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The *Home Lives of Wild Birds* are original poems by Chloe Anne Campbell, in completion of a Masters of Fine Arts thesis. They examine the body, both living and dead, as well as its absence.

Section One is a triptych of three burial scenes.

Section Two is a long poem narrating the death of the speaker's brother using physicist Hugh Everett's Many Worlds Theory.

Section Three follows the speaker's family after the death of her brother.

Section Four narrates the arc of an ultimately failed romantic relationship.

Section Five is focused on the speaker's self-reflection in adulthood.

THE HOME LIVES OF WILD BIRDS

by

Chloe Anne Campbell

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
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Approved by

Committee Chair

To the people I loved in Greensboro, and all they gave me.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Chloe Anne Campbell has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

Instead of trusting to mechanical devices...he cuts off the limb or twigs on which a nest containing young birds is fixed, and removes it to a favorable situation near by. Then, concealing himself and his camera in a small green tent within a few feet of the nest, he waits for the parents to adjust themselves to the new conditions. This they do in a surprisingly short time. In a few hours the old site is forgotten, and the birds are as firmly attached to the new one as if they had themselves chosen it.

—R.H., On Herrick's *The Home Lives of Wild Birds*, from *The American Naturalist*,
October 1901.

I'd been wanting to know if it was all right to live.

—Dana Levin, "Augur"

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I.

The ashes turned liquid in the rain and the men who were working the ruins got entirely black and filthy, 'til you would hardly know one from another. My father brought me some biscuit that had soot on it from his hands. 'Never mind,' he said, 'there's nothing cleaner than ash.'

—Marilynne Robinson,
Gilead

Blue Lake & Constance, South Island

A lake of blue and bone, clear and eddying
around pieces we let slip
 into the water, leaving circles like stoneskips –
 he sinks. Smooth and white – places
 where he'd gotten old, boiled
and burned clean, left in the past shore.

They have no place here,
where he is made into something bare and holy,
 added to a glinting pile under two hundred feet
 of water, older than god. Every dawn
the river rolls off its bed and gives itself

to make new. Nosedeeep, I sink into the clear dark
with his ribcage, long shin bones, to find what lives after
 everything has run off,
 found its answers at lakebottom.

There are fish. They nip at the bones.
I want to lend my fingertips, wait to see
 what bites. How can I be pure as a jawbone in sand?

Burr Oak Lake, the Edge of Two Counties

In this line before last dark, you are a blur,
your wide face catching dawn, but barely.
It is a pinhole of light. It is all that still looks
like you, after the months of swelling cancer.
Your body has swallowed all light, a black hole
tugging everything in – me, the men ready to burn
you, the wood of the pyre, the creak of the jays
as they wake and call to each other,

*Are you still there? I'm still here.
It was a long night. I wasn't sure
I heard you breathing.*

And you spark
a blue glow dimming to yellow, the light come on you.
I burned with you. You didn't feel it, but I was narrowed
to a pillar of ash and bone – you'd loved Lot's wife
salted and sturdy in all that leaving – and we were her, together,

Hillside, Yerpa Valley

Lightened – my lungs flat as ears
and body thinned, I'm laid among stones.
Quietly sunk inward. I've learned how to tuck
into myself, muscles like pillbugs.

It's this, my hips dipped enough for shadow to notch
them, blueing into sky.

And plucked clean, my ribcage a melon rind,
toe bones in a crow's mouth.

I line her nest. I thicken the walls
of it. It's like something holy –
her culling need. I am alms for birds and sun.
All left the coolest water, even the salt leeches out.

After you were burnt bone, after you were lining a lakebed,
I could smell your ash on my arms, face. It darkened me,
but the black of it is a baptism. There is nothing
cleaner than ashes. I've exhaled you, brother, and we rest.

I'm air, lilting. I've been given back. Breathless, wavering light.

II.

I inherited a dark wood, but today I am going into another wood, the light one.
—Tomas Tranströmer, "Madrigal"

A Self-Portrait in the Many Worlds Theory

for Caleb, my brother

-1-

For a year, I allowed a spider to live next to me while I showered, heated my arms, breasts, knees, to a gleaming pink next to her body, stark black against the white tile.

Or, another version of myself, where I don't let the orb weaver spin out a sac again and again. Here, I spray that corner of the shower, knock the heads of pins – her skittering hatchlings – into the drain.

Or, I let them live, let them eat her, thorax first, swallowing any errant drips, lapping at her diminishing frame.

