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These poems seek to demonstrate the ways in which an individual becomes a conscious part of an historical context and cultural moment. The poems are arranged in three sections that chronologically depict the movement from individual, limited experience toward collective, shared experience and understanding. Ultimately, the work attempts to capture and come to terms with the excessive nostalgia and self-consciousness of 21<sup>st</sup> Century America in the voice of an honest, solitary speaker.

WE ARE NEVER MORE HUMAN

by

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## Energia

This year I acknowledge the Interstates  
are numbered west to east. I drive  
to Charleston, the economy is bad, I enter  
the food-service industry, I lose  
three entire Wednesdays  
in bed, indoors, I drink too much,  
a new tax credit draws more movie stars  
to my hometown and I learn to play  
a new song on the piano for the first  
time in a thousand days.

On my birthday, driving, the early night  
arriving, I'm more enamored of  
the on-coming white lights and the escorting  
red lights reflected on the wet roads  
than I am of any sunlit  
bedrooms recently passed.

A little red car acquires compelling  
force, and a person in need of another place  
sees it slow down. The generous approach.

WE ARE NEVER MORE HUMAN

ONE



Last Day at 1452 Sylvan Street

What most plainly happens  
is that I'm leaving. I spend all morning  
loading the bed of the Volkswagen while  
Brendan stays in his room with the door  
closed. We slept together last night,  
both of us drawn in over a game  
of Scrabble, and afterward  
he pulled away and said that touching me  
meant he'd given up his last chance  
with the first girl he loved most, and  
I listened. I didn't tell him  
to me he was only a name  
to remember this home by. Now  
lying down in the grass I look up  
at the grand address one last time and  
I think I catch sight of Brendan's downcast  
shadow. And what most matters  
is that I think of my grandfather,  
who gave up smoking at age  
thirty-two, how he still swears  
that on the day he contracts and identifies  
the real thing that'll kill him,  
he'll light a whole pack in his mouth.  
So we give up great pleasure  
because we have to be alive, I think.  
The light of July hasn't arrived yet  
at our house, but the walls have swollen up  
with toxic joy. If a face appears  
at the window, I'll probably  
wave the white sky  
in its view, in surrender.

## In-Flight Poem

I love the permission of airplanes  
at cruising altitude, how in the sky my third person  
is allowed to exhale her omniscience  
and say Look, that's your life  
down below, don't you miss it? In the plain haze  
of pure humidity over the Carolinas this morning,  
I can't say for sure. I've been reading  
about the old warrior nations of the West, and I might  
miss that life more, miss those rules—  
when you can't love a woman  
until you've felt and returned from a fear  
that fills you with cold, war-painted handprints,  
when you have to earn her that way, it seems  
to me earning your self would feel  
wonderfully secondary. Not that I long  
to ride out against rival tribes, colors  
drawn; I just dream sometimes  
of an earth that low, of a ground so  
specifically holy that I'd die  
to lie down with it, to keep it safe  
from the territory thirst  
of my neighbors. In the cumulous  
quiet, we're descending now  
toward where the Cherokee tried for so long  
to stay on and then had to bleed themselves  
toward Oklahoma, real home  
at their backs. I tell my third person  
my life and my land are slow gifts  
I will lose the way cowards in the plains  
lost the right to their wives. I'll choose  
to miss the air instead, and the wandering  
voice of the captain promising  
touchdown, announcing he'll land us  
over soft, empty fields.

## On the Stoop After a Sleepless Night

This calm is dangerous; the mud  
drying after last night's storm  
reminds me a lover is coming  
to stay a while and help  
with the housework. Meanwhile  
in Pennsylvania, the Amish bury their dead  
in black hats and bonnets  
as they have for centuries, just shy  
of spectacular grief, and I think how  
if I could preserve a way of life,  
I'd keep this ache of possibility  
which gleams like an abandoned orange  
beside me on the stone steps.  
Given the same country, we dream  
such different homesteads.  
My daughter's bedroom will have an elm  
outside the window whose branches  
will welcome in her first broken heart,  
but in Lancaster County, huge plain houses  
assemble on top of each other  
to accommodate four generations.  
Should we want to keep things, or want  
to encourage their taking? More  
and more now, the light is coming on  
golden against the stucco;  
the heat will be burdensome  
before long and I'll go back inside and  
listen as the upstairs neighbor's vacuum hums  
a single note against my ceiling.  
Then you will be here, then  
you will leave. And I'll let  
any nectarous thing rot next to me  
if I think I can keep it from becoming  
gone. Meanwhile the Amish  
dig their definite hands into the rind,  
bring forth that consumption because they know  
the rest of their world will remain  
recognizable. When nothing changes,  
there's no need to dread what  
won't stay, no need to mourn  
the visiting, perishable rain.

