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NEBUCHADNEZZAR

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Jesse Kay Martin

May 2009

UMI Number: 1470978

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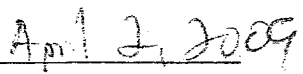

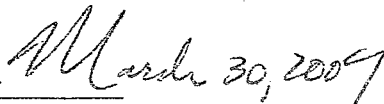
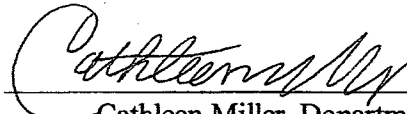
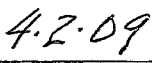
SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

by  
Jesse Kay Martin

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## ABSTRACT

### NEBUCHADNEZZAR

by Jesse Kay Martin

The title of this collection recalls the Biblical king who was condemned by God to run mad and eat grass for seven years, at the end of which time, he stood up, praised God, and returned to his palace. My poems concern themselves with the moments of clarity that bring an end to madness or, more problematically, with the experience of worship that emerges from madness. The madness that threatens my speakers comes from the opposing pressures of culture and faith. The collection contains lyric poems about psychological instability and faith as well as virginity, religious vision, suicide, road rage, work, love, and readings of works of literature and art—poems that are each written in many cases to expose the fragility of the intersection between psychological stability and faith.

I use different forms to express the different causes of madness and points of entry to worship that my speaker experiences. Free verse is the ideal for capturing rambling mania, yet formal verse can also be appropriate for expressing the obsessive, repetitive nature of madness. Energy—whether the energy of madness or the energy of religious awe in workshop—can be foregrounded by a tight form. Because of the confinement of form, the poems' emotions seem to burst through the poems' seams. The speakers in my poems grapple with difficult personal questions and experience bitter doubts and recurring seasons of madness, but they also experience sublime moments of peace, purpose and ecstasy, which they struggle to express.

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## Preface

The title of this collection recalls the Biblical king who was condemned by God to run mad and eat grass for seven years, at the end of which time he stood up, praised God, and returned to his palace. My poems concern themselves with the clarity that brings an end to madness, or more problematically, with the moments of worship that emerge from madness. While this may sound paradoxical, madness is almost the foundation or prerequisite for worship. Thus clarity, or centeredness (what I call worship) both springs from and ends madness. The story of Nebuchadnezzar was not chosen because of its pat ending—the ending is in fact very troubling—but because the narrative is a framework for the poet, speaker and maybe the reader to use when interpreting madness. If the speaker is experiencing grass-nibbling instability in her personal life, perhaps that means she is on track for a return to mental prosperity. The biblical king reached circumstantial stability, but mine is the stability of interpretation—knowing what madness is and where it is going. The centeredness that this belief brings to the speaker is a calm that will soothe madness, even when circumstances remain maddening.

The madness that threatens my speaker comes from the powerful pressures of culture—both academic and religious. The collection contains lyric poems about psychological instability and faith, as well as virginity, religious vision, suicide, road rage, work, love—poems that are each written in many cases to expose the fragility of the intersection between psychological stability and faith.



Poets often cherish and dwell on the broken; as a Christian poet, I, too, am rooted in brokenness, but seek a spiritual form of redemption. Acknowledging and even celebrating brokenness can provide insight into redemption. While not every poem in this collection is explicitly religious, I identify the themes of restraint, depravity and self-deprecation, destiny, and, of course, worship as saturated with faith.

The primary speaker in my collection is a young woman who feels the pressure of many conflicting expectations: to be independent and career-driven, to be socially and domestically skilled, to be content with singleness and to be a good future partner, to be outstanding in the literary community and outstanding in the faith community. Her friends are married and hosting parties, or they are graduate students who hang out at coffee shops, or they are being groomed for management in some large corporation. My speaker has an excellent education and feels responsible to put it to good use. In the poem “Editors,” for example, the speaker confronts the reality that like most young people she hasn’t secured her position successfully in the workplace.

There are  
parentheses left open in our lives—  
not only with each other, but ourselves.  
We scan the page for what it lacks.  
Our lives, just like our drafts, are unrevised;  
my final resume is still tk.

Coping with the pressure to “become” is part of the madness that inspires the title of the collection.