Or I wrapped her in tissue, flushed her fat body, refused to learn to love her.

-2-

Hugh Everett, five years before he died, finally watched a crowd in California clap for him and his work. His son, after finding his body, said, *He ate, smoked and drank as he pleased, and one day he just suddenly and quickly died. Given some of the other choices I'd witnessed, it turns out that enjoying yourself and then dying quickly is not such a hard way to go.*

Did he spread his hands, palms flat, and touch his father's concaving chest? Did he cry, quietly, or did he just sigh, think of the millions of worlds where his father was born instead as a wriggling line of light, was long buried in, was a mother

nursing her son, whistling TV theme songs?

-3-

In one version, I'm a sugar ant, and I'm nothing
hard to swallow. My dark body skittering across
the shower wall will always coax her gleaming
belly over the edge of her web. A lure lilt
ing pond edge, her sweet insect koi.

Make me hollowed out, an echo.

And in this way, she'd give me purpose,
a snarling clarity.

-4-

One morning I couldn't find her.
Nothing left but the grey sacs she'd sucked
clean, the lighter ones the tiny spiders
had crawled from – one at first, then ten, tumbling
outward. Solvents stung at my face. I hadn't thought to dilute a thing.

After she was gone, I washed less cautiously, no longer worried she'd spring
one day onto my lathering hands, hide in a loofah.

But that day I cried for hours, bleached
the shower luminescent 'til my hands were burning.

-5-

My mother hired the photographer and paid extra
for the forty mile drive through backroads to our house —

my brother too sick to leave the couch — and all
three of us posed, even our arms arranged like dolls',
so his swollen face would seem smaller,
so my sister and I could help support his weight, evenly.

Framed in dark wood — the small boy in the middle
folded in on himself, laughing, flanked
by his sisters, one turned toward him, the other cupping
his hand, staring into the camera.

His wide grin, spilling the shot, a mouthful
of milkteeth like a cluster of stars. He never lost them.

-6-

Scratching down your sprains, limb
twists and stomach flus, the doctors
seemed to fill your whole room. Charting
your life. Officially, acute myeloid
and lymphoblastic leukemia. A strange
case. Your veins clotted with whites,
and somehow already too old
for your body, your red cells fattened and slow –
normally only found in adults, chances are slim at best and at worst –
but you were listening instead to the blue
bird past the doctor's shoulder,
just outside, whistling to you.

-7-

His body wracked, again,
with the silent snarls of his sick blood. But
he's too small, and the hungry white
cells are drunk with cancer. His body has not learned
how to stop swallowing when it's full. Ouroboros boy.

 This time, my body is not faulty. This time, he sucks
 at my knucklebones, knots of spine,
 and the marrow feeds him.

 This time we are matches.

 My body can feed him.

 I hollow my bones for him. It's enough.

There is a world where my parents do not watch their son die. Instead, it's me, their first girl, and I lie for weeks about the pain, the thick needles sliding into my spine. The yellow drip of the water there. It's mine.

I stretch out in the narrow white bed, and I'm spindly, the tubes adding extra arms, legs. I wave to my brother.

He doesn't know what could have happened, that I'm a self that's traded with him. Neither do I.

It's cold, even for the season – six below, two days before the first day of winter. The windows of my parents' house are etched with patterns in the frost, diamante that I fog again and again, tracing my name into the wet glass.

And I look into the blue spruce my father cut down himself in our living room, a real tree this year for the first time, and the world is glowing, winking white and blue. And I die there.
Quiet as bone.

-9-

A dropper's worth— that's all they needed to measure our likeness.

Centrifugal, but I didn't have the word yet for its dizzying.
Bits of old stars settling at the bottom, my metals.

They outweighed yours, refused the spin.

You only filled a quarter of the bed. Your t-shirt, red and white striped, folded neatly on the rough blanket covering you, seemed too cheerful for the hospital room.

Whipping our blood into a flurry, the nurse turned the machine off, on, twice over, and each time mine snowed too quickly.

Even before you were sick, your weight had seemed too light. I barely noticed when you'd sit in my lap, lean against my shoulder, rest your head. Our bodies knew before we did— I would never save you.

-10-

Summers before you were sick, we'd climb
burr oaks at treeline, your legs brown from dirt and sun
and I'd teach you my stories —
 that we were wood nymphs, changelings, spotted fawns left in the rich
 black dirt of our parents' tomatoes, strawberry vines.

