

SILVA, STEFANIE R., M.F.A. *Late Afternoon at the Zoo*. (2010)
Directed by Prof. David Roderick. 45 pp.

This thesis comprises a collection of poems completed as a student in the Masters of Fine Arts program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. It is a menagerie of beasts, human or otherwise, who develop relationships with people or with nature, and the poems explore how these relationships affect their interactions in the community.

LATE AFTERNOON AT THE ZOO

by

Stefanie R. Silva

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2010

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

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

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--------------------------------------|------|
| Late Afternoon at the Zoo..... | 1 |
| The Botanist | 2 |
| Chili Pepper..... | 3 |
| Ode to the Matchstick..... | 4 |
| The Botanist’s Girlfriend | 5 |
| The Calling | 7 |
| Retirement..... | 8 |
| Modern Victorian..... | 9 |
| The First Violinist | 11 |
| Intermission..... | 12 |
| Becoming Something | 13 |
| Surveillance..... | 14 |
| And Here I Thought it was Over..... | 15 |
| Wildfire, Santa Cruz Mountains | 16 |
| There is a Hawk at My Window | 17 |
| What We Are | 19 |
| After the Show..... | 20 |
| Vow of Silence..... | 21 |
| The Navigator | 22 |
| Fish Farmer..... | 23 |

| | |
|---|----|
| How Nice for the Snow Queen..... | 24 |
| To the Man Knocking on Her Door | 25 |
| The House of Cards | 26 |
| Only Parlor Tricks | 27 |
| The Doll Doctor is In..... | 28 |
| Flight Attendant | 29 |
| The Cartographer | 31 |
| The Doll Doctor’s Challenge..... | 32 |
| Adaptation | 33 |
| Giant Squid Expert | 35 |
| The Spotted Eagle Ray | 36 |
| Barreleye..... | 37 |
| In the Cactus Garden..... | 38 |
| Cultivating a <i>Tahina Spectabilis</i> | 40 |
| Graffiti Under the Overpass | 41 |
| Saturday Morning..... | 42 |
| The Curator of the Funeral Museum Invites You In..... | 43 |
| Meteorologist in Love..... | 44 |
| The Starfish | 45 |

Late Afternoon at the Zoo

Birds have bones
in their tongues but limited taste buds:
what cumpers our hunger? When separated

from him, when the grass hunkered down,
I drew my skeleton on a napkin
so I wouldn't lose my borders.

It is late in the day. A red-river hog slumps
against a tree, its facemask blank,

alligators sponge on shore, bubbles beading
at the edges of their mouths,

and there isn't a person in sight
to observe this formlessness.

Gray clouds are bags of cinders waiting to billow
down black feathers,
but the bird-tracked lane leads me forward

to the bald eagle—a broken wing,
lacquered buttons for eyes that keeps caged
the last of its strength—

the zookeepers feed it dead rats, pet the top
of its haloed head.

He used to stroke my hair, unwind my curls, his fingers
curved like sparrows foraging
for seeds, earwigs, whiteflies, attracted to my primroses—

soon, loss will be nothing but a pair of brown boots at the foot
of the bed, and that's when I'll doctor myself, rest

my tongue, lay down the sack of cinders carrying the sky.

The Botanist

And I thought I controlled nature—
my soil peopled
with plants and herbs.
The search for beauty hives
in me, a symmetry, a specific odor:

the tulip mutates
for variance against the sky, satisfies
my appetite, exquisite in its design.
It once set a whole country in a fever

similar to my cultivation
of the Butterwort—wintered rosettes,
carnivorous leaves luring insects
with sticky dew.

You are a flower held apart
by your long neck, your lower lip
curved to a pout—
each morning, your communion
with nature as you cut an apple in half,
pluck from its chamber
seeds that scatter
on the kitchen floor

while the leaves
of my Butterwort lay spatulate,
its roots spindling in soil. It is ready
to digest food.

When you bite
an apple so tart, you suck the air
through your teeth, close
your eyes, and say,
Eve's apple was probably a pomegranate.

Chili Pepper

My tongue, soft
as moss, is kindled
when I bite,
my taste buds are thistles
that bind to the heat—

birds do not share
my sensitivity: they eat
the white flesh, loosen
the seeds that fall
to my mouth.

Embryonic, this sprouting:
the ignition sings
my mouth's canopy,
then the tingling
of its passage
down my throat—

I sweat. I
feel the pulped ballad
of my heart, sense
something like pain
in the pepper's shape,
simple as a strawberry.

