who used to dump my medicine without even locking
the bathroom door when I was small

and immortal. It's true I'm still small
but no stronger than I look. I earn
my respect other ways: by being tight-lipped as the empty locket
I wore to Prom, a sealed secret round my throat.
Let people read me how they did. Like how the German word *Eis*
means two things and I always wanted the wrong one. No adult

imagined I felt that desire so big it was reserved for adults.
That it was not a bad habit or a small
rebellion: I did not want to crack my teeth for ice.
To reach always for my thermos. My iron
will, cubed and crushed. How my throat
ached at the word *craving*, how I locked

my vulnerability inside me. Learning how to pick that lock:
saying what I could not do (stop) and waiting for an adult
to hear me. To find wedged in my throat
the secret of my weakness. My small
self-deceptions flaking away like rusted iron:
admitting how much I needed ice

to unlock a pain so low, so close to yearning, so small
I felt it without feeling it. (How adult of me.) My deficiency: iron.

The voice trapped in my throat. The throat I'd numbed with ice.

Self-Portrait as Young Woman Walking Fast

Danger the shape
of the container
I grew to fill

the body
my mother grew me

filled with fear
because fear could keep me safe
because it couldn't

Dear Advice Columnist

I don't like to ask people I know
for advice, and they don't like to give
it to me. Don't like to watch me

make the mistakes they suggested—or,
worse, refuse to. I ask for advice
all the time, of course, and mostly

what I'm looking for is permission
to do what I already planned to.
Or, sometimes, for someone to clean out

my lint trap before it catches fire.
So I call people and talk about my problems
and they talk about theirs.

I know what you'd think of that:
how misguided—how human.
Tell me again what we owe each other.

Knot Theory

I didn't learn to knit from my mother, who never taught me what she wanted to.

Instead: hair twirling, fraught relationships.

That a pattern was what we fought: the same anger in new words.

Knitting involves handling knots with care.

Even the word fraught is fraught.

Mathematically, a knot is a closed loop.

Can something be fraught by itself, or must it be fraught *with*?

With my mother, I bought yarn for projects I never finished.

A knot can also be described as a tangled circle.

No feeling more familiar than being caught circling an argument.

Distressed material is a kind of fraught fabric.

How often I thought longingly of other families.

Some say distressed fabric, store-bought, looks well-loved.

The only way I've got of loving is finding fault.

Topologists call the unknot *trivial*, that loop without tangles.

From fuming to distraught our paths crisscrossed.

I would not recognize an unknot, though it is one, as a knot.

I don't know how not to hear a slight in every piece of praise.

How far I've gone in my attempts to un-/not- myself from my mother.

Left home, brought back distance from her.

As though I could redefine myself until I forgot how to pick a fight.

I wanted to believe hot-headedness was all she gave me.

A dropped stitch, if caught, doesn't need to become a hole.

Haven't I always sought her forgiveness later?

So often I have chosen to unknot what we have clumsily done.

Knitted fabric, stretched taut, can have elasticity that yarn does not.

How Often Have I Spent a Friday Night Listening

to my phone not buzz, wondering what group chats
I've been left out of, erasing half a text

that invites someone to do something
with me. I'm so good now at inviting

loneliness—so many years since middle school,
when I used to study my classmates' conversations

like I would be tested on them, made note
of things people were excited about: the cast list

for the musical, the effort they'd put into changing
how their hair fell. And wasn't I? Tested, I mean.

Each time I chose an anecdote, remembered
a birthday, smiled knowingly about someone

else's crush. Whatever I thought would endear me
to the classmates who were dearer to me than I was

to them. I listened, complimented, explained
the homework—tried everything to make myself

indispensable. Still I was dispensed with
so often I expected it: the sort-of friend,

the sort of friend you leave at the door to your life.
How I hoped to be invited in one day.

II

Flocking Behavior

By eighth grade, we measured our lives
in minutes between bells.

In whispers, we shared the combinations
to the vaults that housed our secret selves.

We knew one another like we knew the morning
announcements with their recycled scripts.

While the loudspeaker squawked
mispronounced names, we pronounced the thoughts

that would end up in one another's diaries.
So many hours spent chattering

with each other and about each other,
always flying toward our own reflections.