Another poem, “Virginity,” like “Editors,” does not deal explicitly with religious issues, but its subject matter—sexual abstinence—is rarely promoted outside of religious subcultures today. For the Christian poet, virginity becomes a symbol of faith in all areas of life—faith that there is something better coming, that the spiritual reality is more real than the physical. Another poem, “Reading *As I Lay Dying*,” is even less religious in theme, but the two poems share a similar lightness of tone, although the speaker in the latter voices insecurities and hints at bitterness. In “Reading *As I Lay Dying*,” a disconnect exists between what the speaker experiences reading literature and in living her life. Literature shows her what *could* be, and the tension caused by her desire for the possible resembles the tension of the Christian’s faith in the unseen—the circumstances of her religious vocation.

There is a playfulness in the ekphrastic poems (poems about literature as well as visual art), but at the same time, a sense of estrangement and isolation. The speaker is often in a position of analyzing, rather than existing. She doesn’t know how to interpret what she observes—or even what to feel in response. “National Gallery, London” is an example of this sensation; the speaker dwindles and becomes numb from her attempts to connect with “art.”

Other poems in the collection treat faith explicitly. In “Contrasts” the speaker finds a moment of worship in madness. The contrasts she sees in the world are picturesque, but they lead her to see the contrast between her own depressed state and the energy of God in the visible contrasts of the natural world. The contrast between “the textured gray clouds” and “the drenched green hills” reminds her of God’s presence in

the pillar of cloud in *Exodus*. Similarly, in “Disposable Hymnal,” worship flows from the madness of distraction, inattentiveness, and even one’s sense of uselessness. The end of the poem approaches religious ecstasy with an excess of imagery in the style of the Metaphysical poets.

As models for how to write about faith—the intangible—I allude to many Christian poets, or other poets who have written about religious themes in a compelling way. Some poets in particular have influenced me as I attempt to explore the pivotal intersection between madness and worship: Mary Karr, Louise Glück, John Donne, and George Herbert.

My speaker experiences the grass-devouring, bedraggling madness of Nebuchadnezzar and the unspeakable beauty of lifting her head. Mary Karr’s collection *Sinners Welcome* sets a precedent for this kind of epiphany. With her trademark honesty and violent imagery applied to her conversion to Catholicism, Karr explores the physicality of the incarnation. She also investigates the moment I am interested in—the mystical switch from madness to worship. Frequently in Karr’s poems, the speaker experiences that instant, inexplicable transition from feeling impossibly raw to a feeling of expansion and healing. She places heavy emphasis on the physicality of the religious experience, which is one way to make a subject so personal and abstract more accessible. She usually writes in free verse, which is appropriate for the visceral and un-analyzed imagery that drives her poems.

Louise Glück’s collection *The Wild Iris* is another influence on this project. In her book, Glück represents the natural cycle of the seasons, which for me is inextricably

bound to the idea of resurrection. I admire the subtlety of how Glück's poems deal with faith as an implicit theme.

The speaker of one of her poems is a snowdrop, reincarnated in the spring, suggesting Christ resurrected yet retaining human frailties; also expressed is the idea of the emotional life coming in seasons. Nebuchadnezzar tells his story in the book of *Daniel* and says of his madness, "At the end of that time, I raised my eyes to heaven," implying that there was a pre-determined end to the season of madness he endured. *The Wild Iris* employs this same notion of the cycle of the seasons; there is surprise and wonderment each spring in nature and each renewal of the self. These rebirths are both inevitable and inexplicable.

The struggle to make one's life cohere with the constructs of one's of faith is also central in the writing of John Donne and George Herbert. Their extended conceits and tight formal verse convey a passionate energy; the poet cannot communicate his meaning in enough ways! Donne's conceits are equally compelling in his love poems and in his religious poems. His famous sonnet titled with a plea to "Batter my heart, three-personed God" is full of violent energy; his poem "Hymn to God my God, in my sickness" combines many of his conceits—the body as a map, and a globe, life as a progression to the West, the union in the speaker of Christ and Adam, the paradox of being cast down by God in order to be raised up—in a passionate legacy. Donne operates under the assumption that everything in the physical realm is a representation of a spiritual reality. The regular meter and stanza groupings are the ideal form for such a poem; each stanza

layers on another conceit. In this poem, madness and worship have become conflated into one in a moment of religious ecstasy.