The seeds burrow in me.
I'm endothermic,
beaked. These gardens
were dead
until I grew the fire,
and now I'm a fledgling:
I flock, I call and call.

Ode to the Matchstick

Combed in with the rest
Nestled in a matchbook

Wedged between bookshelves
Between flaps in cardboard boxes
You are bent backwards but still useful.

A boy dips you down
In the woods then runs away—

Can't you taste
The fire on your breath?
Anyone can swoop your body like a dancer
To light candles, incense, cigarettes—

Charred, your fire grows.

The trees fall into themselves
Smoke rises like soft bread
Flakes sail to neighborhoods
Flakes veil streetlamps.
The sky curdles like buttermilk.
Air waves the pieces down
Trails of you anchor into soil.

A fern grows
In someone's backyard, shrinks
From heat

And when the flames
Burn themselves out
It droops, folds inward, and reopens.

The Botanist's Girlfriend

Come onion shoot
growing from the core
come sprouts
that peek from the eyes
of russet potatoes—
what an eagerness
to produce.

In your laboratory, you forge
tropical climates
to sustain
peregrine specimens,

concern yourself
with flowers that bear
violent names: Blood Lilies,
Bleeding Hearts that erupt
into beauty but soon
wilt into their corollas

and when I eat an apple
you don't consider
the fruit's curiosity,
how it migrated
for survival—

come Johnny Appleseed
who traveled
on his limb-stalks,
who seeded nurseries,

his apples were too
tart and could only
be ground into
pomace for cider—
come, American Bacchus.

You only comprehend
me as a flower,

the way my brain
turns on its stem
like a pink lotus,
the veins of my hands
fine leaf patterns,

but my skeleton
persists in all weather,
my blood pumps
through heart-chambers
and when you touch
me I touch you back,
a sensual world
to remember.

And my apple trees,
come with me
the way Augustus went
with Livia to the figs
she smeared with poison—
he picked the softest one,
the one he trusted
most to eat.

The Calling

In his basement, the old man turns
on his ham radio, signals

friends in Morse code,
but there is no answer.

He thumbs through piles of old appliance manuals,
and later, in the kitchen, heats a frozen dinner.

In the evening, the old man sits outside.
His backyard is infested

with ladybugs. They cover tree trunks
and flowers, animating plants with their whirligig

movements. Everything is hushed
to red. The ladybugs climb up his legs,

circle his torso like a sweater.
Their black legs prickle his arms, and he shivers.

Ladybugs settle on his body, their spots still.
When he stands,

weathered and ringed,
his knee-joints lock into place,

and the ladybugs feed on aphids
crowding the surface of his leaves.

They need him. He raises his branches.
His toes root in the ground.

Retirement

The muscadine vines fill with dusk.
Wasps weave out of their pulped nest:
the canticle of pollen.
The man sits on his porch and thinks
of the woods, where wisteria harps
between the wired tines
of a deer's antlers, where the ferns huddle
together, leaves spun like cocoons.
Behind the clouds, the sun presses down
on the sky that has the look of a bruise—
soon it will be time for bed.

The man once owned a pharmacy,
his chapped fingers dusted with a film
of powder from all those pills.
His wife used to say he carried power
in his pockets: he knew
people's secrets. She carried the frigid
breeze of water. The squall of gnats
in the evenings was like a darkness
that stood beside her.
He counted out her pills, filled
the small, plastic bottles, stuffed
in the cotton balls, but when she was gone,
his power skipped away
into the stream behind the house.

Tonight, the man will lie awake on the mattress
with only his two arms beside him
and a wan sheet over his body.
He hears rats nesting
in the attic, a constant shuffling
as they cluster around each other.

Modern Victorian

Outside, wild children drown
beds of peonies,
vex the bees

that fizzle past
Lady Estelle's window—a violin
hums in her throat.

She thinks of tea
with the queen, her hat plumed
with feathers—

the vacuum purrs
next door, cars crunch Styrofoam
and what happens
when everything retrogrades:

snakes slide back into
their skin, tomato vines
shimmy to the soil while
the Pheasant's Eye closes.

Lady Estelle on a couch of red velvet brocade
teaches girls benevolence—
don't impale
cajole the fillet on your plate.

The girls curtsy when they enter,
eat from their left, drink
from their right, and never speak
while chewing.

