

RAHA, JENNIFER LINDA, M.F.A. *Thirsty Garden* (2013)

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The poems of this collection explore issues of faith, womanhood, and what it means to be *in relationship* with another and *in community* with a place. Written predominantly in free verse, these poems seek to tell a story in the most natural way: in photographic frames, creating for the reader an experience similar to memory. Although these poems can be read independently of the others, this collection lends itself to being experienced as a lyrical story best categorized as a “bildungsroman”: a coming-of-age narrative dependent upon the psychological growth of the protagonist. *Thirsty Garden* concentrates on a specific point in growth which is the aftermath following the transformation: the harvest ready, the speaker already in love, another relationship destroyed or put aside. These poems remind the reader that one must grow into one’s past before changing course, must reckon with it. In mood, these poems range from meditative to explorative, from lyric to narrative. They are obsessive in their focus but unhurried in their search.

THIRSTY GARDEN

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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I

What the public criticizes in you, cultivate. It is you.
—*Jean Cocteau*

Continuum

Split-lipped winter has gone,
(his unexpected
laughter in the wind)

& spring
held hostage somewhere, god or whoever
having sent him
away

Who would advise coming back to this town?
—already
the pavement scorching
our bare feet, the sun cast down
on what we would wish

to hide—cracks
in our mothers' porcelain, gardens full
of weeds

III

Boyfriend

The night you washed my feet
was the night I knew

we would have to stop. Leaving
the bar, you'd confessed

to having lied, years earlier,
about the broken windshield,

had been driving drunk
and thrown the bottle out of it,

though with me you'd chalked it up,
repeatedly,

to bad luck, to some fluke of nature,
had cursed God.

And when I expressed concern
about your sister's cocaine

you told me you used to, too,
when we'd met. Later,

telling my aunt
how you'd hid it, she said

you must have really liked me
to cover it up,

and that's all people ever said
who were older, who'd lost at love

or married someone like you,
all too proud to say

where it hurt or how—
and all I could ever do

was find the wound
and name it,

that was what I wanted the most:
to find an injury

bigger than my own
and as accidental.

Wake

After you sent word that your father had passed
I lit a candle. I didn't know what to say.

The ceremony of it was all wrong: the candle small
and pumpkin scented and from a discount store—

so far from holy like the prayers I whispered
into emptiness, making crosses on my chest,

thinking, *you hypocrite, you know nothing
of where souls go.* And I'd only met your father

twice. Once at the bowling alley when you hesitated
to pay and he scolded you, saw how I loved you.

The second time: defeated, withdrawn.
I cleaned that whole next day and didn't tell you.

Watched on Facebook for pictures of your mother
at his bedside. I wasn't married then. I believed

love would dissipate neatly. But love makes itself known
in the sacrifice and an unwanted sacrifice still burns.

Dollface

Because rain. Because my ankles
doubt your palm, my knees. Because your
eyes, impenetrable. Because her because she—
Because eternity contains this past
still brewing. Because you are more ebb
than flow. Because flow.
Because rain and rain and sleet.
Because back roads and backseats
and fog that weighs down the whole morning sky.
Because I cannot see the sky, just
a haze of tilled up fields
once surrendered. Because too long lonely
to be lonelier together.
Because why. Because you made breakfast,
said, *Don't get used to this, Doll.*

Mayday

You don't want us around
for the rescue

nor for the waiting.
You prefer drifting like a captain

in a shipwreck
caught with his pants down

and tied the neck
to form a floatation device.

In *Small Craft Survival 101*
they teach this move

call it "Kissing Your Ass Goodbye."

Roommates

The girls were friends, not lovers,
this you must understand

when I tell you one girl used to lie
on the other's bed

when she would come home
and find her crying, the girl's

deep sighs often choking
into three quick breaths.

She would calm and the first girl
would listen as the rain outside the window

fell and fell. The sad one was neurotic
about washing her feet

as if the dirt would defile her.
Once, they clung to the York River

as if they were the tides, as if the sea
could draw them out

of the false safeties in that town.
We need not speak of God

but as children, they believed in Him,
and their lives pooled together

like mercury and then, like mercury
their lives slung apart.