As though if we got close enough
to the shining other, we could see

inside. How often did we long
to punch through the glass?

Like the day the intercom interrupted us
with a new message: *Everyone, please*

stay calm—we have a bird in the building.
How before anyone demanded *what kind*

or *how*, before our unflappable teacher
started flapping about and slammed

the classroom door against any disruption,
each of us felt something no one else knew

and then wondered what we should feel.

Dear Advice Columnist

And have you lived so well?
I suppose I could find out,
but every time I've thought about

reading up on you online,
I've chosen not to. Chosen
to believe in the unknown,

or really in my own
ability to find fault. To think
I'd be able to see inside you

to where your advice comes from.
The less I know about anyone, the better
I can imagine them.

The Changing

My least favorite part of going somewhere
is getting ready to go somewhere.

Not the dressing, the combing,
the *Did I put on deodorant today?* sniff,

but the hour before that: the mental wardrobe.
The deciding who to be. The changing.

How I have to make myself so I can make myself
presentable. It's unpleasant work, embarrassing

to judge each option more unsuitable
than the last. To feel so undistinguished

among all the versions of myself
I've cut out like paper dolls, looking

however I made them look,
propped up so they seem to stand

on their own. All holding hands,
a chain of them, encircling what I call *me*.

Friendship Permanence

You say I hold onto too much stuff
and I hold onto that, too, the idea
of myself as clinger, as hands.
It's why I don't like to let people in
my room: the encroaching piles
of old binders, worksheets
with inside jokes doodled
in the margins, birthday cards,
T-shirts from German Club, Mock
Congress, *Guys and Dolls Jr.* Difficult
to find floor to walk on,
but more difficult to be seen
amid all my emotional clutter,
unwilling or unable to part with
any of it. Your idea of messy
is your carload of necessities
arranged on a guestroom floor.
You give away anything you don't use,
like your parents gave away
your childhood bedroom. And even
the gifts I was meant to use
I save: the bath bombs
you made by hand, the soaps
shaped like dinosaurs. I have
a hard time believing in friendships
I can't see, which, of course, is all of them,
so I keep things—longer, sometimes,
than I manage to keep the people
they make me think of. How long
will I keep you? On my shelf,
this Mussorgsky record you bought me
years ago in St. Louis, though I don't
have a record player. I know
how good you are at discarding.

Self-Portrait as Advice Seeker

Let me strip away the layers
of concealment I call personality
until all that's left is anonymous

need, unmet expectation, uncertainty.
The shivering self I don't let people see.
Dear advice columnist, won't you

tell me everything about me
is ordinary before you wrap me
in your quilted words.

I'm Afraid of My Own Fear

that tells me I am small and breakable,
how I become smaller and more breakable

in response. How I say *No, I don't*
want to hear about that, it'll give me

nightmares. Say Anyone want
to walk home with me? I'm afraid

I'm not like the heroines of those stories
I grew up reading, the ones that said fear

is what makes us brave. Me, it just
makes fearful. Fear spins me around

in its drum like clothes
washed in too-hot water.

I am always shrinking
away from something.

Unwinding at the Gänseliesel

When's the last time I looked at her
as I hurried past? Today, I just want

to go to campus—really, to get there
without going there. That's the trouble with me,

explains the obliging voice inside my ear:
I don't make time for in-betweens.

I aspire to something more direct
than a straight line. I worry about being late

and about being early. For this
I have been called tightly-wound,

and I'm inclined to believe whoever
says it. But what in me is string?

And what sets others free
from entanglements and snags

if they don't wind themselves tight?
Oh, how often the Lichtenberg statue

calls over to that bronze goose girl
to remind her to loosen up.

Gänseliesel, you must be so stiff
from standing there unbending

these hundred years. I hope
I don't disappoint you

in my readiness for someone to look at me
and say, *Hm, you've misunderstood*

the rules all along, haven't you? To reach out
and unspool me a little. To lend me some slack.

Take Your Daughter to Work Day at the Projective Plane Factory

The only equipment here is the mind, minding higher-dimensional space into existence, if we can say existence here.