Herbert, while less energetic, uses conceits to explore the relationship between his art and his faith. In “Jordan 1” and “Jordan 2” Herbert questions the ability of his aesthetic to live up to his religious ideals—but he poses these questions about form *in perfect poetic form*. Herbert’s commitment to his craft even as he doubts it has inspired me to use a variety of poetic forms and tones in my attempt to map those transformational moments where madness becomes worship—where mania finds a center. I use different forms to express the different causes of madness and points of entry to worship that my speaker experiences. In Mary Karr’s writing, the tangible imagery dominates the form—in Louise Glück’s, formal verse would dominate the subtle imagery—making free verse the perfect medium for such poems. Formal verse can also be appropriate for expressing the obsessive, repetitive nature of madness. I find the villanelle to be an especially good example of this with its recurring refrain—the sentiment that haunts the speaker. Energy—whether the energy of madness or the energy of religious awe in workshop—can be foregrounded by a tight form. Because of the confinement of form, the poem’s emotions seem to burst through the poem’s seams. The speakers in my poems grapple with difficult personal questions, experience bitter doubts and recurring seasons of madness, but also sublime moments of peace, purpose and ecstasy, which they struggle to express.

*A Work in Progress*

I floss each night to keep my gums from bleed-  
ing, whiten my teeth with bleach—to counteract  
my morning coffee—which makes my gums just bleed  
(is that a valid rhyme?), astringent... \_\_\_act(?)  
and Sure prescription strength deodorant  
(a perfect iambic pentameter line! But wait!  
The meter's name is anapestic! Why?).  
The products burn my underarms and face.

I put myself through pain at night to be  
presentable and no one thanks me for  
or wants to know my pains—and I'll just vent  
it all, this sprezzaturatastic sonnet  
is equally thankless, and a painful chore.  
Fine. My theme is, femininity.

First Weekend After College

\$1.00 ribbons

\$13.95 stamps

the Martha Stewart collection

card stock and matching envelopes

flimsy wooden boxes, shelves and frames for painting

My sister used me as a chauffeur and flirting prop then ditched me at the craft store.

Keane

Snow Patrol

The Who

Clap Your Hands Say Yeah!

Sigur Ros

My brother borrowed my CDs and my car to impress his latest crush.

black dress with plunging neckline

lacy camisole

chandelier earrings

Even my mom sat up in bed and borrowed my clothes to wear to a fundraiser.

I was left at home.

A graduate of something.

A cloudy day, the leaves on the trees clear as a bell.

Reading As I Lay Dying

I can't decipher who I love more,  
Cash Bundren, the careful carpenter,  
or Jewel astride his own spotted horse.

These days I'm ridiculously heart sore,  
reduced to imaginary fictional misters,  
and can't decipher who I love more.

If Cash were mine I could be so demure.  
Intensely silent acts speak his worth,  
but then Jewel flows by on the spots of his horse,

his face, drained green or boiling, tells the story  
he feels. Raging strength or quiet vigor—  
I can't decipher who I love more.

To me these brothers are not classroom lore,  
but objectified, at-my-command suitors.  
My heart shudders at Jewel on his spotted horse,

and Cash, enduring, makes my heart twang for  
him—a craftsman, impassive, always there—  
and though I can't decipher who I love more,  
they don't regard me—Cash or Jewel or the horse.



*Recipe for a Mother on Mother's Day*

“Insert garlic pieces randomly.”

“Trim and grate coarsely.”

“Serves 5.”

“Taste and adjust if necessary.”

“Whip until firm to the touch.”

“Add more if desired.”

“Reduce heat.”

“Garnish for special presentation.”

“Set aside.”

Virginity

*An English Major's Virginity*

Last night  
I slept with Hamlet, tonight,  
with Peter Pan.  
The Phantom of the Opera  
and the Scarlet Pimpernel  
vie for my hand.

*Virginity: A Risky Investment*

I have found the prettiest place,  
where the deep V of my dress  
frames the V of my breasts.  
So white, and the fine hairs glisten.  
Sculpted in pillows and porcelain,  
the place feels chilly, but is warm to the touch.  
I've never shown this part before.  
I've never even seen it, framed like this.

I won't show it tonight, not to everyone, and that's why my face warps.  
Still before the mirror,  
I swiftly stab the safety pin through the black heavy cloth,  
and close it above my breasts,  
dropping the curtain on the star of my body.

It's not just tonight.  
What if no one ever sees it?  
What if it dims?