Atlanta, 1990

The neighbor boys throw pieces of sidewalk  
at one another while I watch from  
the porch. Somebody, back when  
this part of the city was suburban  
laid out concrete hexagons  
to make these pathways, and tonight  
I see them get broken apart. Inside  
the boys' parents are breaking  
apart, too; the screams of both  
mother and father carry into the street.  
Later, I listen as she tries to explain to my mother  
why she still won't leave him, insisting,  
*Nobody, nobody understands.*

By the time they repair the pavement,  
such destruction will be entirely  
mine. But fidelity induces such soreness  
in the fist that holds on, and  
the remembered sight of all this ground  
coming loose from the earth  
will keep throbbing in mine a long time.  
Nothing right between the eyes  
about it: front porch memory  
is a slow kill. For as long as it takes, I'll listen  
to that muscle still pumping, to the drum  
of that woman's love still pleading  
its terms: nobody, nobody,  
nobody knows.

## American Sunday

Most of the time my national dreams  
are like salt, small and deliciously bitter.  
But watching football I feel  
like Paul Revere himself is riding  
through my veins, or like Woody Guthrie is  
strumming huge open chords inside  
my throat. Counting the downs, perceiving  
the divinely slow replays, I feel  
every amendment pulsing, granting me  
my right to make the call.  
I'm one among millions, but I'm  
painting the ceiling the shade  
of a rainless cloud, I'm  
making the world my preference.  
There is greatness  
everywhere. England, Greece.  
But tell me there's another place  
where men are this free to give and take  
and barrel into each other. Tell me  
I should stop them. Tell me only  
the most desperate Hail Mary would  
save this country from loss, and I'll run  
for the end zone lawn. Tonight,  
I deny that grayness persists.  
I refuse to believe  
sometimes a declaration can land  
on both sides of  
the spray-painted line.

## Door to Door

People are making love in these houses.  
I'm coming by to speak with them  
about candidates, party fundraising  
at the state level, or corruption, or something,  
and they're touching. From out here  
I can hear them opening cabinets  
and drawers in the before and after  
while I stare at shut doors,  
listening. They say things like  
*baby* or else *don't wake the baby*  
and as I imagine their bare feet  
curling over the linoleum  
I want to be making love right back.  
I want to be romping out here  
in the road with their very earth, their  
very bit of America. So I start  
to talk dirty to the Neighborhood Watch  
warning signs. I press flat  
and whisper over the manholes and  
one thing leads to another until  
I'm tangled with the pink bike that's laid  
over the lawn, both of us riding together  
toward the cul-de-sacs of our bodies  
and then upon meeting the lip  
of the driveway I lose all control  
and I have to cry out, What a piece  
of asphalt! And that, I hope, will wake  
these inhabitants. That will make them  
sit up, wonder who is that  
loving the world out there at this time  
of day? Whose name is she calling? And what  
is she trying to sell to us now?

Ars Poetica

A Tokay gecko escaped the shelves of bright tanks  
in Reptile Joe's basement next door  
and resettled in our gutter. Each night  
I drifted off to the lull of his deep, breathless chirps  
that bounced like desperate hiccups  
into the engulfing hum; each night  
he thirsted for the female's answer.  
When you don't belong  
but are bound by nature to croak into the dark  
for a mate, what else can you do  
but bury your lament in the dreams  
of the listening citizens?  
A Tokay can only survive  
one summer in the tropics of Atlanta.  
I lasted a dozen more before  
the town was my cellar and love  
was anywhere else.  
When you belong  
but are bound by nature  
to escape, what else can you do  
but steady yourself against silence,  
then call out anyway to no one  
but audience?

## Pedaling Home

I didn't ask myself What would I give  
for the world to stay just as it was  
that morning. I'd slept with someone  
and left him there so I could greet, alone,  
the last day of April breaking outside.  
And if he was lonely, I knew  
his sadness but I couldn't feel sorry when  
there without him the air was packed  
with invisible seeds and the invisible sounds  
of birds keening for each other  
and the world weighed nothing,  
allowed my movement through it,  
fast. I was never less alone  
than in those moments. I wrote  
this song for them right there  
and then, and I wasn't thinking  
of how his body brushed mine  
with the same lightness of those leaves  
moving around in the sun; I didn't  
see the people in the streets passing under  
those shadows, clutching objects  
close to their chests with the same  
blushing grip with which  
he'd clutched me to his. I treasured only  
the lack of human that was in all that life.  
I treasured the lack of me next to him  
and how it would be filled, in  
not much time. And I  
didn't ask myself What  
wouldn't I give for the world  
to stay just as it was then because  
I wouldn't have given anything. Because  
I loved too much the leaving.