Inland, older, they pulled up
their roots as college girls,

joked that they'd brought the river with them
to their first apartment:

the tears, the thirsty garden,
the basement studio flooding with each rain.

But pulling up roots
 meant finding the dirty earth

and soon their shower drain clogged
 with the places each had been,

making their ankles stick out
 of the water like marsh trees.

I used to come home from drinking
 and weep loud enough

for anyone to hear in that shower,
 wondering how long it would take

for her to knock and one day,
 I moved away.

Nimbus, a tethering

In the bedroom (bare-legged, nightgown
twisted with the sheets), the fan whips

hot air around my bed like hair
out a car window, like my hair

at fifteen when we'd dare "pidittle!"
& girls model-walked, no eating.

Times change like tires—
slow wear, sudden blowout

leaving me roadside stuck
& no direction. I ought to seek elsewhere

& different, swat flies (no honey),
their buzz like your buzz: fickle, sudden,

all gears go at once— silence growing
into blacked out silhouettes

wading through headlights, murky water
swimming & that damned pop song

playing upbeat like we used to.

Week of Rain

I distract myself: open blinds,
insist on light, on vibrancy
though morning, as ever, is a havoc
of blue. The sky
remains a doomful gray
and the sun refuses to thrust off
her covers, rise from the night.

Who should I call to say *this city*
has no gumption, no green?
Instead, I act like rain: tremble
around town, cold and unsure,
find grace only in the neighbor's trapdoor,
its white paint thin
as an old t-shirt, its flesh peeking through—

Nights at 200 Mendenhall

My bladder's in 2am alarm
and no friends sprawled out
on the couch—burned through
like the night I write into.

On whose end, I couldn't tell you.
Things fade. Feelings, selves—
We know this or at least I should,
freakish chameleon: *go, go, go, stop.*

Outside my apartment, footsteps
on the common stairs, another neighbor
grunting behind a closed door
you're so good, so good. That's it.

Portrait with Feng Shui

She moved the armchair
crazy-like, squeezed it
through the doorway,
watched its legs rip paint
from the wood. She had to
force it, kept jamming
her fingers against the frame.

Watching, you would see
there was something wrong
with her—to be that stubborn
on a Tuesday night. If she wasn't
me, I would tell you that next
the woman sat in the chair
for a long time and that she felt
that it had held her, that she patted
the chair arm in return
like one would a beloved pet.
But I told you it wasn't me.
I wasn't crazy at twenty-three.

Tic

Undiagnosed, they speculate
drug-girl, crazy-girl,

girl whose face sometimes
does that thing (*you know, the thing*)

referring to me sometimes squinting
one eye too many times

in conversation, the head roll
that follows when I realize

I've done it again, made someone
uncomfortable. In New York,

I've read, twelve girls in LaRoy
have tics now too, uncontrollable

body movements, verbal
outbursts. And speculators say

it's the high school, it's the
water, meanwhile the nature

knows how the spirit works,
how things manifest from within.

My mind knows better,
blames herself; is not

the thinker her thoughts?
I'm frenzied as the blades

of grass quivering
of their own accord, crazed

as the wind which whistles
just to be sure of itself.

Lineage

if etymology is our true ancestry,

& if a stanza means
little room,

then what to say
of the fricative,
a little lip, little lip

stemming from *foolish*,
which perhaps I have been—

feral now
meaning wild

but implying
abandoned—

as if nature were not herself
a home—

Carol

Around the corner, a fire truck
whirls. This is winter
in holiday red: emergency
meets 9-to-5 traffic, a child's
chapped cheeks shrieking
from a backseat, and bank accounts
hushed and slim as a promise.

The trees have cast off
their scorched leaves
without sufficient notice
on my end or any hint of grief
on theirs. I miss them, want
to be like them, pressing
captive veins to the sun.

Celebrating Our Savior's Birth

Like Mary, we know the signs:
feet weary & no room

among loved ones on the couch
to unload our burdens. A secret

long contained reveals
a different truth. For the last

four years, I've found
the lucky almond

in Grandma's rice pudding.
By folk legend, I'm the next

to marry & holding
the other cousins up.

Some daughters are given in seamless flurry
& others must be wrung loose

from a mother's hands.
And then there's my mother,

laughing, *don't you want some pudding?*
Everyone wants a baby.