A denizen of whalebone
and lacing, wasp-waisted
and hooped, Lady Estelle sits
in her parlor, the curtains drawn,

her fingers hooked in her lap.
She listens to the trill
of the sparrows that have always

been part of the circumstance—
as calamity rings by,
they time their calls
to fall between each note.

The First Violinist

Her finespun fingers springing
 into tempo, the tilt of her bowed head,
the way she once used her knee
 to graze his thigh

before a show, saying,
 I'm concertmaster after all.

The audience folded
 in darkness as the concerto
crescendos with a snap
 of the wrist, the orchestra reaching

its vanishing point:
 a park trail where birds
are woodwinds, unable to tell if it is day or night

while the conductor is an old dog
 as he chases his tenor,
strewn leaves are hundreds of cymbals
 clapping under his feet.

He trusts everything to speak
 in this way: the playground
ensemble, the brass section
 of the swings, the violinist's

raised elbow as she churns
 her bow—the accelerando,
(lips puckered, cheeks rosed)
 then the diminuendo
as the conductor traces shapes
 in the air with his baton.

She possesses something that rests on the waist
 of her violin that he craves

to cup between his palms and his chest
 like an heirloom charm.
Sweat on his temples
 as he slows his arm to mute.

Intermission

And when the marching band
was tired of performing
they walked away from the parade

and laid down their instruments,
then they rested beside the lake,
their cheeks wedded to the ground.

Their arms and legs
grew out like branches. Moss
clumped on bright blue uniforms,

grass grew between frayed epaulets.
The flutes and cymbals rusted,
the drum heads dimpled.

Soon, a few wanted to return
and tore themselves
from the earth,

blowing the dirt out
of the tubas and trumpets
that honked in response,

but the others listened
to a potato bug drumming
its stomach against the ground.

Sap beads their scalps. Their hearts ring
like trees. A deer pauses
beside them and cocks its head.

Becoming Something

The dead woman that once lived with me
wore my clothes around the house.
In the afternoons she watched infomercials
and charged my credit card.
She opened the refrigerator to eat my leftovers,
drank milk right out of the carton.

At breakfast, she sat across from me and ate,
one hand propping her head. A tooth
fell into her Corn Flakes and she clenched her jaw.

Later, I caught her naked in the bathroom.
She asked me how she looked.
I told her, *pretty dead*,
and she smelled bad too.
She looked at herself in the mirror and peeled
her hanging skin like a peach,
then sat on the edge of the tub
and put her bony head between her bony
knees, and her hair clumped out.

I heard her that night playing my piano:
fluid, thinned fingers—
a song in minor key.
She made no mistakes.
She used the foot pedal until her leg muscles slid
off her shin, and her heart sat
beside her on the bench, acting
like a metronome.
I told her I needed sleep.
She told me she never did anything
her whole life, but now she feels
the percussion. She closed
her swamping eyes.

The next morning I found
her skeleton inside my piano
tangled between the strings,
the felt hammers resting
on her bones.

Surveillance

He gazes down at people with lightning
on their minds: the blimp they stare at

lacks a framework, its hum echoes
ponderous as a boatswain's call

when there are no boats on the river,
no sails winging against brisk wind.

This is not a moored balloon snagged
between his branched breaths—

nobody can see him, no matter
how much they crane their necks.

He sees how the sun tarnishes
the sky, how the coffee below isn't ready yet—

he turns the valve and sinks a little
before buoying in the air. There is helium

in the blimp's envelope, not an open
letter to the girl on the shore

who unspools like a reeling fog
the string of her kite: a nylon diamond taut

with crossed wooden spars. The girl
doesn't watch the blimp, just lets her kite

fly from the margins to the center,
absorbing the tigerish afternoon:

real power means not having to look.

And Here I Thought It Was Over

How heavily the sky and fields sleep after it's over.
The stars and mud feel knee-deep after it's over.

Tulips bloom, but ash falls and burrows into molehills.
Smoothing down the petals, we hide beneath after it's over.

We, who watch the hawk swoop down to carrion,
eat sugarcane that is too sweet for our teeth after it's over.

It's too concrete, this wall of air we try to push through,
so we build tunnels and crawl underneath after it's over.

Lightning isn't far behind this light summer breeze.
Yes, the field is electric: we lay with sheep after it's over.

