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In photography, the device that allows a person to enter the darkroom safely (i.e. excluding light) is known as a light trap. This collection of poems, completed as a student in the Master of Fine Arts program at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, is titled *Light Trap* for practical purposes: to give the reader photographic sensibilities to engage with my work. Here, poems observe and challenge the intersection of duty and loss—through what has been taught, and what is still being made.

LIGHT TRAP

by

Lauren Alis Smothers

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Approved by

---

Committee Chair

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for Claudia, Francesca, and Martene

APPROVAL PAGE

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

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PART ONE



## **The Girl Creates, Then Destroys A Scene**

Inside the house, the empty bedroom,  
a clock still ticks a dreamless  
landscape across a day's length and heft.  
I close the bedroom door to silence the hum.  
Everything shrinks with the light.  
Outside, I pull the rotten fruit from the vine.  
Attack the porch with a broom,  
with the need to do work, the need to perfect  
what will be never be complete.

The house and garden  
grow smaller with the light—

the tomato vine on the porch  
lists with the bruised fruit. No one

lives here, no one says, Home.  
Once it had a family and story.

Then the family moved,  
and the story took place elsewhere.

Or maybe the story just ends.  
The yellowing leaves of the vine

tell the rest of the garden,  
*Hush, we must stay quiet in this dark earth.*

The windows of the house  
cannot be seen in—they merely show

a blank sky, no clouds to shelter.

Tornado weather.

## **Birds of America**

The whir of wings startles me in the hush  
of the book stacks. Brown streaked  
with gray, white tips. We lock eyes, call  
each other out. *Predator, field sparrow.*

He is very sure of his naming.

I am hesitant to identify him  
until I reach for *The Birds of America*  
and prove him otherwise,  
exotic or commonplace.

From the top of a shelf,  
he dives straight down  
and across into the window,  
his beak making a tiny scrape  
on the glass—

he sees the others in the parking lot,  
bathing in the flooding top soil.

Now both of us  
hop on one leg, looking for a way out.

## **The Girl Retells a Myth as Memory**

*Petra tou Romiou* rises from the Mediterranean,

a lump of craggy, sun-whitened stone

in Aphrodite's robes, a blue-green wash of waves.

My hands grasp the slimy bottom

of rock, my eyes blind to the light. My father offers

his hand, and I rise, the perfume of

salt and olive from the sea and groves

surrounding us. We reach the top

and turn back to Cyprus: the same view the goddess

had when she swam alive from her father's

backwash in the sea. Greeks say

this rock is Aphrodite's birthright. I am

only eleven years old, not very good with mythology.

I see the ruins of columns in the distance, and watch

them wear away in the sun, like this stone, their shapes

disappearing into the sea, where they'll form again.

## **Exposures**

I

### **Ya vas lyubil, Krasnodar, Russia**

Oksana stands in the raspberry bushes behind the house, recites Puskin, whose poems all Russian children learn by heart. She sings, “Ya vas lyubil”, “I loved you once”, holds her hand out, bright with red fruit.

II

### **Rapeseed Field, London, England**

This field is as still as my family’s moving patterns. Five miles away, 134 Arlington Road. Five miles away, Tube trains, row houses, Babel of language, place. But this field is one language, one place—green and yellow, the flowers so bright if you touch them they stain with a milky glow.

III

### **Alive in Christ, Bedfordshire, England**

My pastors stand on either side of me in the water. An open window lets in street noise. Lauren, do you believe? Yes, I believe, but I can’t hear you. I am buried, raised in water. Hands clap, then wipe sweat—the warmest Easter Sunday in years. Chelsea waits off frame with a towel.

IV

**Kurdish Woman Prepares Manti, north London**

She never looks up at the street, never acknowledges me. She is bent over the dough, rolling it with two fingers. Her headscarf is faded from the sun, from sitting in the window of the restaurant six days a week, rolling and pinching the dough that will be boiled and served with yogurt. I eat a bowl of the dumplings and watch her back. She never acknowledges me, never looks up at the street.