## Resolutions for Living Alone

I'll be a Woman With A Drill, not  
a Woman With A Neighbor With A Drill.  
Because things will always need tightening  
and who has the hand strength  
to turn the screws themselves? Of course  
I'll also be a Woman With An Iron, but  
this won't make me any less free  
from the Man Next Door. When he  
sees me in my pressed blouse as we pass  
in the hallway, he'll swoon and I'll  
barely look up. I'll take baths  
with the window open and listen  
as the people outside leave and arrive, and  
the only clue I'm there will be the steam that  
rises upward through the screen.  
Even at evenings when it's quieter,  
after I check the mail and no one  
but the bank remembers me  
I won't complain. The meatloaf  
I'll make will last my lone appetite  
a week, and I'll put off cleaning the pan.  
And like a good daughter, before bed  
I'll swallow just the right dose  
of desire: I'll think of you, because  
I can think of you if I like.  
I know what's best for me, how much  
weight my heart can manage.  
As I'll manage in spite of the one blade  
of the ceiling fan that's tilted  
off its hinges, I'll manage  
with the thought of you hanging  
harmlessly on. I won't take the drill  
and dismantle the skeleton; I'll get by  
with it holding on there, useless and  
off-center, like some petal about to break off  
in the breeze of the air conditioner.

## Middle

Upended, we imagine our feet  
move across the sky as we walk back from  
P. E., back to the red brick gymnasium.  
Ever since someone photographed Max  
and Amanda sucking face in the schoolyard  
shade, the trees have had this effect  
of making the ground feel like so much  
less than a ground. Inside,  
they are trying to impeach  
our President. They're concerned about  
tunnel-related cell phone reception,  
they're waiting to tell us the condom  
we spotted in the loose dirt should not  
be what we want to think it is.  
We want to think about touch,  
about how dire things would have to be.  
To have no better time for touch, no better  
place away seems to us unfamiliar  
and sad, like dying.  
Or like the crowd of us  
that gathered around Amanda and Max  
to encourage the kiss. Someone  
took a picture and now a thing retains  
that light of a first taste, that weight  
suddenly above instead of below the fine  
bodies. We know there will be  
consequences, we are both  
the outside and inside people. And  
the world remembers itself so rapidly  
around us that we'll likely stay  
this way a while.

TWO

## Infomercial

You're not alone! a voice tells me  
when I can't find my keys  
or the blanket slips from my ankles.  
When I throw up my arms  
and shake my head in surrender, he promises  
I don't have to endure these sepia accidents  
on my own. Everywhere then,  
there must be others who are fed up  
with waking and mistaking  
the glow of the streetlamps  
for the headlights of someone  
arriving. And in the quiet of no car doors  
opening and closing, more  
besides me long for the sounds  
of being come back to. They  
stand with me in the dark, watching  
all that isn't moving out there in the world,  
and they long with me for a device  
that heals all of it. By the light  
of the television, belief in such cures  
feels as true as hardwood floor  
under bare feet. And when  
I see the lives of my fellow sufferers  
turn suddenly to color, I know  
their remedy is also mine. I'm not  
alone, so I reach for the phone.  
I dial and imagine the voice of the one  
who will answer, think how he'll sound  
like my very own lonely inventor  
sent to fix all my misplacements. I wait  
for the click of the blessed receiver.  
I hold for the sound  
of the end of the difficult world.

## The Memory of Miss Teen Rodeo Montana

is the only one of my travels  
that I can stand to be inside.  
The look of her thoroughbred body  
as she chased the bulls  
from their thrown riders  
comes back to me. I see her grip  
on the reins, more familiar to her  
than my own hand  
on the steering wheel ever was  
to me, and I'm still exactly  
as envious. She was animal  
and home, galloped around with  
both those lights kept on  
inside her. Then and now,  
I'm not a sixth generation  
anything. I'm only riding  
some machine, chasing local strays  
away from my bailed-out heart,  
but she lasts in me. She lasts  
even as I refuse to recall  
the rest of what I've left behind.  
I'm pulling leather. I'm  
falling in the well which is  
the earth ground of this  
stockyard, the settled  
dust of old falls.