You'd laugh loud at that —
 babies left to sprout like a garden, tied
 to splints to grow straight, tall —
and I loved your grin flashing against the trunk,
your voice sending the birds out of the branches, into the air.

-11-

What Everett did not emphasize:

 everything making itself, again, again, and then cracking
 out of existence, so it can pop back
in one bang and all its sprawl only a bell's clanging
 before a burial.

Every one, every rope, every fracture of starlight, ocean, peach
living a thousand lives, a thousand more spiraling
outward. Ivy furling and winding to cover a gate.

The immortal quantum chain swallowing its tail and coughing it back out.

It all evens out.

Is this why I've tried to die again, and again, when you didn't
live half enough the first time?

-12-

I hold your hand 'til it chills, pales
while your chest mottles.

Rub my thumb over your palm—
the skin of a ripe grape,
its swell.

Everything is the same as it always was, except
we are only letters,
a language we never learned to speak, but here
we are the language. We've made it.

We spell out a longing deeper than marrow, because
we know that in every version, we will die—
a sinking knowledge in the gut, a sense of something
older than either of us will ever be. Even here
there is age. Our bones rattle with it.

-13-

Three months after we buried him, I saw a coyote
split a goat in half –
 jagged flapping throat and her insides that tumbled
 from her soft belly. They steamed below her on the frost
 bitten ground, too hard to give under her as she pooled, then sank.

In what version do I unlock the screen door, sprint toward her
 shrieking and hellbent on sending the ragged dog back into the woods?

In another, I lay her out for it, slide a thin blade down her sternum, hold her,
bleating, and crack the breastbone. I coax the sniffing thing toward me
with her slippery guts. I watch while it fattens on her. Hold my hands just above
her, warm them. I clean the knife on my jeans, two swipes.

-14-

The first time, I stole my mother's Tylenol. My body
 coughed them out, bloomed
 wet poppies on gray carpet, white tile.
The last time it was my feet that did it, dragged me into a
New York avenue against the light,
 but this time a man snagged me, yanked
 my arm into the meridian.

When I stepped into the street, the asphalt sank
around me. It accepted my weight.
I had tired of living.

 He pulled me back so sharply my arm bruised,
 a mark that lasted the next week,
 made me solid again.

 He asked me what I was doing.
 I didn't know how to answer him.

-15-

Everett making and unmaking the universe –
time stretched and split in two, then two, and two
with his speaking.

The waves tumbling from his throat, bright
and long, stretching out and shaking all of us into new
budding.

Our legs too weak to hold us and all our versions,
newly born and our sharp bleats for our mothers echoing through
the heated air. And gone, and back again.

-16-

I make no mistakes. It works
the first time. I am no older
than fourteen,
always.

Your face never fuzzies, its outline faded,
leaving only the swelled
cheeks of your cancer, your wisps of hair, the tubes
sewn into your chest. A boy always at four, instead,
and only the one girl left for our parents.

In that version, we lay beside each other,
and our sister brings us flowers, perhaps
only leaves them for you. You'd never chosen
to leave her.

Did you watch me take that step in front of that bus? Did you see me lean
further over the subway platform as it whistled toward me for months
before that surefooted move off the meridian, into nothing?

and Oh if nothing – if nothing then why not have stepped long before and why
wouldn't my body listen if nothing after more nothing.

-17-

If I could pick which multitude I'd remember
I'd float to the top of this Hattaras wave again, and again –
 made froth, and in the unsure dimming
 the lost light –
 mouth filled with saltwater and my friend calling to me over
the crash of my first waves – I'd never seen a shore –
 and I flatten my back, arch enough –
 buoyed to point my nose at the coming dark
 sputtering foam back to foam –
tide filling the dipped shore dragging me toward wilder blues.

Phytoplankton ridging the coasts of the Maldives make their own light.
They don't need the stars to know what they're like.
Tiny nebula clusters,
 an invented constellation,
 microbial stars.

Yes, I would float in the Carolina water until I was a swell too,
my water made salt and me
fattened and blue, shining back the moon.

A simulacrum of remembered light.

-18-

For two weeks you slept in a fishtank.
The doctors induced a coma
to teach your ruinous blood
how to thicken more slowly.

The monitors lit you green, all your water
coming to the surface. You glowed, a lightning
bug in a jar. You woke

and it was spring again. You didn't have the words
to ask about lost time.