V

**Woman Asks Me To Pose for a Photo, Forbidden City, Beijing**

My father takes the woman's camera and we watch as the woman calls over her friends, who point at his beard, my braid. I stand with the five women: a head taller, younger, darker. Sweat drips off my face, a drop for every thousand years I stand on. I see the print, our faces fading into a background of gray-yellow smog. I watch the woman pinning the photo to her refrigerator, then moving it to a box, then to a bigger box that will be emptied when she leaves her apartment in her province for work one morning. I hear her daughter open it, scream.

**To Know Space is to Move Through it**

On the Trans-Siberian,

    keeping Moscow time

        across the negative

            space map, eleven time zones

of Russia stretching

    like a cat, the furthest and faintest

        horizon I have ever seen,

            Solzhenitsyn's pen tracing the dying light

while my father and I

    eat salami, *kulak* food

        flying at sixty miles per hour,

            steading ourselves on post-Soviet *glasnost*.

Asia looms ahead, expectant, waiting.

    After our meal, we count

        ivory mile-markers

            along the tracks: one, two, hundreds.

## **The Girl Returns to Not-Home-Not-Yet**

January is over herself. I'm standing  
at your kitchen window  
feeling my shoulders shrink  
into smaller versions of themselves,  
in the dead weight of a west Tennessee  
winter (no snow, no ice, just silt loam).  
Your house is kept greenhouse-warm:  
you tap the thermostat, listening to its voice.  
I smell your coffee in the stoneware mug,  
the hot cereal untouched.  
You take the chemo pills. I watch you swallow  
jerkily. You hug me goodbye, hands curled  
from holding the bottle, nails catching my hair.  
As if to hold me here longer, as if by pressing,  
you will convince me that I am meant to remain.



PART TWO

## Drinking Red Label Tea, I Remember One of My Homes

I used to think it a joke, the selection  
of tea and china, the scones and the very serious  
“One sugar or two?” The cricket team setting  
up wicker tables, passing out sandwiches:  
the land that did because it had always done.

Flag of St. George, connecting Carlisle, King’s Lynn,  
Land’s End. All the Queen’s England pausing  
at four o’clock, thereabouts.

The click and pulse of the kettle was my mother’s signal,  
a “do not disturb”. Her afternoon  
summed up in the *clink, clink* of fishing the tea bag out.  
Her parents stopped sending Lipton’s—  
the Turkish grocery down from our house

did not sell Earl Grey: I pressed coins in the bearded  
young man’s hand, murmuring *tesekkeürler*, thank you  
for the biscuits my mother likes so much.

While watching Beckham score another goal,  
his friend would cast Persian tea leaves, wet,  
praying for a grandmother, some money,  
seeking answers from the bittersweet.

Tongue wrinkling, astringency causing my eyes to water;  
two thousand miles away I drink Sainbury's  
Red Label, a gift from my mother—

the liquid holds and hurts,  
but like my mother,  
I drink all tea plain.

**Account of the Living**

*February 5, 2008*

When the wind hits,  
Laura jumps off the bathroom sink

into us on the floor—  
I grab her hands, we all grab hands:

Laura, Melissa, me,  
those five other classmates,

as we inhale insulation and earth—  
the wind like a falling like

we are in an EF-4 nose-diving,  
upside down airplane—

I scream *Jesus, Jesus* until the noise  
ends. Whispers. “Is anyone hurt?”

Hysteria bubbles. We must move.  
So we crawl through the collapsed

living room, through the buckled  
plastic window blinds

then find ourselves climbing couches, fridges,  
concrete, rebar. Live wires everywhere, snapping wetly.

People run past without shoes, blood running  
down their legs. *Where are my friends?* Laura and Melissa

clutch my hands. *Where are the rest?* Faces don't make sense.  
My sandals slip in the Bermuda grass, now mud.

I think the storm took my friends home.  
Like we'd been taught: if home, then heaven.

I look up: the sky above the campus is lit green  
in eager warning—I can't stare too long.

Emergency lights shimmer. Xs sprayed on buildings.  
An administrator thrusts a sign-in sheet

in my face. "To make a count of the living."  
What have we done to merit this?

Boys are trapped under the commons building,  
backs bent into a lowercase *r* (almost prayer)

throwing up, crying, when firefighters  
pull them from the debris.

Off campus in a basement with the girls,  
I watch the TV ticker tape nonstop.

Near midnight, my father reads a Psalm over  
the phone as I stand in this stranger's kitchen

and follow the words with my lips  
to make them my own, to possess them:

*The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.*

If Lebanon, then Jackson, Tennessee.  
The Lord's voice didn't ask for body bags tonight.