Virginia Kriplyana

We do not begin clean like paper, smooth
under our mother's palm.

Wrinkled and crying, we greet the world
uncertain if it has ended

or begun. Snow fell yesterday
and it didn't descend

in one serene expanse.
Daffodils sprouted anyway,

peeked right through. The roads
that wire my hometown

are washed-out, grayed from salt.
Our lives cannot be straightened.

Even at our quietest,
unmarred, *in utero*,

we are steady with pulse
like waves on a shoreline

longing for land. The snow
feels this too in its own longing

for variation, adds another hue so bold
the Inuits gave it its own name—

snow that looks blue in early morning.

Never Again, Again

Overhead, a bridge
close enough we could swim
underneath, get our legs
caught in the underbelly
of steel and broken glass. I kept
casting his line unsteady, embarrassed
in my unknowing how or where
to aim, his eyes reprimanding
the back of my spine *you're not
pulling back quick enough*, even after earlier,
my having done even the dishes
wrong, my nerves so shot all
I could say was *fuck this* and *fuck that*.
Then his joking: *would you
listen to the mouth on you now*,
announcing the passage of time,
as always, revived only
by the four bottles of cheap,
pink wine he'd picked up in town
along with the steaks and shrimp,
potatoes and gluten-free brownies
he was hoping I'd make. *A good effort
nevertheless*, I'd noted that day,
just like his quickness
to wade in early April, after I'd gotten
the line wrapped around a stump.
And then his sneakers squishing
the whole walk back up the meadow,
black Converse soaked through
with lake and ruin
and me tailing along behind.

Warning

The whole memory of it is breasts:
the baby trying to clamp on, head bobbing

around the flesh. I helped her find
each warm nipple, holding her head

in one palm, her bottom
in the other. I told no one

of her delivery. How suddenly
she was there, belonging

to me. I was some kind of whore,
a loveless woman,

myself. She was five pounds and thirteen ounces:
too small. I kept forgetting to feed her.

None of it was as it should be;
I was sorry the whole time.

A half family and somebody's joke.
She sucked through the whole dream.

Suffering Presence

Summer has come again,
preacher having preached
this morning on destiny
and the fatalism
of the seasons. Only
the bumblebee in her endangerment,
could ever halt
what was meant to blossom.

My backyard is small.
My husband is dead.
With only me for a playmate,
my granddaughter runs
through the sprinkler in jabs, unsure
of where to let the water's chilly
knife strike her first.

Stanley Hauerwas, who believes
the greatest need of those suffering
is the presence of loved ones,
once wrote, *I had not yet learned
the desperation hidden
under our daily routines.*
Even he, the Christian ethicist,
added, *and I did not want to learn it.*

Perhaps he had thought he wanted
to be left alone.

My granddaughter leaps
into my lap laughing
in only her skivvies
and still she wants me
to cradle her and her long legs
like an infant, and when I look away
from her sweet gesture too quickly
in a backyard so inherently
green, how could I not teach her
such tender green is made
not just with sunlight but with
an unforeseen blue?

Heat

Night sticks like garlic, wakes me,
the skin around my lip seeped with wine,

my jaw clenched, unclenching—
& waiting to forget the jagged rut

forged from your lip on my hip,
this tongue to your sadness.

I can't believe I don't know you
anymore. Friends, lovers, stay

or erase themselves
like the white train of an airplane.

I thought you would
change your mind, would come back.

Elsewhere someone is singing
in the streets. This is not my time

just as elsewhere in time
we addressed each other

fondly, sought together
the assurance of a lover

instead of someone to love, kept
knocking with our seeking,

never with our finding.

Swim Team

5am wake-up, sixteen
and determined
to strip my body
of all signs of girlhood,

the want for taught underarms
and thighs.

The slip into the water
was more jump

than anything
skilled, knees bending
as the concrete bottom
caught my big feet.

Even my goggles steamed
and left red rings
around my eyes. I was often
caught doing it wrong.