This sky: it clouds over with gray stories—
it speaks into our telescopes, light to keep after it's over.

We wake, our bodies folded like origami on a woman's palm—
we unfold our paper wings and leap after it's over.

We roll with Rose down the mountain because it's so steep—
the sun is etched on your hands, etched deep after it's over.

Wildfire, Santa Cruz Mountains

Smoke enters into the slivers
of space between steel and glass,
its bushels mimicking cumulus clouds.
Ash rains down on concrete,
landing softer than water.
Ash on roofs, ash on grooves
of doors, ash on my hair.

I look out the window at the hazy
sky and know I am witnessing
what is inherent in flakes of ash—
the dust of conifer trees, brittle
grass, bamboo wind chimes, multi-
storied homes and what
is within them: crumbs
on the carpet, flattened
toothpaste tubes, dirty dishes,
porcelain toilets. And, the residue
of people: flakes of skin,
nail clippings in garbage cans,
fingerprinted mirrors.

The smoke lingers
in the sky for days.
This light rain of ash
lands on my shoulders
until I am stooped over
with all its gray stories.
Each house, tree, person reaches
down into my pores and tells
me to watch the breakdown
of molecules that collect and rejoin
on the ground—nature mingling
with object, the result new,
rearranged, and mislabeled.

There is a Hawk at My Window

The day we moved in,
we found a stack of Polaroids
left in the closet, and we kept them.
When we left, they settled
on the shelf—halted
memories, disavowed.

Here, apple slices brown
on top of the kitchen counter
and old chowder slumps
in its container, a watery film
creeping over the dense bottom.
My ceramic bears crammed
in cardboard boxes
growl and paw each other.

I look out the window.
Far away, a tree dies, slips
down to the ground in the woods,
and from that tree trunk sprouts
a row of new trees, and in a new
tree there lies the hawk's nest.

Your books: towers on the floor
that create a cityscape, and I
see the small house we once
lived in, where daddy long legs
clenched to dusted corners,
never wisped away.

I see the hawk—
every turn of its head,
its beak opening,
closing like a door.
I see it lift its large, brown wings—

our once-twined clothes
piled on the floor, our cups
and forks nestled in the dishwasher—

and the hawk's central vane swipes
at the wind as it hurls itself in the air.
It flies away like a prediction,
omniscient in all its roaming,

passing over cemeteries but never
landing to grieve, never landing
near the sight of a woman
whispering at the foot
of a grave, its sharp eyes
trained only for its nest.

What We Are

Lobed, these dandelions, with rows of florets,
like the curves and folds of our brains:
knots affixed to a taproot. Awake
in the day, their petals tuck at night,
and when they are cut from the stem they bleed
a gummy sap. Skeletal, they clock:
soft balls of seeds bound to spines keep time
with the wind, waiting to spread like parachutes—
offspring akin to the parent, offspring
settling in sidewalk cracks, fracturing their
way out of the ground. Even the most
delicate can survive, catching water
to drink with leaves that resemble teeth—
their maned heads open, they bend to the sun.

After the Show

His heart is a concert hall after a performance:
empty, with crumpled programs on the floor.

He is alone on stage.
The lights are off.

Silence reverberates from his rib bones
until he lifts his guitar

and plays a tune, thrumming
the strings with bent fingers.

When his brothers were alive,
they all played in a band—

their music always felt good enough
for the oak walls of his heart.

At night he lies in his twin bed and his feet are cold.
He looks at the light shining through the window—

sorrow is in knowing that the light glows
from a streetlamp, not even the moon.

He turns over, closes his eyes,
but does not sleep,

and after he plays the last chord,
he grabs his guitar by the neck.

Vow of Silence

I leave my apartment at night.
The air is moth-eaten,
the bed of impatiens
in the front yard are threadbare.

I push a shopping cart around
the grocery store, pick up cans
of chunky tomato soup,
boxes of macaroni and cheese--

anything to fill my mouth.

The cashier asks, *how are you this evening?*
I hand him my cash.

I didn't say, *you're the first
person to ask me that today.*

At home, stacked photos crowd each other.
People elbow me out of the frame.

A blue shirt hangs in my closet--
so flat it seems no person can fit.

The phone rings.

I didn't say, *hello?*

No one can hear my bad posture.

From my kitchen window I see
a father yell at his boy.
The boy's head hangs down
like a balloon deflating slowly
as he shuffles in his untied Nikes.