You reverted, born twice—
face wet, twisted and puckered, tongue too dry
and thick to speak clearly, 'til you got it out,

calling to the only thing you recognized in that room,
the wild sprawl of sky, croaking out, *blue, blue.*

-19-

Here, I teach my brother to pick blueberries, only the full ones, and we purple our hands with the biting juice.

I smash them between my fingers,
 rub our lips dark blue,
 kiss cheeks.

It's a game.
 We don't learn what our blue lips mean.

-20-

This time, you don't die at five, but at twenty. Things aren't worse – there are only more flowers, Thomas Kincade cards stacked near the guestbook, more people shifting in their seats, crying or adjusting for a cramp in their leg or avoiding an itch just between their shoulder blades

and the coffin, this time, is not half-sized. It takes up more room in front of the pews. Your cheeks are not rounded from the morphine, but dip at the angle of your cheekbones, jawline. The funeral director does not dig out extra pillows to pad your back, hide where it sunk from all the taps.

Your face is still powdered too heavily, but here you are not so small.

They don't add an extra foot of dirt at each end of the casket so you won't rattle.

After we'd buried him, I cupped my hand
around my sister's, and we raced to the oaks
at the far edge of the frozen slope, the property line
between a cow pasture and the dead.

Whooping under the branches, tumblefooted,
we were made wild, gulping in air
so fast we hiccuped, racing between
trees and calling birds with our thin whistles.

The snow melts, or is flattened,
under our sliding feet. I tell her

you can make your own fires if you're alone
in the woods at night, just strike
the rocks together, twist and rub and spin the twigs, breathe
into the smolder, little puffs

or, if you have it, knock your Swiss Army knife
into flint – even stone and metal can
make light.

We've planted flowers around your stone, and a tree grows just beyond it. Our parents talk too loudly while they dig, make miniature plots and fill them. The warm smell of cows and dirt carries over the fenceline three graves down.

They chew and sway. It's summer again.
Our mother hums while she tends to you, throaty and soft as a sweatbee.

Or I never come back to this place, never try to read to you in the dimming light, never stretch my toes toward the rough back of the headstone. I leave you buried.

But I like another version, one where instead we bury you under our old maple, suspend you between root and topsoil — you and the cicadas just starting to stir. They crawl over you, spill out, shake with the shock of living, and I stand just near enough to feel them vibrate your bones, like an old cartoon, where the skeleton band uses their spines, pelvises as xylophones, drums.

Cold mornings, years after you died,
I'd sip coffee on our parents' porch,
watch the trees green into clumps, blacks
softening, their lonely
bones blurring into each other.

Other times, the sun seemed to barely rise at all.

When we buried you, the day was so clear and pale
that I had to squint past the preacher who read one last verse
before we lowered you. The sky was too much.
The hole so sharp against it, it was like we were dropping you
into the end of the world.

A black hole is black because it has swallowed all light.
It drags in everything.

Those mornings, I heard the wrens —
we need you need you need you.
There's nothing I can do for them.

The faint steam first dampening my face, then drying it.

My body saves his body, my marrow thick,
my blood ready to flood his, red enough to stain his whites.

It's true enough, and in another, I'm a tea kettle, whistling forever in a house
where the owner has died on the kitchen floor, and I boil dry, everything
inside me sleeking my body, then effervescent
rising to the ceiling, raining on me again.

They're the same, parallel lives,
neighbors with curtains closed, but flicking out the lamp
both at ten, heading to bed, though one does a crossword
while the other sleeps like children do, tumbling into it,
irrelevant which one wakes first.

The blinds never flicker apart.

They never meet each other.

He is always dying, again and again.

Living again, and again, and again—

And it spirals out from Everett's mouth, a multitude
of me, you, firecrackers, dead boys, the Taiga, chrysanthemums –
but streaming outward, ropy galaxies knotting around each other,
heating the dark to a starkness
until it is all bursts of burnt light.
All of us small, shocked to find our mothers behind the hands
that cover their eyes, delighted.

Did he know how it would crack the sky into eggshell, thinking in this way
so that everything unravels?
Did he long for that unraveling?

In one world, he was never a physicist. He played the piano
and wrote aubades to a woman who only
skimmed his life when he was young.

Here, he was a wine bottle, full of tilting reds, glancing
the slope of the side like plucked notes.

And here, a coyote dragging a goat into a cloak of burr oak, their branches
covering him, softening the leaves and moss under
his tender feet with her deep heat
her quieting heart.