But in case the Lord comes for us again,  
I keep my ear to the ground.

### **The Girl Asks, But Doesn't Receive**

The tree line stretches  
forever here. I can't tell  
if the three of us are alone, or in a great  
crowd of ghosts or creatures  
we don't know the names  
of because they exist  
between highway and creek bed.  
Tennessee is beautiful  
at times. If I extend my hand  
I'd touch your arm,  
then your own hand resting  
on your brother's shoulder.  
(He's leaning against something,  
I think it's the door, the one  
between this dream and waking.)  
You're not close enough  
for human contact:  
your skin still glows from the mercury,  
the gasses in the atmosphere  
you slipped through on your way  
to my voice, my fear.

## Take Joy

The long sermon over, we drift  
from the church to the trees,  
where the table sags under the covered dishes.  
We fill our plates in semi-slow-motion,  
the Sunday's heat rising from the dead  
grass to the bead of sweat above our upper lips.  
We gather at smaller tables, eat and talk  
of the heat, the neighborhood construction projects,  
avoiding doctrine. From my spot at the farthest table,  
I stare at an old woman  
eating a ham biscuit, her mouth a wet blur.  
I cross the yard where a boy around four or five years old  
is attempting to slide a piece of German chocolate  
cake onto his plate. I ask him, *want some help?* Too shy  
or not interested, the boy walks away. I close my eyes.  
The boy becomes my younger brother,  
the two of us small, members of my father's congregation  
at the little white country church in Tennessee.  
The warped table is my mother's Sunday school craft table;  
the old woman is Patsy, the church organist;  
the shade, the eating, gifts I hold in sweating palms.



**On Being An Angel**

*after a photograph by Francesca Woodman*

Her body is in mid-flight,

arms thrown behind her back

& turned into ghostly wings; eyes

seeing the shutter but staring

beyond the frame. She tells me: *I want a teacher, a lover.*

Her body is a vessel of light, the studio

a dark well beneath her breasts.

In between this world & and the shutter's eye,

she blurs, insists

*I would rather die young than erase these delicate things.*

Look again. She's mid-fall. A wave in deep,

cold water will shudder & break into itself,

back into the beginning of another

wave as the shadow of a hand

passes through it, reaching, pulling back.

**Process**

*excerpts from Francesca Woodman's journals*

I change my mind  
but then I hope this doesn't  
last today I came from Newport seething  
with ideas a new hat  
a teacher a lover  
I would rather die  
young than erase these delicate things  
a language  
for people to see

PART THREE

## **Enduring Freedom: a Darkroom**

The scene could be anyone's.

But it's ours: we are in a field, the cotton green,  
growing buds under our feet,

Tennessee's sky an unmoving blue. Your eyes dark  
like mine, like smoke as you turn toward the camera,  
shoulders thrown back.

Ignore history, family, or home. I remember the scene  
when I call to say goodbye, to send you to war.  
My voice shakes. I hold the 5 x 8 photo, the field.

When you are on patrol in the villages, the time difference is  
a Navy jet's flight eight hours east, in mountains.  
I step through the light trap

into the darkroom. In blackness, I open  
what I've been carrying, tucked in a pocket  
of a denim jacket. In the absence of light

my nose quickens, ears split; guides to the mirror's  
focal plane, the click of the shutter,  
the snap of the camera back.

Stephen, I've carried you. The timer buzzes.  
In a row, the images hang, ghost-like. I hold your face,  
Death-head, sickle & lightning bolt

before the chemicals, the attempts at black and white.

Here, a taste of the ash left after the field burns  
up to the empty house.