*The Bennet Facets of My Virginity*

Lydia didn't notice she lost it  
Kitty can't give it away  
Mary's is as good as lost because she'll never lose it  
Lizzy willfully believing that anything has value without its loss  
Jane waiting for someone to claim her

*This is My Time?*

It's time to stop my sass.  
The cellulite seconds are  
adding up. Time to produce  
something. I want  
something in my belly or  
something on the  
bookshelves.

Time to open my eyes.

It's high time to build our  
resumes and invest our virginity,  
so how does beauty is truth  
and truth beauty fit in? If  
we don't get a job now, we never  
will. But this is also our only chance  
to wear skinny jeans...

*Disposable Hymnal*

I stretch my creamy paper wings to the music  
and look at my sisters coasting beside me  
and all around me in the shabby glam of the high school theater.  
I soar through spiritual space in your hands.  
The airflow that supports me is not your energy,  
which fluctuates and falters as you stare at the dingy red curtain.  
I beat my wings on the particles of God Himself  
who is shining like shook foil whether I am in hand or under foot.  
I follow the angels who are dipping and diving like mermaids at a sea ceremony.  
I fly under angel arms,  
finding shelter in their airstream.  
Shake me with emphasis,  
hold me elevated,  
a pulse for each amen,  
a beat for each musical note of alleluia,  
and so join with God and me and the angels and the music notes  
as we all swirl like the Great America *Delirium* roller coaster,  
like a 70's psychedelic dream sequence,  
like Bambi and Feline, twitter-pated, walking on air.  
I was printed for this—and for you to throw me away on the way home.

*Opheliad*

I lay my head on my bed to dream  
My skin so thin the pillow meets bone.  
I want to see her once again—  
to see—even in sleep—her greet her end.  
I wasn't there—I have to know  
what her body spoke when her soul gleamed.

I see her now  
under a lake  
under blue fire  
her hair floats wide  
her eyes awake.  
I see her now.

Am I in bed? or bedded there  
covered with waters, lake aflame.  
She parts her lips, and they are mine.  
The bubbles chip my teeth. Supine,  
gurgling: "You know"—we are ashamed—  
"It was not you I couldn't bear."

Agonistes Everlasting

I.

I'm totally writing  
some *Tuck Everlasting* fan fiction  
where she DOES drink up  
immortality  
and she and what's his name  
live an everlasting postmodern love story.

They can live in every era and country,  
in the opulent rise and epic fall of every empire,  
sometimes happy  
sometimes cheating,  
but always chandeliers and sunglasses  
and they have to come back to each other in the "end".

But this is all coming from a stupid old break up that still stings.

Isn't there someone out there  
who you want to be ok with again,  
someday.

II.

HOW DID SHE NOT DRINK?  
When she felt the first twinge of age  
how did she not regret it?  
She was so brave as to attest that life, as it is, is bearable.  
She said *bring it* to finding love again, to old age, to death.

She knew he was out there.  
She knew she was withholding from him what no one else could ever give him.

III.

And we know she had no one helping her—  
no one in her life like my dad, my girlfriends: *No, don't call him.*

There are people in my life who are more present, scoffing at him.  
He is disadvantaged by absence.  
His demands have no power to control,  
just the power to wound  
still.

IV.

Ouch ouch ouch.

V.

What if she had a pimple when she drank?

Ok, bad example, but my point is maybe there's no moment  
worth freezing forever

because something bad is always passing  
just like something good is always passing.

VI.

Art that advocates *embracing life as it is* makes me wish I was dead.

*Brave New World*—

the idea of happiness is worth any suffering.

I just don't see it.

VII.

How could she bear to not drink.

How could she bear to drink.

Still

I'm still sitting on the toilet  
in the library  
even though I finished peeing a long time ago.  
Someone has turned the main lights off.  
The urge to kick at the stall door in protest subsided pretty quickly  
and instead I'm motionless.  
It's very important to keep still,  
so I exert every muscle.  
I think about things nowhere near clinical depression.  
The old lady who broke the world record in the two mile for the 50-59 age bracket—  
it was as if her arms were doing all the work and her legs were just swinging easily  
back and forth.  
I feel myself coiled in the starting blocks,  
that completely taut misery—  
each muscle in the fetal position.  
Why do I have to hold so perfectly still?  
Because I can't move.