So what is it you do all day, I ask.

My mother thinks up another plane before answering. *The same thing you do*, she tells me. *Twist ideas into new shapes in my mind.*

I sit there watching her make spaces where our rules don't apply.

Over lunch, her coworkers comment on our likeness. Our stature, our dark hair, they mean. Our obliging smiles, our willingness to parallel any line.

Obligingly, we smile. We chuckle three-dimensionally.

In the afternoon, she takes me on a tour of a projective plane. *You know, it may not look like much—if we can say look here—but you can use a projective plane to build almost any surface.*

I know that, of course. I visualize the strange surfaces of our home.

In the projective plane even parallel lines cross each other.

In the projective plane I say, *I take after Dad's side of the family, not yours.* I mean, *There is nothing I won't disagree with you about.*

Her gaze flattens. Flattens me. In the projective plane we are more alike than ever.

In the projective plane I open my mouth to ask a question and my mother tells me to be quiet. She needs to think about the next projective plane.

I storm off into a bewildering geometry.

Remembering Galois on his Deathbed

Don't cry. I need all my courage to die at twenty.
—Évariste Galois, to his brother Alfred

I'm not interested in his contributions
to abstract algebra. Don't try to explain
the theory named for him. Just promise
you'll pick up the phone when I call you
after reading his last words. Like a brother,

a phone call can hold so much silence.
The kind that makes me feel my sadness
is too heavy for the two of us. The kind
you think is all you know how to say. And

am I any better, when, problem-laden, you
dial me? For all my words, I can't find any
that aren't a burden. I make every feeling

of yours into a feeling about me.
The only way we know to be siblings:

Don't cry. I need all your courage and mine.

For All the Times I've Thought about Taking Self-Defense

There is no comfort without caution.
I'm most at ease with jagged keys in hand.

Or with the lock in my tired hand
(I slump out of bed to check it again).

As though by being willing to check
and recheck, I could ever earn safety.

Recheck. A question of earning, not safety.
They say: be alert, don't talk on the phone,

alertly pretend to talk on the phone.
Awash in tips to ward off violence

when warding could never stop violence. How easy
it'd be to break in. So many ways

I could break, and only one way to defend
myself: blamelessness. There is no comfort.

Catalog of Apologies (What I Learned from Saying Sorry)

Tell me this isn't a love
poem. Tell me it's not about the future.
Give me another word that can be a charm,
a wish, a surrender, and a threat
at once. If you have one, it must also mean *sorry*.
A word's the kind of blessing

I believe in, not the kind of blessing
that rains down from on high. It's love
like in tennis: *I acknowledge that I have nothing*. Yes, *sorry*
says what it could conceal. But I know this, too: in any future
where we're all happy, the past is a threat.
Any word we use as a charm

only lasts until its charm
wears off. Maybe that's what a blessing
is: the suppressed threat
of its transience. Maybe all love
eventually dissolves like any sour candy, and *future*
is just a word for mistakes we haven't made yet. Sorry

I couldn't believe long enough even to write this poem. Sorry
I brought you here under false pretenses. Still, I mouth it like a charm,
sorry, sorry, sorry: a promise to my future
self that no one will hate me. Asking strangers for their silent blessing
as though it will make me worthy of love.
My aching need not to be seen as a threat

or an object of contempt. This is my threat
response: not fight or flight but sorry.
My bad. I'm bad—the worst. How did I learn to love
the easy way out? Me and my apologetic charm:
sorry as automatic as a blessing
after a sneeze. A long future

of avoiding conflict ahead of me. The future
an emotional debt I've amassed, as threatening
as a promise. All because I was blessed
with a will that bends. Because I can be sorry
for myself and about myself at the same time. I'm a charmed
snake; I'd apologize to a mongoose for being eaten. For falling, to love.

A future I hope to avoid: teaching my daughter to be sorry
and not meaning it as a threat. Presenting it like a charm

for her to wear on a bracelet—a blessing. A token of my love.

Self-Portrait as Best Friend

I could name all your exes
 in order, each of your roommates
and their respective infractions—
 you used to say, ten years ago,
that you never stay friends with anybody
 longer than two years.
Every gone person a reminder
 that I'm still here.
It doesn't come easily to me
 to say things to people
that feel true, easier to say things
 that feel good being said,
but you make me feel
 like most of a person.