I pull the curtains closed and lean
against the counter, eat ice cream
out of the carton--

it's vanilla ice cream no beans.

I didn't say, *everyone wants details.*

The Navigator

In me, there's a river, she says.

I believe her. The crow's feet
spattering the shore of her eyelids,

the drift of her hair: signs of
the swell within. *When fishermen
catch trout, I feel their panting gills—*

*they relied on me. Now I can't
do anything to help.* In the puddles
of her irises I see the bends of the river,

dragonflies skittering the surface,
ducks preening, their heads bowed
into their stomachs. Spread out

on the bed, she becomes shallow,
the groundwater from her pores emptying
into her, trying to fill her back up. She sighs.

*Now there's a drought
and my lungs have dried out.*
She looks so sad that I ask for rain

as I begin braiding her hair.
I braid until there's a long gray rope.
She shakes her head. *The stream bed,*

*it's not comfortable. All those
stones.* There is nowhere to rest
within her. I braid to pull her out

from the depression that forms
in the ground of her heart, to help
her over to the warm, soft mud.

Fish Farmer

All his fish are dead.
The algae on the surface
of his ponds laze
over the water like wet hair.
Silver Dollar Fish clink
to the bottom, sinking a wish,
Bleeding Heart Tetra bloat
to the shore, stiff as plastic toys—
he can fit two in his palm,
their scales clouded,
their eyes round knobs.
He thinks, *they would have died
anyway*, in an amateur's aquarium,
the fluorescent light tinting
fake plants neon as the fish
tuck under a castle's moat,
but he knows they shouldn't
have died in his care.
He couldn't save them,
couldn't enclose them all
in their own, other-worldly
ecosystem when the chill
first anointed the water.

Wind scissors his face
and he covers his mouth
with a scarf. He walks back
to the house where his wife
microwaves canned tomato soup
and his children bite
into grilled cheese sandwiches—
as he sits down, their eyes blare
like lamps with new bulbs.
Failure drains into his eyes.
The warm bowl of soup in front
of him steams his cheeks.
He flakes off a few dried scales
from the sleeves of his
threadbare sweater, rubs
them onto the floor and says,
I think I saw a few still swimming.

How Nice for the Snow Queen

I pull my hat down low. A little lower.
Dogs trot in knit sweaters, steamed windows reveal
fingerprints from the day before.

Time is a glassy statue of days and months.

In the lidded woods, the sycamore bellies and drags,
vapor swirls around its crown, but all I can think is, *sun*,

the way light tunnels through its branches, ending
with a kaleidoscope of earth and moss, and birds
everywhere, animating twigs and leaves,
the smallest ones chirruping the loudest calls—

I wait for the thaw. A migration back to gardens—
insects bulldoze out of the ground,
squirrels a squall of fur winding up trees,
and owners pull off their dogs' sweaters.

There's a nightly refreeze in me, my veins run lateral
like moraines, the peculiar sensation of slipping.
Icicles germinate from my hands and feet like spores
and I turn up the heat as much as I can afford,
scrape the ice off my body—

my well-chiseled heart puddles
to the sprouting asters, feels for its own pulse
teething through the layers.

To The Man Knocking on Her Door

There was some strange weather in her room.
Gusts of wind whooshed the door closed.
Then, the room opened to a sunny day
and she felt her cheeks flush.
She laid out on the bed in only her underwear
and closed her eyes, but then she felt
the pelting of hail cratering
her body, leaving pock marks
that turned into shallow puddles
when the rain began, howling rain
that rusted the metal rails of her bones and eroded
her kneecaps. She became a mudslide and slipped,
sinking into her cheekbones. Don't even try to pull open
the door to save her—it is swollen shut.

The House of Cards

The boy builds the second story of a house
of cards, his hands steady.
The couple living in the house peck
each others' cheeks and take measured steps
on the red-and-blue patterned floors
while they chop vegetables to place
in the slow cooker. They whisper
about how they can hear everything
through the numbered walls,
and isn't the King of Hearts an awful
focal point for a living room?

Everything in the garden grows
on its tiptoes: the ivy does not wrap
around the house for fear of its own strength,
and a graceful praying mantis climbs
the thin spines of a cactus newly planted.

A light breeze makes the walls throb
and the Joker looks like he's laughing,
his stomach pulling in
and out as he gasps for air.
They run to their garden and yell and
raise their arms. They imagine hawks
flying over, gripping them with their beaks,
taking them up until they are floating
like two hot air balloons, and they land
only when they find something
sturdier—a bricked house
of Legos with windows
and a little yellow door.