*After a Long Struggle*

driving through the central valley  
suddenly I look out of the car

twilight is living here

the hills darken  
as the sky melts and drips  
golden drizzle on their brows

I don't see a single dwelling  
a bird flaps madly  
the crops are blackening  
and from inside the car I can feel the air outside cooling

after a long struggle,

the long precise rows of sprinklers  
are the first thing in months to touch my heart

*The Resurrection*

He is in no hurry.  
Elements have power over Him no longer.  
Now the spikes know they never pinned Him to the cross at all.  
They are stunned as He releases them.

He compels the shroud to billow and snap around Him,  
like a second womb, rebirth on His terms.

Those nails, awestruck, are still floating somewhere,  
set free forever from laws of gravity.  
That shroud had never been partner to such a dance;  
she was accustomed to being the servant of death.

*Editors*

Such countless worries weigh on women at work:  
a boy won't call, a family is too far,  
but these we do not share. Monotony's  
enough. We carefully pass the sheaves of eleven  
by seventeen paper back and forth  
so not to give each other paper cuts.  
We brandish red pens with a flourish, splash  
the bloody ink on fingers, even forearms.  
One girl has short nails to rebuke herself;  
another, long nails bolstering herself.  
I watch the hair on my arms stand up and lay down  
under the vent; my fingers swell up and  
deflate; the pinky so stiff at the end of the day,  
too weak to type a key without the weight  
of the whole hand rolling on it. My hands  
become a microcosm peopled by  
scribes, or 19<sup>th</sup> century mill girls.

There are  
parentheses left open in our lives—  
not only with each other, but ourselves.  
We scan the page for what it lacks.  
Our lives, just like our drafts, are unrevised;  
my final resumé is still tk<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> an editing term for material that is still “to come”

Contrasts

On mornings when I wake up before my alarm, the house that is way too close to my window looks the most beautiful thing to my blurry eyes: copper against the blue sky. Then when my alarm goes off and I put my glasses on the sky isn't as blue and the house is back to its old barfy mustard yellow self. Even if I take my glasses off again I can't bring back the bright, energetic contrast and I just want to roll over once and then I'll get up and shower. An hour later, I might get up after one more fetal roll.

Out at my car, securing my thermos and books I stop and look up at the California hills at the head of my street. Again, such deep emotion in contrast! The textured rain clouds, up east there, cast a wet sheen over the green-seeming hills that a clear sky would reveal to be dead-brown and dry. I always feel like God is up there, like in the Old Testament. *Clouds and thick darkness surround Him* today, for fun.

*A Dream of Moving On*

So I or Caroline or Lauren are engaged  
and I and one of them are sitting in a car  
that's sunk in sand and there we plan the wedding day  
I've re- and re-designed. And "Modern Bride" is far  
more complicated than I imagined! The food...  
the centerpieces...—then he's coming down the dune.

His hair is sparkly blonde; his skin is pink and gold.  
His skinny bones are corded now with pretty muscles.  
He's *not* invited to the wedding. But that old  
beg is on his face since I said, "I have devils  
enough without you." Green promises reproach me  
for breaking them, moving on industriously.

Doing our yard work, wearing Mickey Mouse ears,  
significant with hope he looks above my face  
and suddenly I'm wearing Minnie Mouse ears.  
I whip them off, blushing angry, and look away.  
Then I wake up. *Get out of my subconscious.*  
*Just get the hell out. It's been long enough.*

"Nature" (in "air quotes")

On the final off-ramp of a grisly commute,  
a great white crane comes into view, sometimes out of mist, sometimes against blue sky.  
They tore something down  
and they are building something—a Jewish cultural community center.  
This is a heavy machinery crane, in case that wasn't clear.  
I can never tell at first if the crane is in action;  
it never has been yet.  
What is so mesmerizing?  
The crane is so gigantic, I can't wrap my sense of sight around it—at such a distance  
wavering like a mirage.

Maybe someday I will drive off the overpass looking at it.

I want a lot of death in this poem.

Can the crane count as Nature?  
Pretty much not.  
It counts as a symbol.  
I'll make it a symbol of nature.

I know it's shallow of me,  
but I like nature best when it's out of context—i.e. when it's not in nature.

I spent a total of an hour  
at the drive-thru window of the pharmacy one day  
while the guy puzzled over my insurance.  
("NO! I WAS BORN IN '84!")  
He didn't deserve for me to yell at him.)