Aubade with Time Difference

In these morning hours, on German streets, I could be anyone I don't know. The people who care about me most are asleep, and I could start sprinting away from where I need to go, lie to every person who tries to talk to me. Alone, I am carrying the full weight of myself. From German, I could translate the same word as *carrying* or *wearing* but I know, for me, it's carrying. Every act either in-character or out and only myself to discern it. On the street, I don't make eye contact with anyone, pretend not to see whatever it is I see outside me. I carry myself gingerly, with exhaustion, knowing I won't wake up for hours. Not until the morning messages dawn on my phone, saying you're conscious of me again, saying you haven't forgotten, saying you know again who I am.

I've Been Trying to Write a Poem Comparing Myself to a Loose Tooth

Yes, I still have my baby teeth

in a little box in my childhood

bedroom. No, I don't

know what to do with them.

Many of my teeth didn't fall out

of natural causes, never

even got loose. So

dentists pulled them

like unwilling truths

from my mouth and I think

that's more like it, not a loose tooth

but one that refuses

to wiggle even a little,

whose roots won't dissolve

even though they're supposed to

Do You Take Me

You tell me you're applying for jobs in Alaska and I want to uproot everything and move to Alaska, even though people aren't supposed to follow their best friends,

especially not to Alaska. For so long I worried about silly things like whether to call you *best friend* and now I have the audacity to feel sad when you text me a joke

about how you've become best friends with a tree. You know I would let a Greek god turn me into a tree for you, even if I had to be a cottonwood who grows that fluff

I'm allergic to, like how you're allergic to your cats. I don't just wanna be the person you call to bury the body but the soil and the shovel and the unlucky

corpse, too, not to mention the detective after you, and of course if I tracked you down I'd help you adopt a new identity and we'd carry that dark secret together.

You only introduce me to the people you date right before you break up with them so it's a good thing you don't often ask me for relationship advice,

especially since I don't know much about that kind of thing. I never was good at letting people know me, except you, but you go on trying to marry me off

anyway. For you marriage is a covenant with God, but you know by now that you are me and God's only mutual friend. I wonder how it works: Does he need to be

party to all covenants? Or could we make one just the two of us, just to be safe, just to say we'll always need each other the same amount?

In 2020, They Tear Down My Former Elementary School

Gone the play structure, the trees, gone
the gymnasium, where I so often played
capture the flag and ultimate dodgeball,

where I learned I wasn't built to capture
flags or play ultimate anything. People tear into

the plans for the new school building
in the neighborhood Facebook group,
as though a wheelchair-inaccessible building

with an aged HVAC system is something to rally around,
though really they're rallying around property taxes.

The proposed structure's an eyesore, commenters agree,
more like a high-rise than a school. But the crew has excavated
the old foundation now, and structural steel soon

will arrive: metal ribs exposed like the skeleton of the place
that taught me that there's a right way to estimate,

that you shouldn't put capital letters in the middle
of words, that it's better to pass notes than to whisper,
that girls and boys shouldn't be friends. They're building

new stories now. Of course, everyone's
still thinking about what was once here

by the time the exterior masonry's
finished—soon they'll install siding
and ceiling grids—and if I moved home

and sent my children to this school one day
I'm sure neighbors would still be fussing

about the new building and its flexible
classroom furniture and maybe what they'd mean
is that they'd wanted every childhood

to look like their own. Now our old school
is unrecognizable: resembles, perhaps,

by no stretch of the imagination
a squat office complex, red-brick

no longer, and faces a different direction.

Meeting Minutes from the Catch-Up Call

Call to order

Reception of latecomers

Agenda items

Payment of membership dues (ceremony of compliments)

Motion to visit each other soon

Brief presentation by each attendee of personal, professional, romantic developments

Committees' reports

Revelation of hometown scandals

Technical difficulties

Accounting of former classmates who have married

Accounting of former classmates who have died

Discussion: How did they die?