### **The Woman Visits, Stays**

The room flickers      the walls shake      my teeth chatter  
in my head              I open and close      my mouth  
its great silence

She is sitting            by the bed              clutching the floor  
with her hands          the room keeps          turning

they say he fell        off a mountain        do I know you  
do I know anyone      she nods               holds the floor

Father mother          brother sister      their heads  
my teeth have not      fallen out          the room  
is alive

## **Maid of Honor**

I lace you up in your dress,  
my fingers catching in the loopholes,  
the polyester and tulle surrounding  
your tiny frame. Feed the end  
of the ribbon between the halves  
of the garment and with each row,  
pull you tighter and tighter into yourself.  
I am not letting you out of this. I steady  
my hands around your waist, the beads  
cool, slippery. When did you change?  
Count the rows: six more to go.  
*Canon in D* loops on a CD player.  
A joke about running  
down the aisle to a new world.  
I tug one last time, and thread  
the ribbon into your white, strange self.  
Listen, you in the mirror:  
*He'll have to find the end  
to get you out of this.*

## The Woman Names Loss; the Girl Collects Loss

*Dusk homesickness:*

When Mother tells the story of her brothers  
at Belleau Wood five times in a row  
then turns to me, asks:

*Who are you? Whose porch swing is this?*

Something about the light  
falling behind the fields, pulling the dark  
with it like a stone—weight pulling weight.

\*

The house at the end of the longest driveway,  
the corn stalks, cotton crib, porch swing rusted still.  
The storm door, a hole in it where she caught  
her walker trying to get back inside, fearing  
we'd left her alone. The braided farm rugs in every room,  
made two decades ago—she knew the rugs, but not  
the house they both lived in. What is left: the cast iron skillet  
still hot, biscuits for the country ham. The TV volume button  
pressed down permanently, blaring the 2000 Republican  
Presidential nominees. The bathroom linoleum that always  
looks dirty, even after Pine Sol. What is gathered: the photo of her,  
Daddy, the girls, Bud. The plate glass shiny, the smiles quiet, comfortable.  
The wind chimes on the back porch, to take somewhere else for song.



### The Lord is in This Place

When someone asks me, *where are you from?* I see  
him parking the car on the hill above the soccer field,  
the U-shaped hedge stretching behind them,  
in the cold February sunset, him turning to her, I can't see  
his eyes—only his hands in the sharp, pale  
light, hands I touched in chapel when hundreds gathered  
to pray for peace in other lands—*this is my Father's world,*  
*let me ne'er forget* we sang—I see her turn, I see  
her head crack open from the bullet.  
Smoke pours from his hands  
into the air. *All nature sings*, the hymn continues.  
Because, *the battle is not done*.

This is what we were taught  
in the pews, this is what we brought  
into the dorms, this is what brought  
us to her funeral, to her father and mother  
receiving a rose at commencement—  
to us driving past the church in the country  
he preached at on Sundays, with her by his side, tapping  
a microphone with her engagement ring,  
singing *The Lord is in this place*. I think the place lied.

I hover over his arms shoving  
her body into the driver's seat of the Toyota,  
pressing the gun in her hand—then him standing  
in the still air, listening for the world to speak. His hands are bright  
and shake as he dials a number on a cell phone

but I do not linger there too long. *Should my heart  
be ever sad?* I think he knew that night, I think he knew  
when he called her family to say, *she's gone*:  
we are being killed all the day long.  
This Is My Father's World, dear Jackson, Tennessee.

PART FOUR

### **Call and Response**

Go to the woods. Breathe deeply as the light changes, quick to quick step across the dogwood branches. Lay me down, lay me down in the creek bed. The light is hurting my eyes and the water's about to run dry; feel the grass growing under the mud. I don't know how to ask: how to form the words with my burnt lips or blackened teeth. The leaves will mulch my heart, no doubt. *Fie on my heart*, as our fathers said. Fie on our melting hearts, sighing eyes. The words and woods become crisscross strokes, leaf and vowel, branch-that-will-not-break, conversation-that-will-not-surface. You are rising, and I am holding the dirt in one hand, your voice in the other.

## Gain

for *John Christopher*

I never called you John. Always your middle name  
when we both ran tag in the lightning bug dark,  
where we both skipped Sunday night prayer to swing  
on the set out front until my father asked from the pulpit,  
“Where are my children?” and you had to come in too  
because you were a child of his, in a way. I named my striped cat  
after you, Christopher, I named that wild thing *you*.