While he was on the phone, first with the insurance and then with the doctor,  
ladybugs came to minister to me.  
One had no spots,  
one had many deep dark black spots.  
They were more of a brown-orange than a red.  
I loved them—why did I love them?  
Because I never see ladybugs any more.  
They seemed like mystical visitors  
bringing simplicity.  
But I didn't want them to come in the car  
in case they got trapped  
and died and turned into shells.

A few weeks ago  
rolling at a crawl through the Safeway parking lot  
I saw a brilliant flashing  
and *No way!* It was a red-winged blackbird  
(a black bird with orange shoulder pads, if there is anyone more bird illiterate than I am).  
I bet these are common enough, but I don't think I've ever noticed one in my life,  
let alone outside Safeway.  
It hopped to rest in the scraggly island of the parking lot  
beside a shopping cart with its two front wheels hooked up over the curb.  
I turned in my seat. I could have hit a pedestrian.

It's like the first time I was in love (just stick with the nature symbol here, people),  
on another overpass in bumper to bumper traffic  
and a crane—and this time I'm talking about a bird, an egret maybe—  
in the special light of a cloudy day  
flew glinting over all the silver and gray cars stopped on the freeway I was crossing.

I turned around in my seat in my memory—  
oh, still driving!—to watch until it was gone.

And I want to love nature, but I can't engage with it in this poem  
without killing someone or being killed.  
And I bet it's plain that I only like it when nature makes me feel special  
or observant or long suffering etc.  
That's the only time I give "nature" the time of day.

*Get-Together*

Two friends get together, one newly married, the other un.  
“You’re married!!!!!!” the second friend is squealing,  
touched that the bride has a friendly caress to spare

as she pops the cap off her chapstick—  
the personalized chapstick that was her wedding favor.  
The single friend hasn’t broken the seal on hers yet.



Google Search: "Husband"

husband definition

Don't let your husband define you.

husband poems

Don't write too many poems about him.

cheating husband

Who is Selena?!

selena's husband

Selena's *husband*?! I didn't know he was married!

husband abuse

Me: I've never heard of husband abuse.

Social worker friend: Because men are stronger than their wives, battered women have to use weapons to defend themselves. Because they use weapons they receive more severe prison sentences.

controlling husband

I can match any husband on this one.

husband jokes

*"Do you really believe your husband when he tells you he goes fishing every weekend?" asked Jane's best friend.*

*"Why shouldn't I?" said Jane.*

*"Well, maybe he is having an affair."*

*"No way" said Jane. "He never returns with any fish!"*

husband quotes

*That quiet mutual gaze of a trusting husband and wife is like the first moment of rest or refuge from a great weariness or a great danger.*

—George Eliot

Haiku

Live satellite of the earth  
as my desktop background:  
the dark always approaching.

Previously refusing to come,  
the deaf cat yowls hideously in the hall.  
Now our doors are all shut.

Arranged myself  
like a table for two.  
Waited.

Posing disconsolate  
but it shouldn't even count  
as loss.

"Snow of new beginnings..."  
"Snow of depression..."  
Sometimes it is just scientific snow.

Sudden daffodils in the front yard.  
I want to cut them for my room,  
but she brings me backyard daisies instead.

The neighbors  
have a hummingbird feeder.  
We do not.

That can't be  
the sun—dull orange bead  
In the trees

I always check to see  
if a flock of birds is  
parrots.

"Gmail-Inbox (1)"  
I wish. And I've been humming  
my ring tone all day.

5CTZ796

Driving on 101

I fall in behind a boy in a black car  
and follow him,  
Ninety-mile-an-hour man.

I can see an ear and the high curve of his cheek in the side view mirror,  
and occasionally the sinews of his hand as he shades his eyes.

I feel closer to him than to any man.

For four hours

the wind whistles at my cheap car,  
but I keep a distance so he will not hear the screaming  
and know my need.

I wear myself out squinting

and hugging the yellow line on the turns to get a glimpse of him.

When he exits

I am sufficiently calm to let him go.

I do not veer across to follow him...

I only turn around in my seat, dangerously, for a moment,  
for one good look.

Two Raccoons

I'm hurt by the scorn of my baby brother.  
My headlights sweep over a lump of raccoon—  
its eyes glazed; the broken jaw a whimper—

I am distracted, gagging as I center  
my car astride it. I'll remember soon  
how I'm hurt by the scorn of my baby brother.

As I think of him, far away he encounters  
the infamous City College albino raccoon.  
Its eyes glazed and pale jaw never whimpers.