## Fourth Grade

Today as I dress I feel the good haunt  
of the boy who sat across  
from me then, who penned careful sketches  
of all-powerful robots, weapons  
and sometimes, my younger face.  
Today he lives in California  
where a new girlfriend sits, and he paints  
big canvasses with colors as vividly polluted  
as the city in which we were ten.  
All things are the same things, only  
grander, or gone. At our desks,  
we felt around with small fingers for the metal lip  
where our pencils were kept ready  
and safe. We pressed our cheeks  
against the faux wood while Ms. Caller  
read aloud, and we were so peaceful  
imagining adventure  
that together we dared to barely  
laugh. We didn't know other homes  
would decidedly claim us. We didn't know  
one day we'd get dressed for the gazes  
of other beloveds, but still  
without practice we knew how  
to climb inside each other's lives  
for a while, and how to slip out.  
We understood, the same ancient way  
hands understand the deft work  
of sliding shirt buttons into thin, patient holes.  
All things lose their shape, but  
the best fabrics hold on  
to their texture for years. Today  
my woman palms and fingertips ache  
for the feel of what I wore back when  
we were each other's first and only  
musings. I hope both of us would still know  
the old soft of that cloth  
if we touched it.

## Shelter

Tornado nearby, I take the radio's word for it.  
So while navy clouds soak up the last  
of the daylight, I think about  
the Americans my age who are off somewhere  
becoming the young ghosts of a strange war.  
I could always belittle my crises this way.  
The first time my father scolded me  
for my breasts, I thought about  
the wounded torsos of mercenaries  
instead of my own. My father's hands  
might never spread Vick's Vaporub  
across my sick chest again, but  
at least I had a body, a shelter;  
I had someone to keep me from becoming  
too beautiful for my own good.

Take the lightning: three minutes  
ago, it was a thread. Now that fire is a blanket  
that wraps me in a storm I can't see, and  
that's how fast the air around a woman  
can change. On clear nights,  
my father wrapped me in a quilt  
and together we stared the inky sky  
in the face, until one night I was nothing  
but trouble. Somewhere  
men are lifting up countries and dying  
under the weight. If I'm grateful  
enough, my delicate walls will withstand  
the winds. If I'm sorry enough,  
the gorgeous tempest will benevolently  
leave me intact.

## Dark Energy

Today they gave the Nobel to three physicists  
who determined the Universe  
is seventy three percent dark energy  
and maybe climbing. If you and I meet  
at the end of all places, I worry now  
the room will be too wide for us to navigate  
our past separations.

I met Kate

in Amsterdam once, and  
not even the clock in the train station  
was enough of a place for us  
to find each other. And Kate and I  
have been separately together forever, we brighten  
toward each other. You and I  
are more like the gravity those scientists say  
doesn't slow down the Universe's  
descent back toward nothing: we keep  
everything on the ground, we believed it  
when Einstein said we were an unstoppable  
force.

Kate and I finally crossed paths  
at the Anne Frank House, then spent  
the evening spreading oil pastels across  
cream-colored paper. We thought  
we were drawing how the galaxy would die.  
But enough stars hadn't exploded yet;  
all that dark was barely a hypothesis hanging empty  
in the air of the laboratory where  
three physicists lost themselves one night.  
You and I will illustrate our end  
with No. 2 pencil on black construction paper.  
We'll honor the findings, we'll wish  
they hadn't been found.



## Apology to John Keats

Now that I can no longer say  
and mean the way you did that gathering swallows  
twitter in the skies, I stay indoors and read  
about who will be today's guest on *Ellen*, because  
I love Ellen as I love your poetry, and  
I'm sorry today's lexicon has drowned out  
your birdsong, that tweets in any art these days  
hearken not to the autumn's sweet music  
but to the quick black typeface  
of egos run amuck. But  
take comfort, John.

Culture is just what happens when  
you wake enough mornings to the smell  
of everyone else's tears on the sheets, when  
you start to mistake that bouquet of a body's salt  
for the gentle scent of cotton.

And you, dear Keats, are asleep to this one.  
Be glad you don't have to suffer  
as I do today when your poem's perfect ending  
makes me think only of celebrities  
frantically chirping their whereabouts, of  
nothing but *I'm here! I'm here!*  
Because surely you were meaning more  
than that, weren't you?

## Incident on the Way to Work

I'm walking, hardy-boned  
in the sun, on the phone with the landlord  
who might've lost my rent check, when  
a rare breeze in this heat  
lifts up the thick cotton skirt  
of my dress. I'm in the middle of the road,  
where the daylight is rampant.

It doesn't matter what  
I'm wearing underneath, or even if  
I'm not wearing anything at all. I pause  
because it's morning, and cloudless,  
because I know this country  
and I can't measure any aerological reason  
why a gust should go skyward  
from my ankles at this hour.  
No weather is riding in on this wind,  
but the driver up ahead sees me exposed  
in the rearview and smiles.