The house sways with the boy's breath
as he begins construction of the third story.
The couple scowls in the bed
of flowers, but the boy
takes no notice, so they return
to their house and finish
their preparations for dinner.

Only Parlor Tricks

Pinch a snapdragon and out comes
a skyful of words, its tongue a skewer
stuck with flowery intentions.

I spin plates on sticks, escape
from handcuffs, perform
coin tricks—pennies fall

from thin air into my pockets. Disappearance
is not a miracle, just smoke, a pencil cut
in two will always be returned intact, but

don't ask me to smooth a run
in my stocking, set the clocks, repair
the white-blood stem of the daffodil

trumpeting for my assistance—
I can guess what card you're holding,
but I'm no expert. This flicker isn't celestial

light but the dying lamp in the parlor. I sprawl
a shadow between me and empty chairs, hold
my breath as I pull silk scarves from my top hat—

colored teardrops pile to the floor.

The Doll Doctor is In

It gives her pleasure to unite
newly sculpted fingers to his hand,
to straighten the bends
inside his wire skull
before glossing the cracks
until his face is smooth as an apple.

As she brushes dust
from the crevices of his body,
she taps his knees,
waits for him to kick back
in reflex. She looks into
his painted blue eyes,
pulls his face to hers
to feel for puffs of breath
from his small pouted lips.

When she is done, she touches
his wrist to feel for a pulse,
and this is the way her real name
returns in socket and joint,
in sure yoking of parts.

Flight Attendant

I explain how to place
the oxygen mask over
mouths and noses in case
air pressure drops,
then buckle my own seatbelt
for take-off. I leave behind
an apartment with an empty fridge
and not even a goldfish to feed.
My curtains are always drawn.

My body once sprang
with each gallop
as he and I rode horses,
my spine stretched
forward, my arms clenched
to the horse's solid neck.
The wind seared my eyes
until I was branded
with its ownership—
when I shut them, I felt
nothing but flight.

My landscape is different from his—
from above,
spindly country roads zigzag
like white thread
through brown velvet.
Nothing moves.
Even the oceans perch
in one place.
And tiny homes
I couldn't possibly live in—

I told him I felt penned
when he huddled
next to me at night,
his arm tossed
along my ribcage
like a rope uncurling.

I sit alone, my hands on my lap.
Most of the passengers sleep,
unconcerned with how
they will soon fool time.
I look out a window:
clouds flurry past us
until we are above
them in unwrinkled air.
The plane levels off, the sun
facing us, a florescent
half-crescent so sure of its rising.

The Cartographer

Mountains, plateaus, basins, he shades them in
With contour lines

He shades in the moon and constellations:
Under the two-dimensional heaven,

Across the hued shadows
Of Indiana corn fields,

He shades in streams he shades in ravines
Until his pen leaks and ink sticks to her feet—

He shades in her terrain
To the sodden border of her brain.

She knows he shades in her thoughts with a legend,
Shapes her hand into a compass pointing north.

He projects himself so close to her—
She lifts her arm, her veins sinuous roads.

She has no idea what is of scale,
No idea of meridians or parallels—

It feels like the earth splayed before her
Has always been flat.

The Doll Doctor's Challenge

Howdy Doody sits on the table, left
hand missing. Wood pulp and glue:
she mixes, she shapes, she sands the hand. New
beside old, she matches the paint, the clefts
between flesh-colored fingers, and deftly
pops the cuffed wrist back into the arm: blue-
sleeved and soft like a pincushion. A breakthrough:
to revive the fundamental. Oh, the lengths
she went through to save his identity.
What is he but boneless? What purpose
does his gapped-toothed grin serve?
She went to school for this: certifiably
a Dollologist, making pacts with the breathless—
she shakes the hand she believes he deserves.

Adaptation

1.

Eyeless troglobites live
in subterranean waters of caves,
aware of vibrations from dripstones
that hang
 from the ceiling
 like chandeliers.

Albino cavefish glint
pinkish-white like cellophane,
their lateral lines sense fluctuations.
Skin grows over their eyes:
alabaster scales undulating
over the spots where lids should be.

Very few people observe these creatures.

2.