He's walking home from a party, sober  
I hope (he's underage and on probation).  
Hurt, I try to scorn my baby brother.

He shoots and misses the ghost-raccoon with his air  
gun, but here the roadkill is hit again and again—  
its eyes glazed; the broken jaw a whimper.

He thinks I should do drugs, be happier.  
To him, I am (to me, he is) a raccoon.  
Hurt by the scorn of my baby brother,  
my eyes glaze, and in my car I whimper.

*Bath After Surgery*

The slow-motion realization of those drawing water from the Nile  
during the ten plagues on Egypt:  
the silty blood is drifting along the bottom of the tub.

Tiny air bubbles barnacle themselves onto my hairs  
and as I stroke my legs there is a mass Exodus.  
The refugees flee to the surface of the bath.

*Terrible Dynamics of Disagreement*

Seeking a safe stance in this discussion  
stomachy sucker-punchy  
eyes rolling back buck  
hearing sounds that must make up words  
*yes*  
*mhm*  
plunging tongue stuck  
trachea padlocked  
legs curling up towards my chest (dead spider-like?)  
thoughts breaking up  
walk out: worse  
wait it out  
can't talk back can't talk  
I look blank at him  
his confident words slip and drip off me  
I can't hear him, but his lips cut  
and disgust roughs me up

Nebuchadnezzar

The speaker's mom mentions one morning,  
"I'd like to put you on lithium," timidly.  
The speaker has to sit down  
to argue, "No way! You're the bipolar one!"

On the kitchen floor one night her brother stands  
on her back (why is she even on the floor?!)  
and grinds her hip bones into the floor and won't  
get off when she chokes out "I'm hyperven—  
tilating" so I chase him in a taut  
circle around and around the staircase and scream  
in a whisper "-----!"  
There is no way to express what an expletive  
is in my house. He feared for his life. When I  
approach him he cries "you're a delicate blossom!"  
to appease me.

Not me! It's her! The speaker! It's not me.

She hisses at colleagues and computers.  
She accidentally says out loud, "*You  
think you're better than me?!*"  
My face is very hot and I run on  
the fumes of embarrassment.  
And daily I cry in rage at the rush hour traffic.

The next time someone cuts me off, I swear  
I'll throw up my hands and let go of the wheel and step on the gas...

Rolling in the grass, howling.  
The spears of grass point at my face and I try  
to crush my face on them but self-preservation  
prevents me like water in dreams.  
Making mud with snot and tears,  
gnashing, the grass does not taste good.  
There's mud under my fingernails and up  
my nose. At last at last at last at last  
my outside matches what I feel inside.

*A Woman*

I study a portrait of the head of a woman  
in black and white.

The picture cased in a thin frame of tan slats  
like “Yellow Wallpaper” to her.

Hers could be the face of Sylvia Plath’s  
woman perfected in death—

the face that we never see.

I can imagine her feet saying “We have come so far, it is over”—  
her clothes “the illusion of a [Victorian] necessity.”

I can only see her Sisyphean eyes—  
her bastion nose.

She is drowning behind piles of books, old books with brown pages, red covers.

These nameless books that I don’t care for are piled over her lips  
and her gaze is averted.

I imagine that this is her personalized Hades—  
silenced, besieged by the works of others.

She looks away, as if she cannot bear the crushing weight  
of her coffin.

“I have to write a poem about that woman,” I say.

“Isn’t it Virginia Woolf?” my friend says.

I deflate; it is her.

She was real.

She was always weighing down her pockets  
with rocks.



*And Her Brother*

I unearthed from my clutter  
twenty pamphlets displaying my favorite painting,  
“Dodo and Her Brother.”  
I am startled and annoyed.  
I had planned to write a poem about the love of a brother for a sister,  
But I look at Dodo’s face and she has stopped smiling.  
Orange shadows crouch under her sharp eyes.  
She seems about to cry out;  
her brother’s face green behind her.  
What has happened?

He has broken out of her orbit.  
No longer a foil, a counterpart, a jigsaw complement.

Edgar Degas: The Millinery Shop

(X-ray version revealing a customer)

Under the layers of ochre, sienna, blue, purple, green  
is a buried woman.

She came to the shop every week for a new, increasingly excessive, hat.  
Her husband was relieved to throw some money at her.

Degas, the “misogynist”,  
gave her exactly what she wanted on her last visit to the shop.  
She wanted to become invisible under the hat.  
So he drew the paint blanket up to her chin;  
she nodded, encouragingly, and he drew the paint shroud over her head.