Just like when Norma Jean became Marilyn,  
it seems the world and I must  
simply be needful of a little more  
leg. If only the landlord could see us now.

## Tri-State Crematory

Everybody took their bodies  
to Noble, Georgia for burning.  
We let Ray Brent, Jr. tell us  
how beautiful Mother looked  
going into the oven, like it was  
where she'd always been heading.  
We let him give us a box  
of cement dust and soil  
in her place, because she'd  
always told us, *Don't put me  
in the ground, where  
I can't breathe or chase  
my children!* She wanted  
to be free to fly off in the wind  
if she wished, or float a river.  
And didn't Ray Brent Marsh  
only want to free her as well? When  
he piled those 339 mothers  
and fathers in sheds and  
in mounds outside, he did it  
to keep them from keeping on  
after us. And for a while  
we all were happy with where  
we thought our dead were  
ending up. It was only  
when the dog came home  
with a skull and femur  
in his teeth that we  
became outraged: Why  
didn't you burn our fathers,  
Ray? How could you not have  
lit mother on fire like we asked?

## High School

Friends were practical, like raising up  
daughters as sons in farm country; friends  
were a useful subterfuge. Wars happened  
elsewhere, quiet as a paragraph  
and the cars in the student lot might've been  
keeping each other warm—an International Scout  
slept beside a brown minivan, and  
I treasured my loneliness,  
harvested it like heavy gold grain  
with which to fill the silo of my body.  
It wasn't very long ago.

## On Grace

If every person can be saved  
and every poem, love and creature as well  
where is the sermon this morning that will rescue  
the self from inside each of us that's been lost?  
No one is standing at that pulpit.  
No one is speaking to the space where our souls  
were once warm and young inside the cavities  
of our bodies, no one is calling them home  
because that would require remembering: recall  
July drives, recall October falling  
over the windows, recall winter loneliness  
how it used to be—at least we knew  
we had the means to be held, however  
wasted. Recall the songs  
that filled those empty rooms, songs  
of cotton skirts and of the soon-to-be spring.  
Recall how even in the company of others  
that music played under our talk; recall  
our attempts to make that talk  
come through the dark and glaze over  
the dramas playing before us, gray scenes set.  
Recall what we spoke of, the vast histories,  
the last requests and tragic distances.  
Recall how we used to covet  
that longing, how what's far felt like  
a deciduous forest in which buds could always  
come back. Recall the homes  
we made in that shade. Recall  
the stories we told to hold those  
walls up with, and recall the stories  
we couldn't tell because of  
who might hear, how even that limitation  
was revelatory, like the moon when  
the worn-out lunar cycle intersects the daylight  
and we can see the white crescent  
against the blue sky. Recall how daylight  
was always the same light until  
one day it wasn't, now recall  
that ending. Recall  
that first Sunday, and the Saturdays  
and the Ash Wednesdays since then

that have failed to make us like we first were  
with those new eyes of ours, those lips.  
Recall the preachings we've  
believed and still not taken heed of.  
Recall how we became these lucid, slow humans  
filing by, seated beside me and beside  
you, and then you'll be telling us  
how to return. Then you can rescue  
our hearts from this morning  
as the sun breaks the cloud wall  
against itself, lights up cold while we stay  
inside, bent toward wood-panels,  
still understanding nothing.

Act IV

What, all my pretty chickens and their dam  
at one fell swoop?

-Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

No beloveds in one fell swoop  
are now gone. But I used to care about  
the crows in the oak trees in Maine  
and now they look more like cartoon birds  
cawing gross humor in falsely solid color.  
*Welcome to the Landscape of Falling Action!*  
they squawk, and send me fleeing  
from one state to the next. From Georgia  
to Oregon, from Montana to Colorado canyons  
I watch the rivers carry human bodies for miles  
downstream, like the electric belts  
of treadmills under pounding, bright white  
shoes. Every section of the countryside  
plays its role. In Appalachia,  
I drive through sunrise  
and just as dawn becomes fully lit  
I have to stop for a pile of vultures  
eating in the quiet center of the highway.  
*This hour is no longer yours*, they say, and  
then they move on and leave nothing  
but bare, spotted bones behind.  
And no blue was rinsed out of the rag of the sky  
in that last rain, but here I am downstage,  
a moving part of this inevitable scene  
in which the pretty ones are always  
the next in line to be run down  
and tossed up under the eager car, then  
to be gratefully devoured,  
like hindsight. Up ahead, the trees  
move their arms in the puppeteer wind,  
and I give up worrying  
over who's most beautiful now.