I’m sorry. Why all this pointing, and showing? Why the memory  
to replace truth—your body thrown from the Ford Mustang,  
wrapped around a sweet gum tree on Ashport Road?  
After Spring Creek, my family kept moving,  
pulled along by gospel: “to live is Christ and to die is gain”.  
I hope the years we never saw each other were lived  
like your ten-year-old self: running, always running circles around  
whoever was chasing you. As for dying, I wish I had not read  
the article that gave *female passenger aged 17 who also perished*—

To know this is to keep crouching on the bedroom floor,  
newspaper ink staining my hands, to let myself be the girl  
in the seat beside you, to keep running in the dark  
until we bump up against each other, to grab hands.  
Fine, you’re it.

### **The Woman Explains the Source of All Her Problems**

The girl, the one who keeps leaving, walks the driveway  
from house to road three times tonight. A mile

long, it stretches straight, gravel soft  
in places where the last thunderstorm cleared

clumps of grass away, showing the burnt Tennessee  
clay. I've lived on this clay for sixty years. The girl likes

disappearing acts, daydreaming, these walks—at the end of the road  
she turns, floats on the horizon, crossing

my eye with one of those crop-duster planes flying low,  
far away, spewing a cloud over the bottom fields.

I stand on the porch and call her by name,  
but she cannot hear my voice. She will turn, but still

not understand. If forget Papa's Christian name,  
I'll yell louder.



**This is How I Remember You**

*for Kate*

Beside a crowded mosque  
in glaring desert light, minaret shadow,  
I catch you about to laugh,  
and the sand stops, sticking  
in the narrow neck of the glass.

I take the frame, shift it  
to the market where you are buying  
bread, sweetmeats, spice for the stew.

I take a pomegranate seed  
from its split fruit,  
hold it to your face,  
and you are red, red  
like the carpets flung at your feet  
in the market stall  
like the poppies by your gate,  
where you hold the latch  
calling your sisters in for chai.

This is how I remember you,  
or imagine your childhood  
as I sit in Tennessee's heavy humidity,  
waiting for you to tell me

*it wasn't like that.*

Your long skirt catches  
cotton farmer's red dirt  
as you pace, turn.

My friend,  
the sand keeps blowing



across that courtyard,  
the grapevines we sat under  
when you were young.

**Elegy, Still Under Investigation**  
*for Holly*

“In an uneasy moment of revelation, he divined that the woods  
were not yet finished with him, that he had barely tapped  
the reservoir of their knowledge.”  
William Gay

*The Brother*

Rain the day before, a wet ground  
and the smell of Mom’s daylilies

under my window. I wake to our dog  
barking, loud, frustrated. I tell myself,

“electric truck”. Slide myself out of bed,  
toward the kitchen, where the microwave

buzzes, the food left inside. I see no truck,  
no one checking the meter.

Her car is still in the driveway.

Then I see them, walking toward the woods:

my sister and a man in camo hat, pants. You asked  
if I have regrets: well, my first was to believe

our woods were safe, and the second  
was to believe God created them so.

*The Neighbor*

You need to understand,  
everyone knows everyone

around here. I know  
Darden, Tennessee

like my own blood  
because, most of its people are my blood.

When I heard the scream  
across the ravine, kudzu-thickened

and warped, I called her mama at work.  
Because she surely would do the same

for my mother, our house. It's just what  
you do around here. We hunt

fish, go to church, go to work.  
I hate to see our woods becoming

a playground for the Tennessee  
Bureau of Investigation. Those men

and women in their suits  
gall me. I keep telling them,

you need more teams, more money—  
hell, you need to pray that the kudzu

don't swallow up any more  
evi-dence. Tennessee's camo,

absolutely, one-hundred percent.

*The Search Party*

We changed over the months:

started out as locals, Henderson County

men and boys, armed with coon dogs and shotguns.

Then came the groups from Illinois, Kentucky,

Alabama, Florida, Pennsylvania. Accents caught  
in the creek beds and followed us around gravel

roads. The family's church set up a prayer vigil  
that lasted for six straight months, then it was just

the preacher, who would come to the woods  
with us and pray *Ob Lord*

real loud, but stay out of the way as we combed  
kudzu and live oak, creek bed by spring.

*The Psychic Investigator*

Her abductor might have a scar  
on his forehead, a birthmark on his elbow,

or a bite mark on his hand. He might work from home  
as a web designer and long for the 1950s.

His hair might be red, or blonde, or salt and pepper.  
He might be clean-shaven, or he might have a small moustache.