At the Community Pool

The girl can't be more than nine,
small gold hoops through both
her ears, her lips parsed almost seductively
as she dips her fingers into the water.
Brown eyes. Short brown hair. Two-piece
swimsuit. Her freckles are coming in
though she must will them not to.
Her breasts too—body having betrayed
her early. She shares a lavender inner tube
with her friend who is smiling
and likely the same age, only smaller
with black hair spiraling down her back.
This one hasn't learned which way
to tilt her chin yet, seems unbothered
by the sunscreen smeared thickly
across her nose and directly under each eye,
making her appear birdlike, godlike,
supreme and so unlike the first girl.

Volant

You were a *you*—a man, my first—
 who with horror I learned such need
 is often a pushing against & yet

 the rhythm—if you could call it that—
 an attempt to hush something innate
& seemingly eternal—like fear.

You held me like the air must hold
 a butterfly, my constant & jittery need
 to keep moving, to never relax

 into you. I knew I couldn't because surely
 my wings had already clipped the water,
those moments just before the butterfly's

death, wings wet & unable to rise
 in its flutter, a walloping
 which could never satiate

 the water or the air enough
 that the creature could be freed by either,
even with the water still in awe of it,

its mimicry of color so similar
 to our attempt to slip between our realms,
 together in some ephemeral form. Then, my

 jarring initiation, the sudden & un-
 mentionable reality that assenting
to a man had meant meeting you here,

that rush in your eyes,
 if only momentarily,
 that lied air & were river.

Portrait as My Father

At dusk, I row my daughter out
to gaze at the sun dappling the river.

There's smoke most days along the horizon
that bleeds like ink, through sky,

like Corazon through veins of night.
She's heartbroken, my girl,

can't seem to be set right, still holds
the pearls he gave her,

heavy moons she carries
in her pocket, remainders

of their goose skin and wading,
ankle deep along the shore.

Their love still twinges like evening stars
within her. Feel them fade,

and slowly sink, fiery masses
puckered to charring kiss—

With age, you learn that blackness.
The empty that fills a soul in mourning.

The plenty that's sure to follow.
Soon we'll watch the day tiptoe in

determined to shed her sorrow,
You can't tell a girl it gets easier.

The sea, the rhythm, knows no even keel.

Map

The way back is high grassy plains,
unexplored territory, but with the usual

burrs and rattlesnakes.
That familiar feeling of being alone.

I do not know when it is that a girl
forgets her worthiness, or where

she should go to reclaim it.
Life makes no promises,

carries no weapon with the intention
to wound. One can stand upon lost love

like worn wooden floor, but it cannot
make one walk. I had to do that.

III

Echomimetic

Like lightning through a tree, a hip bone,
under force, can crack and splinter.

Joints are different. An ankle will roll
out of itself with the same quick hollow rush

of a bullet. The back has its own way,
is as stubborn as an old man. Like the heart,

it keeps pleading with the mind that it's fine,
begs to go on, quietly, with its burden.

2011

Nothing new to that year,
except the accepted loss of you—

the man who broke my heart like a lousy
pair of leather flats: wore me into it.

And being a woman who believes
herself entitled to love, what a thrill it was

to have love dangled, then taken away.

Resupination

Only the blackberries give joy in this creation
more labyrinth than prayer. I've lost, again,

my *Brief Guide to Deliverance*,
though I remember comfort is found

in the inertia of the inevitable sting.
Men, it warns, can be sweet like citrus

against the wound. In the kitchen,
an orchid grows toward the window

& often I catch myself pressing a palm
against the radiator, resting my cheek

against the glass. I'm learning
that praise can be a natural state,

the orchid awarding her most ornate petal
with a swelling into bloom.

It is not separate. The body, like a bud,
knows to twist out of its weight, thrust

the bottom below and continually
face upwards, having taught the lips,

her hips to sing the petal's song
labellum labellum labellum.

Devil Purses

Bags of leaves sit along the curb
this morning like stout old men,
like my ex-boyfriend would sit for hours
in front of a blinking TV screen.
I was always crawling into his blank-
eyed stare, begging for what was
mutually kindred and dark.
Even I knew it was a bad idea
to be heartbroken and home
for Thanksgiving, to accept a date
with a guy who remembered me
and my heavy blue backpack
in the sixth grade. I winced
when he took my hand climbing
the York's uneven river rocks,
skate eggs peppering the sand.
All this time spent leaving
this quicksand coastline. I winced
when he kissed me too, my eyes
sinking in on what didn't belong:
someone's abandoned condom
glimmering under the rural sun
and my own innocence further undone.