THREE



## The West Sings You to Sleep

Dream your body is a Conestoga, that  
your bones are whale bones  
in the canvas ceiling, that your skin  
is like that skin, thin enough  
for the morning colors to seep through.

The wagon's slow rock, the sad sound  
of butter churning in a pail  
that hangs from the back, and a national  
madness that's like your madness  
good and right, all will be inside of you

as you press on, full of dream.  
Dream of how California looked  
to the Great Emperor Norton, who believed  
he was the godly sovereign, King  
of America. Dream like he did, inside

the precise light of delusion  
in which you forget the waking world  
won't let you find me inside  
any dim romance or bright  
sincere sun. Dream is the flickering

light in a theater, and Sweetheart,  
I'm your Big Rock Candy Mountain, I'm  
your Gold Rush reward. Dream  
the night long, then chase me  
through the warm disappoint of daylight.

## Reaching

Some days for the sake of some ache  
I call in sick and stay home and watch movies,  
some that are trying to say something new  
and others that aren't trying at all.  
The lazing and the breathing  
while pictures move on a screen  
are the least uncommon of tasks but  
the excuse to complete them,  
I know you'll agree,  
is most precious. Oh, let's  
lie on our backs! Let's say it's all  
we can manage. Let's let this  
be the most slow thing on earth, this act  
that's so much the likeness of having  
another beside me here, someone  
who's glad to be nowhere else  
without me. The way  
Muriel Rukeyser was most nearly there  
beside Kathe Kollwitz saying  
*My lifetime listens to yours* and meaning  
I know what it is to have a son  
but not what it is to lose one  
and so I listen to you, my somber  
German lithographer. Because Kathe  
was trying to say something new, too:  
that war and death should not  
have been (but were) all she knew.  
Some days, then, I ache and  
I reach for poetry, needing  
no excuse. I lie still and breathe  
while beside me someone whispers,  
Listen to my lifetime, it  
will soothe you, will bring you back  
to the world's warm beat.

## Quotients

Add the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico and  
you get the Delta, wide as a woman  
along three states. Now consider  
the water, multiplied by rain and riverbank  
as it migrates south, and ask yourself  
how many times one quantity  
is contained in the other.  
This is the arithmetic of separation,  
of equally allotted loss.

In 1993, a man turns 23 and lies down  
one night on the concrete of Los Angeles  
and never gets up. He divides himself  
between one brother, three sisters  
and the dream of his unfound great love  
which he carries in his pocket.  
What's left over is left hanging  
over the world, and now  
each time you see River Phoenix cry  
on screen, everything inside you dissolves  
into a sugary trust. This is the low  
and fertile flood plain where division is never  
remainderless. Here, a digit  
will always endure the equation, fleshy  
as a tiny shard of shoulder.

To Anne Frank

If anyone looks for me here  
they'll find me. If anyone wants to take  
me away, I'll let them. On the fire  
escape, reading your diary  
in January sunlight, I don't think about  
the unknown places like you did, like  
that passing away of time into darkness.  
I think about Madagascar.  
On the beach at Nosy Tanikely,  
thief lemurs look out at blue waters  
from safe inside the trees.  
A family came and went  
from the houseboat on the canal  
across the way, sometimes you could see  
the top of a dog's tail wagging.  
From a balcony,  
the town of Andoany looks  
like Neverland: jeweled sea, pink light.  
In the annex attic, the clock tower  
bell announced every quarter hour  
older you became inside.  
In Morondava at sundown,  
the baobabs lunge like women,  
high branches reaching toward night.  
When the moon was big,  
you couldn't part the curtains even  
a little, couldn't let in any shine  
that might illuminate a face.  
This bright afternoon, when  
I recall the year is young, inside me  
an endemic relief rises  
and falls, like mist.  
You wanted to pass the time.  
Once, there was an eighth continent  
where you might've continued, bold as  
gunfire and alive. In an opposite  
season I visit you there.  
I find you, you smile. I want  
to be like you. My jealousy  
clears its tired throat  
and gives us both away.

## Fifth Grade

Did you have fun at  
camp? I really like you and  
I can not stop thinking about  
you. I know you hate getting  
notes and every thing but  
this will be the only one.  
Do you like me? If you  
don't know think about it.  
If you do please write back,  
if you don't please tell  
me. If you just want to  
be friends tell me or  
write back. I'm at seat  
9 on the bus. I'm really  
sorry you and Joel  
didn't work out. If you really  
like Joel then tell me and we  
can just not go together.