This wasn't my home.
I was there
to visit family friends,
to eat codfish and boiled potatoes
in the small kitchen

and to tour churches—
glass-cased relics, blue-tiled mosaics.

They showed me the church made
from bones of monks—
skulls as doorways,
femurs and clavicles nailed
to walls like museum paintings, and spines
trailed down the ceiling like limestone.

I sat in a pew. I sat for a long time.
My friends left to find gelato.
When I stood up to meet them,
I bumped my shoulder
against course bone—

I reached out, felt the craters
waiting to fill with water.

3.

At the aquarium, blue lights peer
into tanks of blind cave salamanders.
Receptors in their skin detect movement
as they breathe through feather-like gills.
I trace the ribs under their white skin, smudge
glass with my finger. This habitat
is so different from where they're from—
they should crawl in the boneblack
darkness of every crevice and corner.
Translucent, these salamanders
show their guts, what's left
of what they last ate.
They have adapted to being buried alive.
Life outside the cave
is too difficult.

Giant Squid Expert

I have to acquaint it
with all my senses.
Spread out on the examining table,
the specimen's flattened mantle
is mottled like salami,
its tentacles curled at the ends—
slick and rubbery suction cups.
I pull away folds
of formless flesh
to look at the eyes,
wide as dinner plates.

That night, I sauté twelve kinds
of squid for my friends, pass
the skillets. For the finale, raw
giant squid cut into small pieces—
I arrange it on a serving platter.
Chewy, too bitter, they say.
I take a bite—such
a strong taste of ammonia
I didn't expect—

think of solving
all the mysteries of the sea,
think of my specimen's beak
opening, parroting its story,
sticking its toothed
tongue out for me to touch.
When I swallow, I think
I'm standing on the stern
of a fishing boat and my squid
has recovered its torpedoed shape.
Just underneath the surface,
it pushes water through
a funnel in its cavity,
showing me how it glides
in languid, rhythmic strokes—

I lick my lips and it still tastes
like the sea.

The Spotted Eagle Ray

It is different. Our skeleton
is made of bone and breaks
so easily.

See it glide
above coral reefs in shallow
waters, the white-ringed
spots scattered over
its sleek back, the stinging
barb it has never used
at the end of the tail.
It leaps out of water to escape
from hammerheads.
What chance
to collide with a woman
standing at the bow
of a boat, looking out
at ripples of blue
water, her shoulders red
from the beating sun.
To her, it is a large bloated kite
flying briefly in the sky.
It slams into her--
a loud, crunching slap
as it smashes her
face and chest.
She doesn't have time
to scream before she falls
back, cracking her skull
on the deck, and it lies
beside her as her children
run up, baffled by the ray,
their mother, the blood.
It is gentle, really,
they can stoop down
and pet it but look,
its punishment: the beats
of its two-chambered
heart slow down.
It can't flap its wings,
can't slide back into water.

Barreleye

The woman throws bits of sliced bread into the fishpond:
buoys quaking in murky water before the koi rise, their mouths circling.

She read about Barreleye fish and their translucent heads stocked
with two fortune balls for eyes that travel, searching for silhouettes
of food. It is dark out there—the light from their bellies tunnel ahead.

Her family once gathered daily to pray the rosary, her fingers tapping
each blue bead. She felt stitched to the shared cadence echoing
in her mind—a ritual, like a chalice shined by the priest after each sip of wine.

But they do swim alone. A Barreleye won't emerge from the depths
of the pond, peck at her stale bread. They swim in an unshared
language, looking anywhere but at her.

In the Cactus Garden

The plants swell up
when they're full of water, swivel
when they're dry, their roots
waiting to sponge up rain

and she remembers her mother
who once peeled
the firm rind off the globed fruit
of the cactus, told her

not to touch,
the spines thin as thread,
nearly transparent,
and bury into fingertips—

she studies
the prickly pear:
deceitful as a pincushion,
its fruit lining the top
like a row of birds—

she picks one off
the stem, places it in her pocket,
the gummy spines
tangling with cotton fibers,

and when she rubs her thumb
against her index finger,
the satisfaction of a bristling,

and she imagines the pressure
of spines growing out
from all over her body—

a human cactus no one
would dare touch,
and she thinks, *one day*

*when someone tries
to reach out to me,*

*I will show that person
mercy, I will tend
to the wound.*

Cultivating a *Tahina Spectabilis*

In Malagasy, *tahina* means to be protected,
blessed: with my pencil I speed time,

shoot up the weaved trunk and slow down only
at the inflorescence. Flowers burst the branches,

mob the pinnate leaves that blow out like fans
as they hover at the base of the tree.