He might be a Capricorn.  
He is either scrawny, or of medium build,

or stocky and muscular — possibly ex-military.  
He might own a black leather briefcase,

and his name might contain one or more of the following letters:  
L, E, P, Q, M, or D; his last name might be Ford.

She might be (or might have been at one point)  
in or near a place that has the number 7 associated with it,

either a house or a highway mile marker  
or possibly seven miles from a Tennessee landmark.

The lyrics of the Neil Diamond song "September Morning"  
contain important clues.

*The Man Who Found the Skull*

I remember seeing the bucket  
and thinking, well, got to turn

it over in case there's ginseng  
underneath. It's a hardy herb.

My cousin was maybe a dozen  
yards off. I heaved the bucket

over, and this chill came over  
my entire body, like the sun

had dropped from the sky.

I knew it was her. I knew.

*The Cousin*

To tell you the truth,  
I'm lucky. I'm lucky I got out alive

from that not-town in the woods  
and headed to Nashville.

Though they're family,  
it breaks my heart to see

them being paraded  
like animals before a freaking slaughter,

wearing their pink armbands  
like prayers. Oh, they pray too.

I pray when I can, mostly  
asking our family legacy

to be the songs I write and produce,  
not the headlines for her killers.



*The Father*

You tell me what was worse,  
the forty months looking for her,

or the forty-first month,  
when her bones appeared?

I cut trees for a living,  
and they have become the dead

to me. Every tree I lay for the lumber  
company, I think I could've leveled

it forty months or forty years ago,  
to keep evil from growing

around my house, attacking  
at dawn.

*Family Members of Suspects, Various*

“...referred to as the "A-Team" based  
on the first letter of their last names...”

\*

What causes anybody to do it? Peer pressure.

What causes the people we see on meth,  
they make out of, what, battery acid?

What would compel somebody to do that?

I guess it's just the thrill of getting high.

Why do people drink? I guess they drink to feel good.

\*

We are in fear of our lives.

\*

After the TBI found her remains they returned  
to [suspect's] home and cut out the floor  
with a chainsaw, cut out the walls,  
ripped out the carpet and took a mattress.

\*

Someone has perpetrated this crime.

Not one of our own.

\*

It needs to be justice, a fair justice, not a lynching.

*Witness Who Claimed She Saw \_\_\_\_\_ Tied Up in a Video*

I watched about 30 to 45  
seconds of the video, enough to catch

the front of [suspect's name]  
at a glance, but never saw a sex act take place.

After I saw the video,  
I asked [friend's name] to turn it off.  
Then I never saw the video or phone after that.  
100 percent sure it's her.

His ex-wife doesn't have blonde hair.  
I never seen a video of his wife.

*Person of Interest in the Investigation Who Killed Himself*

It is unknown what \_\_\_\_\_  
told detectives before his death.

*The Mother*

At my desk at the elementary school,  
I have this verse framed—

“Mine eyes are ever toward the LORD;  
for he shall pluck my feet out of the net.”

It was her favorite. Sometimes,  
at night I lie awake and pretend she walks

out of the brush and into the house,  
laughing as she drops her car keys  
in the wrong bowl on the sideboard.  
Mom, where are you? Did anyone call?

Or she asks something else, but mostly  
I dream she’s looking for me,

not the other way around. Everyday,  
I get dozens of phone calls, emails,

texts. Even after they found her skull,  
I keep looking for a message that says,

“Home!”

*The Boyfriend*

My favorite memories of her  
were when we would ride 4-wheelers

on her uncle's land, spinning dust  
or mud like we didn't have a care

in this world. The first year  
was the hardest, the next two

it got easier and easier to pray  
that she had fought whoever

held her to the very end.  
Moving on is a kind of revenge,

at least temporarily;  
I won't hear it otherwise.

*Holly*

I was plucked  
and delivered

tree-line over ash  
mud over bone

hear me talking  
you out of sleep

out of tears, oh  
out of the earth itself

### **Self-Portrait**

Asphalt shimmer, cicada roar,  
dive. A woman, off frame.

The girl pedals a bike  
in circles and figure eights  
in a church parking lot  
in Tennessee. Bare feet,  
shorts sticking to legs,  
she makes a circle,  
then another. The tires  
are used to this and say  
nothing. The woman watches,  
says nothing. In the distance,  
two children wave, try to get  
the girl's attention.