## Tableau Vivant

Everywhere, l'Odalisque lies down on a sideways bureau  
that's made to look like a bed, her body propped  
so the awkward way she has to lean  
to catch the light looks natural.  
In a kitchen in Toulouse on the Rue  
Jean Racine, tonight she is Florence,  
a wife who thinks the English word *unfortunately*  
is the most beautiful-sounding thing.  
Through the frame of the doorway, I watch  
as her husband reaches his hand  
under her black sweater while  
beans stand boiling in the background.  
He is Didier, a fat businessman  
who likes to test his English out on me.  
*What do you like of the composition?*  
he wants to know. I tell him I like how  
it looks like he's really holding her there  
by her most delicate extension, how  
she doesn't seem to mind.  
She only keeps singing those five syllables,  
drawing the first and last into long, vibrant strokes:  
*Un            for tune at    lay    !*  
And by now I've been standing in front of the painting  
for hours, now Ingres is everywhere  
fluffing the sheets and brushing l'Odalisque's bare ass,  
coaxing his authorship to land like a fly  
on every surface. Tonight he is Didier, waiting  
in the soft kitchen light for my critique.  
I tell him he's only not captured the feel  
of all that blue silk around her ankles.  
He nods and says *Yes, unfortunately*  
*she will not want to say*, and  
I and Florence and l'Odalisque  
smile, out last dominion kept  
an untranslatable word.

Never

I said I'd never smoke cigarettes. I even said  
I'd never be someone who thought much about God,  
that I'd never need to thank anyone  
for this world which breathes  
so presently in and out—the beautiful  
exhalations, the necessary intake  
of grief. But look  
what happens: on an April evening,  
as the daylight extends itself another inch  
toward summer, I smoke Camel Lights  
and dream of mountains.

I was 19 when a girl I was jealous of  
died in a helicopter crash with her mother and sister.  
At the funeral, a pew full of boys I'd always known  
wept like fathers. Now I imagine  
the foggy ridge where her aircraft went down  
and I remember the first time I understood  
sometimes when a body dies, well after the mouth  
stops welcoming warm oxygen in,  
the tenderest gazes keep looking  
out the window at the world, ongoing.  
I said I'd never feel enough  
on anyone else's behalf.

Now as my lungs take and return  
their own gray weather to the ending day, even  
the most ghostly eyes are beginning to close.  
In the edging dusk, I look around and say  
Dear God, empathy is nothing  
but human collateral, and mostly,  
I'll never be able to hold it in one place for long.  
Filled with gratitude, I think how  
this time of year in Maine  
a woman sees a robin and knows  
warmth is on its way back,  
which is the change I forgot to account for  
before, and which is the only promise  
earth ever keeps.

Las Vegas, 1981

My father breaks up a stabbing  
at the gas station, my mother  
waits for him at the apartment, feels the loss  
of him hovering, possible. But they'll be married more  
than thirty years more, and he'll keep  
reaching heedless into the space between strangers where  
ill wills bleed out, she'll keep tolerating  
his breakneck goodness. Always their bravery  
will gleam like sunlight on a square mile of ice.

I could let this year settle inside me.  
I could feel as if I'm there, beside my mother  
as my father comes home, covered  
in another's blood. I could understand the emptiness  
she feels when she searches his warm chest  
for knife wounds and finds none  
will be filled soon enough with her willingness  
to treasure something tenuous. And if I wanted,  
I could be just as reckless.

But I'm going to be less than they were.  
I'm going to hold on to everything.



## We Are Never More Human Than at the DMV

Back at Christmas, my old car started to sputter in reverse.  
It worsened every time I retreated from a shopping mall space,  
until the whole front end bucked and growled with me inside.  
All the mechanic could offer was the advice that I should reverse as little and as gently as possible in what time I had left.  
New transmissions cost, he reminded me,  
much more than the collective rest is worth.

At first, with a few adjustments I got by.  
At the grocery store, two spots stacked atop each other meant I could pull mercifully through toward new forward-facing trips.  
And until the neighbors complained of the eyesore,  
at the end of each day I parked inside the widened edge of our building's driveway.  
In this way, I went two weeks without going backwards,  
but at night I dreamt of unforeseeable traffic catastrophes,  
of having to back up for miles until I and the car imploded in a heart attack of grease and metal.  
Before long, I could barely stand to keep taking the risk.  
I drove so rarely the battery gave out,  
and since then I've been bumming rides and trying to dispose of what's left.

There are better people out there than me.  
Or at least people who might enjoy the job of dissecting an old car into useful pieces,  
still others who might have the will to try and revive the engine that took me all over the West and then back south again.  
I've resolved to find them, to take whatever they're willing to pay.