Blackberry,

you woo me with your lumpy bits,
your multicolored flesh pocketed
like Indian corn, *maiz morado*—
the name plump on my lips
like plopping your purple into my mouth, taste bright
and chaotic, each berry its own secret
that you keep, my misconstrued
blackberry, completely a-
symmetric though this goes unnoticed mostly
except when my tongue envelopes you
with the same urgency as a man
taking a breast into his mouth,
my nipples aroused and ripe for the tasting—

Symmetry

Like a man who keeps drawing nearer
a woman's silence, slow cause
of her pulling away, we too cast out wonder
on accident, declare it a thing
to be hunted, to be held up before our eyes
like a text too small. Landscapes
cannot be read like this and refuse
to be solved. The trees take root
within the atmosphere, are contained
by the seemingly uncontainable.
In the same way, a sidewalk puddle can gather
light, can comprehend the brilliance
of the entire sky. And yet, because we believe
we cannot entice heaven nearer, we busy
ourselves, paint steeples white, raise them, determined.

Harvest

I have spent the whole season collecting seeds
in my apron pocket. I do not know how
to call you home. I painted our door red
last week, and finally, there are roses, wild,
little ones. How will you recognize
me now that my hair has grown long as the wheat
and my halved peach cheeks are ripe? My lips
are plump tomatoes splitting under the hot sun.
I can't remember a time before all of this bursting.

Anachronism

“If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” John 15: 18-19

Creation, if we should be together,
concomitant in the isochronal,

this collateral,
if you are modernity and I

am on the spot, if the man
on the sidewalk has misplaced

his importance and somewhere,
down the road, a young girl

is slitting her thigh with a razor,
when will you realize then,

and should you,
that the simultaneous

leaves no time for spelling
contemporaneous or pondering

why it should take so long
to say, *in the moment*

or how this should seem
a smarter phrase than *now*,

now, you are of this world,
now you live here.

Tell me, who among us,
belongs here?

Perennial

You did not come in like summer,
car seats hot to the touch, all that sweat.

Nor winter: cold, sullen,
and anxious—as anyone—to run off.

Fall would not do either,
with its loud cackle of fire and leaves.

You were and remain spring,
that fresh light crossing over

the hills in the horizon.
What if this is all anyone means

when discussing rebirth?
—the recollecting of who we are

as children, that light in the eye
so strong that when I catch a glimpse

of myself in the mirror
I find my girlhood

grin, fearless and willing, high ponytail
lopped to the side from laughter.

Note to Self

Even if I had made him up, if he had never
come around, the tomatoes still would have grown
wild along the drive. The gardens, too,
would still be in need of pruning, weeds
rampant around the harvest and I'd still leave
the scarecrow gawking like a madman
at the ravenous squirrels, just as the shaggy dog
up the street would still need to leap
into the back of an old pickup, its nature: to stray.
Sweat gathers in the crooks of my elbows
despite fall's first early chill. I plant
the ugly bulbs in the cracked, unwilling earth.
But still, the oaks sashay their branches
like girls with tambourines, dusk wired
with some neighbor kid's saxophone scales, chromatic,
as my fists like plums soften, give way, disheveled
as the dandelions which join—haphazardly—with the wind.

Reply

Like deer, the stars came out seemingly
all at once, though you know

that couldn't be true, that rather, they crept out
one by one into the cold night,

into this field where we lay, our bodies
separate but humming in our having

found each other, even though
I'm lying: we've never

camped before and the deer do
as they wish: sometimes trickling into the night

or out of the dawn and sometimes
they do so flamboyantly and a driver can't

sense their pandemic joy
banking the curve in his SUV. Your love

feels like this and also like a deer
feel when cast in some musical animation,

personified and set to a higher note. I don't know
what to make of being so wrapped up in you

by accident, which worries me,
for in our dawdling I can't make you stay

any more than I can make the deer
stop their frolicking in the street

and as for that, Dear, I can stop ours,
either, should you ever so desire.

Directive

You want to stop the car.
To not proceed any further

into the place you have been
and the place you continue to go.