-26-

You were quiet when the doctors told you
that neither of your sisters were quite
right. My incongruity. You blinked
three times, a Morse acceptance
of the next year, your inevitable brevity.

You were so quiet. You were never a wren.

-27-

Here, you are still dead. But you've
sprouted. Grass first, then the flowers
I called Grumpy-Old-Men when you were still
alive. You'd loved their sour purple and blue
faces, scrunched your own into a wrinkled pucker.

More have curled from the ground, unfolding question
marks, lengthened in the sun. I can't see their roots
but I've leaned my head against the rounded top of your dirt,

and I know they've bloomed from the sturdy splints
of your ribcage. Their faces tilt upward, catch

heat, rain, light. Crocus, furling
and unfurling. Pansies, squinting upward.

I breathe them, full and soft. I would have taught
you their names, had I known them.

Shoreward – the waves lapping at my pale feet,
long toes digging miniature channels that fill
again and again, and I could stay here, could float
out to meet the horizon line, where I'd flatten,
part of light and time and I'd burst into sparking particles, lose
the weight, the heft of my bones. I could forget every life
I have lived and haven't, unravel all of them.

But closer to the truth of it, I'd be one of those tight knots of bluewhite
leaning always in between the sway of waves,
the longdead stars.

Water plants clumping into galaxies.

Hug the shore –
straddling both, breaking the dark
with my own bright body, my sharp glowing, my self-made light.

III.

A hole is nothing but what remains around it.

—Matt Rasmussen, "After Suicide"

Exuviae

I.

Humid creekcrush of late July in my parents
and in me too, grasping at each other and only
scraped, snarling the hairs blinding on our arms,
held nothing, said nothing –

II.

and a baby gone, and another coming –
my palms filling with feathers my mother
swore would give me lice, tying them
into hair loveknots, crowning me,
asking the grass for a birthright or god,

III.

and how do you explain death and rebirth to a girl of nine?
I only knew sweat and locust husks, turtle shells
I dried in a box, wrote letters to, asked how it felt
to empty out their insides, to let their skin grow thin,
to be a pretty and rattling thing, to keep the ugly
and wet elsewhere.

IV.

Mother swelled hollering for me
at yardedge, when the sky broke
wide, rain fat and pelting and me
sitting in the fast sliding mud near
stormdrain and ditch, flooding
out the skittering dark things inside, so
they came crawling, howling
out of the water.

V.

In the morning, my father dragged me in, towed
off my chiggered legs and arms, left me on the porch,
took the shovel to scoop out the hairless kits that had crashed
along ditchseams, against the bricks, too small
for swimming, their pink wrinkled
bodies burst open, spilling.

VI.

Called out to him
when my mother's water wooshed,
while he got the car, while I picked
up the shovel, finished what the raccoon
or cat needed done, what needed
to be finished before the next crack open.

Walleye, Alewife, Trout

for MKC

There was only the one vacation –
fishing shack, five
miles from Lake Erie, one roomed
three days. We'd saved for a year. I tattooed
my face with the grid of the screen
door, dappled by dark and sun like the burr
oaks just outside. On the hottest
day, when you tried to find
something to feed us besides Vienna
sausages, butter crackers, cheese in a can,
when you hollered that this was the biggest
mistake we'd ever made, I left you and, barefoot,
stumbled down the dirt
to the bigger rentals. My shoulders split
open and peeling, the sun tired of kissing
me – freckles weren't enough after
so many hours.

I found a man working in front of a pickup,
four fish on the table. Silver and muckbrown,
they shone in the wavering heat, shot
off light. He was patient. He pressed
the knife to my palm, said little, but cupped
my hand with his, led me to clean the scales
into flaking piles, lump the fillets
in pink stacks. He wrapped the meat in white paper, packed
the cooler. I trusted my new sharp hands.

At dusk I left him and the skinned fish,
found you in front of the two burner
stove, coaxing pierogies to brown
in someone's forgotten butter, humming
and stirring. I rinsed the last
bits of scale into the rusted out sink.
In the half dark, they glowed,
shining back the blue gas

flame, metallic tang. They dazzled.

Milkomeda

for Carly

Born with our necks curved together,
locked like swans, we could never
swallow enough to starve the other. I wanted to sleep
alone. But you were smaller and I loved you.

You were so near-bruise, your thin blood thrumming
just at the edge of your skin, always – but a snapping
thing, you bit at me, howled when I pinched you back,
brought that blue blooming on your milk white arm.