The shop girl doesn't even look up.

National Gallery, London

My back hurts

My eyes fall off painting after painting

Am I this ignorant?

I could count on one hand the paintings that I can keep looking at and I could never say why

I sit down on the wide shiny bench and look from there

No one looks at me I am not art

Maybe these paintings are more important than I

Maybe these paintings are more important than I

No one looks at me I am not art

I sit down on the wide shiny bench and look from there

I could count on one hand the paintings that I can keep looking at and I could never say why

Am I this ignorant?

My eyes fall off painting after painting

My back hurts

Dali Devotional

Salvador Dali  
scares the shit out of me.

But my professor passed around a copy  
of his “Last Supper” and taught me this:

*Your attention is drawn to the absent head in the sky,  
while Christ is pointing to his head—  
‘That’s right. Here it is, what was missing,  
what you’re looking for,  
what will satisfy’.*

*The pieces of bread are torn apart,  
so the human mind has the urge to put  
the halves together in the center—that’s where Christ is.*

Amen.

I wasn’t expecting to get right with God at last  
in a Wednesday night English class.

"Hello?"

I take pleasure in answering the phone.

My phone voice is practically so high  
that only a dog can hear it  
but I can end in that shamefully weak  
ascending feminine questioning tone  
because it *is* a question. Isn't it?

*Bible Commentary Mania*

In a manic down-sizing frenzy,  
my Mom moved into an apartment  
and accidentally put her Bible in storage.

The first calm morning on the balcony,  
open on her lap, a Bible commentary.  
The thing was hefty.

She read aloud,  
“Psalm 118.

David.  
His men.  
Adoration.  
Lamenting the king.

Surrounding foes,  
sufficient name,  
strong right hand.

The stone,  
the day  
and the Coming One.’

This isn’t working,” she laughs.

But I’m not feeling up to complete sentences,  
so I’m grateful for these poprocks of sense,  
these firecracker signifiers.

*Desire for a Husband*

The Bible says, “Your desire shall be for your husband.”  
and yes, being single sucks and I want a baby.  
It also says “Your Maker is your Husband.”

So ok, Hot Maker of everything under the sun,  
I’ve been feeling pretty temporal lately.  
YOU made me this way: “Your desire will be for your husband”

I know that’s not the teleological end:  
a husband here would be a symbol to delineate  
the real thing: for your Maker is your Husband.

I do try to be content, but I feel undone.  
and wtf, it *is* a CURSE anyway—  
your desire shall be for your husband?!

unfair! threatening! disenfranchising! no fun...  
Unless... through his shortcomings, sins—and nonexistent state—  
You make it so my desire is for the husband—  
for the maker who IS my husband.

*Rainforest Exhibit*

on the hottest day  
it's hard to see through the misted glass  
so much condensation  
water slurping lusciously down

the mint chocolate chip ice cream frogs  
and lemon-blueberry frogs are perched on the springy moss

suddenly one of the big yellow and blue frogs hops forward—  
and he had been sitting on top of a little mint one this whole time!

first they all hold still  
then one frog hops and stops, then another

its like they are following rules I don't know  
like off-sides in hockey



*Repentance on the Road*

I'm glad I don't have a Christian fish on my car  
because am I ever a bitch on the road

On my commute home I try to listen to Christian radio  
to make me more patient and remember Who really matters

but when I get cut off the praise is *over*  
I'm swearing, tailgating, hand raised

When I was a good Christian I used to raise my hand almost exactly like this at church  
I had a pure heart about it, too—I didn't do it for show  
but now, shit, what a hypocrite

Fireworks sizzle from a tossed cigarette skipping on the freeway

I'm all up on the car in front of me  
I desperately try to pretend that the driver is my best Asian girlfriend  
who looks drop-dead gorgeous in a visor  
and just had a baby so has a good reason to drive like that  
but I can't back off

The dusty silver elephant rumps of the rush hour traffic lumber on

I sing "*Hallelujah God is near*—are you fricking kidding me!"  
I'm stuck behind a truck—  
and it sucks  
F-word!  
(guilty pause)  
No! I don't care that God is in control and the One who matters

In my rear view mirror I see the sky in a stunning fade  
from light blue through a misty green into a pale gold spray  
No washed-out pastels here  
And even the headlights add to the majesty, so I see that I have to repent