Vote held in cases of disagreement (results to be disseminated after tabulation)

Unfinished business

Divination of own deaths (omens supplied by attendees)

Divination of each other's marriages

Closing

Recurrence of technical difficulties

Offering of a sacrificial memory

Adjourned

Next meeting: in several months

Self-Portrait as 3-Manifold

I ask you what kind of topology shape I'd be
though I know that's not the term for it, and

you say a 3-manifold. Tell me to imagine
an object that I can zoom in on and see

that every face is three-dimensional.
I can't, of course. Only know how

to understand things with flat surfaces.
It's not supposed to make sense

to us, you say. To whom, then?
And why a 3-manifold?

It's just a feeling, you tell me.
You don't know much about 3-manifolds at all.

I Hate the Word “Adulging”

but I sure do spend a lot of time acting:
a girl dressed up as a capable young woman
who knows the I-don't-know-what that gets
a person through the day all alone and intact.

Once, I was a girl dressed up as a girl
from the 1950s and I started across a stage
all alone. On my red tricycle, streamers gleaming:
for a moment I must have looked unstoppable.

I want someone to take care of me. Not in the 1950s
way—I get by just fine on my own, until I don't.
I'm a stoppable force, but I don't take pride in it. Still
like to think of myself as a person who's going places.

There I was, rolling along just fine on my own
and before I was even halfway there, I was stuck.
Pedaling and going nowhere. And isn't that how it is,
straining every day to push myself into the future?

How many years has that feeling stuck with me:
Suddenly I'm not acting. Not following the script.
Maybe someone rescued me—maybe I pushed myself
onward. I don't know. The memory ends there.

Dear Advice Columnist

Of course I have to lie to myself
to get through the day. The sort of
false accounting that lets me like myself

at least a little: I didn't really mean it,
I did my best, I didn't know what else to do.
Why bare the truth to you, unless

it's a skewed one? No one wants you
to tell them how wrong they are,
and aren't they usually? Wrong,

I mean. You must know that better
than anyone. And still you go on believing
in them, whether or not you believe them.

On Our Birthday, You Unwrap a Klein Bottle

and I know you've talked about them
so many times, Klein bottles and planes

and whatever else, but I'm so good
at turning my brain off,

or really at keeping it on
and changing the channel,

which I hate so much
when Mom and Dad do.

I call it *mmhmm-ing*, when I know
whatever I say isn't getting through,

that they're contained
in some space I cannot

access—but how I long to
be the only thing

filling it up. What good
is a bottle that can't hold

anything at all, but you
handle it so carefully.

For a long time, I've avoided
handling these fragile things

with my clumsy words
because I don't trust myself

not to break them, or I
don't trust them not to

break. A real Klein bottle
can't exist in three dimensions,

just like a family can't exist
in a poem. I want to say

to you and Mom and Dad, I'm sorry
that I've brought you into this

one-sided nonorientable space
I've created, sorry

that it has no boundary,
sorry that I've trapped you

inside the glass of my needing.
And if I'd just listen this time,

I might hear you saying
wasn't I listening,

saying there *is* no inside.

Home Is Where

we go around calling each other
the wrong names, saying the wrong things,
watching each other mess up

simple tasks: running the dishwasher
with no detergent, twisting the doorknob
right off the door. Of course

we try to change each other.
We're the ones on our knees with towels
when the shower starts leaking

through the floor, opening the unwilling
windows when the smoke alarm
goes off for the third night this week.

Of course, we don't change.
The oven always needs to be cleaned.
And how many times have you told me

not to shout from room to room—
you can't understand me
through these walls.

But you can guess what I'm saying.

The Ordeal

We saw each other five days a week—
Sometimes more—for four years

They say that's what high-school
Friendship is: proximity

And I wanted it: to be close
The way a future is close

The way it's what you live toward
We lived toward distance

We spent our days trying to get out
Of the place that brought us together

Away from narrow lockers
And Prom Court ballots

Even the orchestra room
Where the two of us hid

Away from the cafeteria
And ate our lunches

Where we practiced
The same measures

Day after day, and they never
Sounded the way

They were supposed to
When we'd played the final notes

Of our string duet
The judge said, *Well, that was an ordeal*

It was an ordeal. We got through it.

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