This is how it has always been
with Irish twins, snagged and tripping over each other, all knots.
Simulacrum of sistering, of holding too tightly.

No one but you mirroring the lines in my palms,
and we lay in late summer grass, and I pointed
out the three buckles of Orion's belt. You shivered and swatted the mosquitoes.

It's been years, but if we're still on that hill, know this –
we could never help it. We were made too close. Milky
Way, Andromeda, jerking away and clinging
at once – light ruinous and spiral,
constant and glowing darkly, but necessary. We wreck. We reach.

Three Women at Twenty-Three

I.

I swept the months of hair
and dust on my floor into neat piles last
week, and I found my grandmother
at twenty-three, her smock a tent
over her rounded stomach, her hand
holding it the way that all pregnant
women cup the swimming baby's
head through cotton and muscle
and fat and worry. Her hair cropped
and bobbed, bars on the windows
in the air force apartment, her husband's
shoes next to the door, flipped
to the side and dulled. He must have taken
the picture, now bent at one corner. I pressed it between
the pages of a dictionary. When I told my mother
about finding it, how a friend said, *she's pretty*,
the phone hummed with her held breath.

She doesn't want to say what the photo is likely hiding,
what she's slipped before, mumbled under
her breath, what I already know —

that her face is turned to the side to hide
a blackeye, that she is cupping
her stomach because he has knocked
her down the night before
and she's afraid she'll lose my mother's
half-formed tadpole body.

II.

I read once that cockatiels pair
and mate for life, that they nuzzle
feathers like teenagers in their humid

roosts, nests built of equal work and spit.
That the male perches, watching while
the female warms the eggs, vomits
into the pink shaky things' mouths, nudges
them to jump.

But when left in cages
too long, without food,
after a week the male will peck
at his mate's body, loose
the meat from her neck,
rip at the feathers, even take
the eyes, given enough time
and need. She allows this.
Her body fills his hollow belly.

III.

My mother told me about her first wedding, finally,
last fall, how it was in the Catholic church
across the street from a house she'd grown up in,
the light dripping through the veil's thin lace,
the groom with his whiskeyed lilt
and how he'd reeked of perfume. I didn't say anything
when she said she had never felt sure
about him, didn't tell her that seemed normal
for twenty-three. He'd bloodied
her lip after the reception that night
before they went on a honeymoon to a fishing
camp two towns over, *and I didn't say anything,*
she said, *I didn't say anything to your grandmother.*

IV.

When my grandmother died, I was the one
who sorted through her dresser, folded
her white underwear before stuffing
it into the garbage bags I'd brought with me.

And under the rows of white cotton, the silk
slips she'd worn to work each day, there were stacks
of handwritten poems, the ones in pencil fading and even
the few that were typed were yellowed, but each one
was a love poem, eight or ten lines remembering
a boy who'd cared about her once, a boy she'd written
to in Korea, who she'd just married.

Her heart, she wrote in one, was a mirror of his. That morning
she'd felt their first baby stirring. One written back — *I hope
to be with you soon, Sue, love, Dick.*

Fall, Years After

for SAH

The damp crept in through the halo
of air around the door, where the frame
gapped, sent me shuffling into the night air.
If I was going to feel it, I wanted to feel it fully.
The chill sharpened my nose – the fungal
smell of mulched leaves, woodsmoke, tobacco,
and under it the saccharine of over-ripe fruit.

In the neighbor's yard, the lowest
pears had sweetened too long, pulped
by her daughter's young feet, strings
of the soft meat trailing through the grass.

I lay under their small tree, palmed the ones still hanging.
They were swollen, but soft in places, and I pressed
my thumb to the darker bruises,

made them give way and juice, run down my wrists.

It was too much. I jerked back. I crossed the yard.

Years before, your legs in the last days in hospice, and how I rubbed them,
so you could move your toes again. You turned away
when the smell of the sick blood in them filled the room.

I rubbed small circles, kneaded the purple back, 'til you were pale
and small veined again. I would not move my hands away.

IV.

You remember it differently. You remember that the cold settled in stages, that small curve of light was shaved from the moon night after night, until you were no longer surprised the sky was black... One night, giving me a lesson in storytelling, you said, 'Any life will seem dramatic if you omit mention of most of it.'

— Ann Beattie, "Snow"

Slush

for Calen

Half frozen, the slush filled my socks, sank
into my toes. His shoes an inch from mine.
We were not kissing but breathing too near each other, fogging
the air around our cheeks, earlobes.