The place changes—
sometimes a lover or a bar

you frequented when you were young
and less tired, back when you didn't

look in the rearview mirror
and find your cheeks sunken,

your eyes weary & lined.
At one time, the place

was a boat landing and the desire
to drink up the moon, to swallow it

like an ice-cube in diet-soda night,
your tongue fizzy and blundered.

Like a migratory bird, you always
know the place and to find it

when your belly crawls up to your throat.
It never knocks. Refuses.

Tells you: take a narrow
stretch of road, one peppered

with rusty mailboxes
and half-assembled cars.

Seek dandelions or buttercups;
it makes no difference.

A soy field will do. Drive
until no one knows

where to find you, even the one
that loves you and waits.

Park where you feel skittish,
someone's driveway or an abandoned

factory, until you want
to turn around, taking yourself with you.

Portrait with Telepathy

Walking to meet an old boyfriend,
the girl is stuck watching the train heavy
on the tracks. She's remembering last week's
article of the teenagers killed drinking wine
too close to the rails. Another woman
steps near the full-barreled
mammoth, incomprehensible
to choose to be on the doorstep
of such an ordered danger. When
the shaking gates lift, red lights
blaring, the girl walks forward, briefly
catching her shoe in the track.
She wonders then if he feels it
waiting for her a block over,
if he's become aware of her accidental
longing, the wild and wicked desire
to want to be wanted by one suddenly
in love with another. She knows
he cannot avoid the train's mad whistle
approaching their distance, its steady
careening both chaotic and wonderful,
chugga-chugga, chugga-chugga.

2am reading

Even the book of used poems
I picked up quotes knowingly,

something keeps you up at night, though.
I don't need a reminder.

A friend mentions the tendency
to think about the future

makes the present
irrelevant. She does it too,

says the clock
is a human metronome.

Waking goes the same way
as sleeping: is just as difficult.

Each delicious, *Good Morning!*
still brings its own host of ennui

and desperation: orange juice meets
newly discovered canker sore

and last night's dishes
wait in the sink just as the bodies

of the dead await the mortician.
What can be said of the work

before me? Whole lives
are spent waiting in the wings.

Voyeur Vespers

The old woman next door
who plants bulbs every afternoon
at dusk

looks like she's praying, whole sky
gray with dust, no moon,
no sun, & no horizon.

Even the grass—barely green.

The sky has been streaked with clouds
like a child running fingers
over the window of a dirty minivan,

and the only color: dozens
of light pink roses and my neighbor's
strawblond hair

against her faded
black dress, her toil
her homage to the dust that has been

and the dust that is to come.

-somnia

I woke to the sound of rain he says
eyeing the open window—

an invasion,
the house otherwise still.

Mornings early and cold.

He's pressing
the fleshy part of his thumb
along my hand. Love would

be rain, the sudden
slowness of it, the pooling, the odd

and possible
evaporation into day.

Sometimes, when alone,

I think the washing machine
is saying hushed and quickly:
love-love-love-love-love
as if there is no time to waste.

On Loving

If you learn a lesson well enough
you don't do the thing again:
begin backing up hard drives, watch
for rusty roofing nails, skip the last round
of tequila before calling an ex-boyfriend.
You'd think by now I'd say *no*
more. And *yes*.

Weeks ago I stood at a crosswalk
and couldn't tell if the breeze
came from the wind or the cars which rushed by,
blurred and as aimlessly determined
as my feet. I barter often with the sky
that hangs over Friendly Avenue, will it
to caution me with rain or hurricane,
dusk too quick on an afternoon run.

Some choices don't want to be made.
Like you on the phone getting your discount
spaceship tattoo. *If you don't like it, then
maybe this isn't meant to be.* As if
you have no demands of me,
but you'd peel the kisses off my lips
from other men if you could.
How unreasonable. And how like love:
that black cloud rearing unexpectedly
to spite the persistent sun, their squabble
unavoidable, celestial, and so routinely lit.

Bullet

Before our sudden greeting
with this odd planet: the womb

a waiting chamber
slick as the gun's sleek barrel.

Then, the constant
forward motion, even in sleep,

especially in sleep,
the whirlwind dreams that startle

you back into life, back
into the hurtling of the bullet.