Months and months ago, I placed the title in the drawer where I keep everything that explains the few things I own.  
On the day I placed the ad, I found it wasn't still there.  
There was my apartment lease, my taxes from the last two years, even the records of the car's previous owners, all the way back to Washington state.  
Only the proof of the car in my name had disappeared.  
And so in the cruelest joke of the whole tragedy,  
now I'm in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles waiting to register a car that can't even take me to the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The whole place is a study in despair.  
I watch a 400 pound man offer to hold a spot in line for a pregnant woman, so she can take a load off.  
None of us is worse off than the rest,

and the florescence is like one giant rearview mirror in which we can all see and  
understand each other's heavy histories,  
whether we can move in reverse or not.  
I watch the woman in front of me pull a Ziploc bag from her purse that's full of a sad  
assortment of old candies.  
She hands her granddaughter a Tootsie Pop,  
then breaks off a piece of a candy cane for herself and speaks to me.

*You have a heart scar, too?*

In the upper center of my chest,  
it's true there's a small, raised collection of pink tissue.  
But it's a scar that was never a wound, it's something I can't explain.  
I haven't gone backwards in months, and I haven't lied in years,  
but this is the DMV, so like a child I tell her, *Yes, but it's all better now.*  
Then I see the line, like a thread of caulk around a doorframe, drawn vertically down her  
sternum.  
She says hers is from January, a quadruple bypass, her third such surgery.

I wish we were talking about the weather, about the recent rain that washed away the first  
collection of spring pollen.  
Actually I wish we were standing in absolute silence until they call one of us forward.  
But she keeps telling the story.  
Her glasses hang from her shirt, pulling the collar into a V whose angle is bisected  
perfectly by her scar.  
It's something I can't explain.  
Coming to the end, she touches the place where her granddaughter's hair is parted into  
three braids, smoothing the loose strands.

*Blessed*, she says, shaking her head, *blessed*.

## Living History

When I think about time  
I think about Colonial Williamsburg, how  
you can go back to the 1770s and  
smell the horses and listen to the wagons rolling  
off of red brick onto dirt road  
and still feel exactly alone in America  
before America even existed.  
You can go to a craft demonstration  
and make eyes at the man  
who melts pig fat into candle wax, fall for him  
even though he would've died  
by now, in one of the wars  
that was coming.  
You can dream him  
into any hour, any decade,  
despite the slow and terrible rotation,  
the turning away of everything  
from what you first thought it was.  
That's why when I think about longing  
I think of the people I've known the longest,  
of how we've traveled so far  
from the days when we, too, were only  
colonists, eager to settle  
the tillable plains, to tame the savages  
of before love was a country. Which is why  
all my best loves are immediate strangers:  
we meet young, or old in a place  
that looks and smells like youth did  
and what we each love most is knowing nothing  
of who the other one will be.  
And inside our New World  
we feel time lie down and swell  
into an era that'll be rebuilt, maybe  
centuries later. We're sure someone  
will put on these old-fashioned clothes  
and reenact our artisan lust, and  
a whole lonely people will come  
to visit the town where we landed.

## NOTES

“Energia”: The title of the poem refers to Stephen Greenblatt’s reappropriation of the Latin word “energia” to mean, most simply, “social energy.” Using Shakespeare’s *King Lear* as example, Greenblatt elaborates: “That play and the circumstances in which it was originally embedded have been continuously, often radically, refigured. But these refigurations do not cancel history, locking us into a perpetual present; on the contrary, they are signs of the inescapability of a historical process, a structured negotiation and exchange, already evident in the initial moments of empowerment.”

“Tri-State Crematory”: In 2002 authorities discovered that Ray Brent Marsh, Jr., second-generation owner and operator of the Tri-State Crematory in Noble, Georgia, had failed to cremate hundreds of corpses over a six-year period. Investigators found a total of 339 bodies left to rot throughout the property, out of which only 226 could be identified. The reasons for Marsh’s failure to cremate the bodies were never made clear.

“To Anne Frank”: Part of Hitler’s “final solution” at one point included a proposal to relocate Jews to the French colony of Madagascar. The idea was renewed upon the fall of France, but was ultimately abandoned as the war escalated.

“Tableau Vivant”: The poem refers not only to the 1814 painting by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, “La Grande Odalisque,” but also to the larger tradition of Odalisque depictions. “Tableau Vivant” literally means “living picture” and refers to a 19<sup>th</sup> Century trend in which models posed silently within a framed setting to represent the images of a painting with human figures.