I couldn't move in the cold, but I knew if I moved too much
in that half snow under orange light, he'd leave
me there. He sighed, leaned his forehead on mine.

You might never meet this man, but I want you
to let water bead against your feet, to shiver
in your wet socks rather than end
the easy stillness with him. I want you to exhale frost
and thaw your lungs with air warmed by a man's chest
while you're trying not to clutch at him, while the thudding
in your knees – where his knee is almost touching your knee –
is shaking you. While both of you are thrumming.

Hold onto it, the damp in your socks, the musty
smell of soaked wool, the blink of the walk-stop sign
beside you, the clanging in your chest – be still in it. Breathe,
fog, breathe fog.

Elegy for the Dodo Bird, Stuffed in a Natural History Museum

You are nothing soft – not whisperthin
or heirloom quilt. You bristle.
You've been left
in glass too long to hold the dank
mold of afterliving. Mites don't comb
your feathers for dust, flakes
of pimpled dry skin.
But there is nothing
dead about you, leaning your face
toward new earth, pining
for curling worms, a faint skittering. Under
bare lighting you glow. Hug the ground,
wait for rain. Behind you, prints in the mud a god's eye diamond –
damp indents, a soaked dioramic universe.
Bring what moves, what grows.

Accretion

The bones of the ash trees and birches hung
sagging and graceless. The bones
of the birches pointed out the places where my feet
had been and what I had asked for while they were still
green and full. The bones of the stumps
where I rested after searching the woods for upturned pale
leaves, for signs of rain, sunk low in the peat and pillmoss,
whole groves of knotted grass. The bones of the black bear
I found that fall lay felled and I had asked you
how something so hulking and haunted could ever look
so very small, crumpled and breaking apart,
the ribs showing where the crows
pecked at his frame, their feathers
lost in the fur, so that his back and sides
seemed to shudder while they nipped at him,
swallowed him, while we watched.

I Ask You to Look at Me

for ACM

to see the basket of yellow flowers on my porch and how I've allowed
them to frizz up in the Carolina swelter, let them go dry –
dryer than the half-chewed thigh bone I found

buried in that pot like an auger.

You were not there to let its strange lightness fill
your hands, to see me skirt it for weeks once it had been chucked

to the edge of the porch stair. It crackled
the day I missed and crunched it under my heel,
and it was so like the hollow scrape the chicken
thighs made when you wedged the knife into the joint,

pushed until the blade hit counter and the red leaked out,
and you said, "It's not the blood. It's the water."

And I wondered if our red and clear could mix this way –
we keep unraveling, and it's not about a fight at all,

but the way you twirl my hair when we're on the old couch
and the curls where your neck meets your skull, but I wish

you'd once kept a diary, for small things: the crocuses that bite
through hard riverground, creekbed, the spotted brown
eggs we bought last summer in full sweat,
cracked them for dinner, their membranes white, and clear, and clinging.

Breathed & Breathed Again

I try to list the places where we touch accidentally –
the back of a hand against a stomach
a leg bent and pinned between two legs
an arm gone to sleep under a body
a forehead resting against a forehead
and this is the part I like most –
not the slip and sway of waves during,
but the minutes when you're still sleeping and I can see
us fill the gaps where we fell away during the night,
see our bodies not bear to be separate.
Tangled in bed but quiet
as children sleeping still,
late in the morning, and the snow
muffles anything we might say. I brush
at your hair in measured steps – reach
slow, touch light, smooth and flatten
the locks. It's warm and dizzy with air
breathed twice, mouths and noses
too close to bring in anything new.

Accretion

The bones of the bees that were too small to spot
in the spilled hive and combs after the week of rain
but that I knew had to be waiting to be buried –
I looked and there were none
and you were none too.

Broken Rib

It was not a clean break, when I fell
through the thin ice crossing
a creekbed. The hollows between
each rung ached for weeks. Press
your fingertips to each one –

a rattling song, a stutter step. Count
the cracks – I want to know what I have
accumulated, what shatterings
and mendings, when your thumb
grazes the last true rib.
There is nothing permanent

about it. It is only a body.
Know that I was always thudding.

Swell

Found the fox strung up in the dried-out
grapevines, and you said, *It's a she,*
and the way your tongue fumbled
over the words, I knew you were trying not
to look at the heavy swing in her gut,
the sacs where she had nursed. I dragged
her from the knotty wood and you were long digging.