Soon there are years of resistance
and wind in your face,

mixed with moments
of what feels like free fall,

that amazement with living,
until the eventual end of flight,

life careening into some
unknown, the body

turned inward, potential,
not kinetic,

that science class maxim:
a being at rest will remain

at rest, our souls, our energy
again embodied, spirit no longer

emitting or taking charge, our energy
transferring into the earth,

and that word *potential*
resulting from some arrival.

I am not cruel, only truthful-

after Sylvia Plath

Like a ghost, I lived life masked but present,
lit devotion within my hollow. In cupped palms
I held the flame, blew gently upon it.
I got to choose what or whom I believed in.
And to what magnitude. That was key.
A stranger mutters my secret:
you only write about bad relationships.
What other kind are there, I start,
my want for ruin like a fire craving kindling,
though I've forbidden you, now,
from being the wax below my wick
as to not consume you with my need.
But then, what flame wouldn't lick up
your wet-eyed wanting, your desire
to keep the fire lit, but tamely so?

Commencement

Last year I wrote that I wanted to live
in a world that was pretty,
as if I no longer believed that it was
or could ever be again.
My vision of ugliness
could be trusted alongside all things
which malignantly grow:
grief, loss, cancer—

The world, now, keeps getting uglier:
kindergartners shot & I can't stomach
the president smirking, avoiding news
of who else we killed today
& what for.
And you, you keep calling
at each upheaval,
*are you okay, do you need me
to come home, do you need me
to fuck him up?* Outside,
someone is banging on a door
c'mon, man, c'mon & fight,
a chant you & I know too well,
result of my disbelief, my want
to take comfort in this ugly world
& ugly men where God hides, chooses
which of his naughty children
will blow up other naughty children.

This is where you meet me, my timid
stallion: at the gate, returning,
still surveying my upturned mourning.
You jerk your neck with certainty,
like horses do, willing the rider
away from some dark something,
asking me firmly, but gently,
to follow.

Invocation

Here they say you never get the experience
you came for, here being your life and they
the little folk band from Idaho who appear well-versed
in the mundane, those small wonders, mercies
overlooked: the wren perched atop the storm drain
or the wick whose flame stretches high in its first gulp
of air with the same lift as my eyes do
as they draw, suddenly, up the horizon to power lines
gridding a once boundless sky.

I've found small, unwanted reminders:
spoiled milk, leftovers, and silence.
No longer the roar of laughter over some silly thing
done during breakfast, some joke
that never got old because of who was telling it
and how, and oh, maybe it was you.

I no longer preserve odd, humble things
like the bathroom's one board shelf and its nails
I once left abandoned for weeks
where they fell onto the tile floor. Even the cockroach
carcass I left for days as if I were waiting
for it to salvage some deep strength
and one night quietly take leave.

All things are both fleeting and certain.
River stones choose which bank to shift weight
and settle. The song note pedals the air in its purpose
like a child on a bike. We have come here
for something and I do not mean to say that I, in particular,
have been lost or that in some wanting, could be found.

The rain pools along the road, offers itself.

Notes

The quote from Charlotte Brontë in the section one heading can be found in her novel, *Villette*.

“Mayday” describes a real approach to floatation though it works best with denim which is “airtight.” This method requires tying the pant legs behind one’s neck and making a swooping motion with the waist of the pants.

“Tic” references a school in LeRoy, New York where “16 people suddenly have developed uncontrollable twitching and verbal tics” (CNN).

Country singer LeeAnn Womack has a song entitled “Never Again, Again” for which my poem is titled.

Suffering Presence is an actual book by Stanley Hauerwas. The poem was inspired by Melissa Ann Pinney’s photograph found on page 27 of *Regarding Emma*.

“At the Community Pool” was inspired by another of Pinney’s photographs found on page 87.

“Portrait as my father” found its beginnings in Claude Monet’s “Impression: Sunrise, 1872”

The lovers described in “Portrait with Telepathy” stems from the death of two best friends, Elizabeth Nass and Rose Mayr, who were killed by a derailed train in Ellicott City, MD. According to *The Baltimore Sun*, the last text one girl sent was “levitating.”

Sylvia Plath’s quote comes from her poem “Mirror.”

“Voyeur Vespers” captures the woman found in “Misty Morning, 1874” by Alfred Sisley.