My hand rashes through dense tangles of shades
and chords, the tree seemingly effortless in its growth—

in the wild, the plant self-destructs,
its bloom draining nutrients. What else

could come of such beauty? I preserve its spiraling,
its final thrust tearing into the middle,

tangles of excess the center of its crown.
I do not erase its errors, graft

lines to alter its course—I tape it to my refrigerator,
halt the advancement of death.

Graffiti Under the Overpass

A tempest of colors press the gray out
of things in the darkness the artist
is designed for. The spray cans are lungfuls
of air, the paint a squad of green clouds,
the letters curling and swerving underneath
blue flames until there is only a slight
argument of concrete left on the walls.
Paint stains the canvas as he projects
his name beyond the cage of shadows
in the raw of early morning.
The overpass pulses above, plastic
bags balloon to the shape of the wind,
and miles away, the trees catch rays
of moisture, their grains alive in the night.

Saturday Morning

The square-jawed man ladders
to the rooftop: he sees what I see
sleeping—coins hanging from thin air—

mother's earrings scrambled
on the kitchen table—but he doesn't hop
for her, just leaps off the building, his cape bellying

to the wind. At my age, mother ran
at lightning speed, smuggled lizards
into her room, fed a bucketful of tadpoles

boiled lettuce. She harbored so much in her day, but he
watches her toast waffles. No air
in the vacuum tube for me to decode,

but this: the afterwind of her robe as she passes
in front of the television unravels
her mask, and what's left

is some gravel-scatter, a burned-out
field, a curious feeling
that the villain has capsized

this moon. It will become clear
in the afternoon—right now,
a terrific headache, she's going back to bed.

The Curator of the Funeral Museum Invites You In

Come inside, look at these embalming tools:
formaldehyde to inject beneath skin,
the bodies dried out, fluids draining down
the body rack. Then, makeup to add depth—
rouge for cheeks, prosthetic noses, suits and
shoes bone black. This replica of Lincoln's
coffin speaks the art of funerals: grand
processions, horse-drawn hearses, casket veils—
artifacts of last rites, a wealth deserved.
I stand alone. Most won't enter, most won't
buy chocolate caskets where small mummies lie.
I hear my museum knock at Death's door
because it's a reminder of our fate—
we end the same, we will all lie in state.

Meteorologist in Love

Here with him, they would not look at the storm
out the window, no, they would sit next to each other
in the kitchen, eating thick soup, its steam fogging his glasses.

The barometer drops, a cold front
approaches. Clouds pile on each other like sacks
of rice and the air tastes tart as hail mottles the asphalt.

To him, she is mercurial.
Her hair curls like hundreds of tiny cyclones,
her heart his center, while around her, rings

of towering thunderstorms. He would predict
her atmosphere from observable events, note
the interactions between variables—

if she was with him they would clear the table,
clean the dishes: her hands scrubbing, her soapy hands
touching his, the wind outside whistling through the thin gaps

between panes of glass, and he would breathe
into her ear, say, *you better stay until the storm lets up*.
But he does not find comfort in the wind. He measures

its speed, hears it speak its one-syllable, its rasping
run through the tree branches until it knocks
at the wooden legs of his weather station.

The Starfish

It is customary to attend a viewing
of the body, to gather together like clams
and peer in, one after the other,
and say death looks good.

Once, my father and I found
my grandmother in her hospital bed, naked.
To me, her shriveled arms and legs and spine lengthened
like summer days, and then I saw her young,
weaving hats with supple fingers, stirring
a pot of fish stew, standing over
my father as a boy, her lips pursed
as she chided him for hitting his brother
on the head with a hammer.

And then, my father scurrying
to cover her up. And then, she wore
a blue dress to her funeral, and we all
paused to say she looked good.
My grandmother was stiff

as the starfish my friend gave me as a gift
for my tenth birthday—
pink and spiny, microscopic eyes at the end
of each arm, two stomachs, one
to swallow prey, the other to digest,
and its hidden ability to regenerate a lost arm.

I tried feeding it mussels but it shut
its stomach, I tried stroking its brittle skin
but it pushed my hand away. It couldn't get back
in time to the coral reefs where it belonged,
so it said, *bury me*,
just bury me. And I did.