We cradled her, let her thud of weight hang
between our arms. And you said, *It is she,*
and I thought, *is she, is she,* and the hollow
we'd made was filled with her, and she looked so small

and red in the clotted brown. You watched the worms
move just below the fur, would not look at my eyes.
I touched my body, where I could swell
and with what. I was not the same.

Accretion

The bones of me
that will not let go of you. The bones that will not be
laid together in a box, will not be spoken of
as a pair, will not be remembered as anything
that fed a mouth, a heart, a second
thought. The bones of nothing worth remembering.

V.

When I was alive, I aimed to be a student not of longing but of light.

—Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

After Watching the Corpse Flower Bloom in D.C.

I.

My torso unfurls, the piston of my spine
bowed and full of thick yellow –
 it feeds itself, blooms me again and again.
My bones a closed circuit,
 marvels of symmetry and containment.

This unveiling is rare. It's only every ten years
or so I'm made bright and fetid with my own living.
A flower that will not let you forget your own body, cannot
be stuffed in short green glass vases with sympathy cards.

 It's the smell of it. Touch the petals.

II.

 And it can go the other way – a man in Russia thought he was
 dying, was filled instead with the sap the tiny tree nestled in his
 lungs wouldn't stop leaking. A two inch fir, and it ached
 when he breathed. Two surgeons undid the rooting,

made him wholly man again. And when asked of it after,
how glad he felt to breathe without that rasp and wriggling of pine,
 he felt more empty with it gone.

I'd love to see how it looked there, that sprouted
thing in all that pink. My throat once confused
timothy grass for air, aspirated the blades
and secreted them away. I dreamt of the
knots and clumps filling me up, the earth
taking
me back. Upon removal,
even after ten years of lying in all that dark lung,
 they still brimmed with green

The Denver Parks Department Moves a Cemetery to Make Room

I.

When they dug us up,
shoveled out our dirt, scraped
our good wood, our casings,
we were stones. We didn't
sigh, croak out a low rattle. And we were
carried far from the earth we'd been used to,

moved above ground, to cool white marble rooms, storage bins.
If you could see where my feet once
stretched my toes toward knotting root, you'd find a dip
where my heel had rested, softened the
casket wood, depressed the dirt below. I had
dug in. I had filled it with myself, my heel
bone.

Marble doesn't soften. I don't hear the rolling and shifting
of earthworms. I hear my jawbone click. Echo. Click.

II.

The disinterred and their holes have left
perfect spacings for small shrubs, three feet
apart, and larger spaces, for blue spruce, hemlock,
honeylocust. Acreage wide and blooming.

III.

Rustling roots through newmade tunnels, I grow.
Long limbed and heavy
I have learned to sing when the right air
slides through me, when I move from a
shake to a wheeling cry out, a high long
call,

I am here, I am here, I am growing. My stillness
is nothing like the dips and whirrs of birds, bats.

The park is like a church in all that quiet. The wind, me, a gospel.

IV.

They wait for the cars, the men
to wave them over, to tighten their lips, pursed,
and shifteyed, scanning for cops. It's dark
enough this time of night that the faces are only half-lit
by headlight, the glow of a cigarette. And the boys
slink over, loosehipped and willing. They've
waited all night for a tired man
and his waiting mouth. The grass flattens
under their feet, made of light and pale green
from the headlights, then darkened, winked out.
The dirt holds onto the boys' footsteps, sinks
around their heels when they step out of the park
and into the cars.

Unmaking

The night you tell me about how you would do it,
both of us hunched in porch chairs, I tell you about the colors,
how they ran and blurred in the murk
that, heaving, I'd bloomed onto the blue
and white checks. I could see the linoleum in the places
where the pools separated, where nothing was wet.
I want to give them to you, the oranges and browns
and yellows that I had made, that my gut fought out.

Palmettos skitter over the peeling paint
on the floorboards. Two cars pass each other,
wink their headlights off, on. You flick the stub
into the broken plate already spilling over
with ashes, its eye
sleepily watching me.

In that room my heart clanged,
would not still. Arms too heavy
to lift, my hands shook when I woke, when I scooped
everything into piles. I rinsed them in the hall bathroom,
dug the soap under my nails. I shoved the bag
and towels in the black square of the trash chute.
They barely fit. I want you to see how I brimmed
over, how I felt too fully every thing. I drag

*at my cigarette, say, are those
birds, it's too late for birds, it's
too dark. You tell me, it is never too late. There are
always birds. Some don't need the light.*