

WHITE, CORRIE LYNN, M.F.A. *The Carpenter's Daughter* (2013)

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These poems introduce a speaker reckoning her identity through the lens of childhood memory, Southern American culture and landscape, and the undulations of romantic relationships. Divided into three sections organized in a rough chronology, the speaker asks questions about the nature of love and acceptance, sisterhood, anxiety, and loss. Often, she comes to no conclusion, but finds meaning and power in the mining of inner and outer lives: memory, psyche, and community. The poems contain both narrative and lyric elements. While they oscillate between rural and urban settings, the speaker's vulnerability and self-consciousness remain steadfast throughout and serve as the poems' binding feature.

THE CARPENTER'S DAUGHTER

by

Corrie Lynn White

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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 _____

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I

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright.
—Robert Frost

Overture

Remember standing knee-deep in saw dust.
Four walls of crickets. Wood holding tight to rain.
By the lumber pile: the corn crib, broken toilet, gas
tank, tiller. Lucille gets her cheek caught by her brother's
fishing rod. He casted and hooked her jaw. We all swat
at sweat bees. Pears fall to the ground. Thomas builds
a wood-shop, cuts trees into kitchen cabinets. His daughters
sand the edges of doors. Their thumbs know the feel.

The hound wanders off. How did it come to this?
Hoyle turns his compost pile, curses the pests that eat
his beef-steaks. In cursive, Mitzi writes her cards, cries
over the smell of her dead mother's soap. She sets the table
with silver and unlit candles. The ways we were taught—
cut the stemmed end of the potato and plant it again.
Stop the car for a harvest moon. Fill the plaster
bucket with water and fill the pig's bowl. Give her all
the scraps. She'll gnaw away at where she lives.
Make a hole in the wire for her snout to fit through.

Sisters Coming Up

Whoever comes here knows the hills were drawn

like a woman's body. We fold into their shaky-
handed hips, into the faint arches of their feet.

My mother watched our straight figures
in flailing shirts run into perfect rows of loblolly
pines. At the creek, we're straddling the rotten
tree when Adam, the kid next door, comes carrying
a dead black snake on his gnarled walking stick.

He sits next to us, pulls a cigarette from his shirt
pocket, buttons undone. Summer has a way
with skin. His chest is a child's, rising for inhales,
caving again when his breath is a cloud, hovering
like a sudden storm. We take turns. The thin
paper and dried leaves lose their form and our
buckled knees belong to us. The way home
is uphill. The sun sits on our house and when
I do a cartwheel, our house sits on the sun,
balances on what's always burning.

Staining Wood

They called it blackberry picking,
but blackberries grew sparse
when my mother and Robert
took off with empty buckets.
My father, acres away, put a paint brush in my hand
and told me to stain the cabinet door
with the grain. This was late August.
The berries were mostly black by then,
the box fans in the shop blowing wood shavings
around like snow. Robert told my mother to think like a blue jay—
stay in the sun, keep her eyes down by the margins
of meadows. I was expecting jam.
When they reached low between the toothy
thorns to loosen the berries,
would their fingers touch?
Would my mother taste one
to be sure she didn't starve, if by dark,
they're still foraging like berry-drunk sparrows?
When we finished staining, my dad poured gasoline
on my hands and told me to rub them together.
No task is finished without something to clean.
Back home, when he was rolling dough for a pie,
would she come home purple-lipped,
empty handed like some kind of girl?

Christmas, 1995

I sit at the desk my father built for me,
pull knobs on the yellow

drawers, touch the tacks, paper clips,
blunt ends of unsharpened

pencils. I run the soft of my palms
across cherry-red laminate,

cross the map of light and shadow.
You taught me not to love

the things of this world, not to conform
to its patterns. But noon sun

shines through white eyelet curtains.
Clean paper sleeps in stacks

and through the window and skinny trees,
cows huddle around hay.

Why must we leave here? I think,
turning the pencil in the sharpener,

imagining my ascension to heaven—
beautiful desk in tow,

while flakes of wood and graphite fall
by my cold feet.

Formative Years

Emily and I smoked pot
from a bent coke can,
walked barelegged
into the corner store for corn
chips. Those days, freedom
was sticking my head out her
speeding car's window—
about getting away even when
we parked and hiked up the hill
to the school's swingset,
pumped our legs like we'd learned,
landing on some cedar
mulch. On our backs we listened
to the song playing in her car—
the part that let us know
our bodies, gave us reason
to color inside their lines.
On the way home, we almost
hit a deer. The hour,
only our parents knew.
My mother found my jacket
in the floor that night, smelled
cigarettes and mixed perfumes,
refused to wake me—my face
calm against cotton, my chin
like her father's, dimpled
like someone didn't
wait for me to dry.

Eating Chinese After School

When my sister told me
she was bulimic
at the China Wok,
we ate lo mein off
styro-foam plates.
Snap peas and baby
corn tangled in twice
fried noodles glistened
in canola oil. When
she told me she threw
up her food after
most meals, I was holding
an egg roll dipped in duck
sauce. Her hot rolled
curls were loosening
around her face. Words
fell like knotted rope
from her straight lips.
But I heard the grit
of knees on tile,
the running of bath
water. I saw her mouth—
the digging she does
for mistake. The shut
bathroom door
in the dark hallway.

The Carpenter's Daughter

You come from a long line of nerves,
he says over the phone. I don't hear
his table saw or the air compressor,

but imagine him sanding the corner
of a dove-tailed door. He isn't much
for being still. Maybe he kicks the roots

of a white oak, pets Polly's head, throws
her a scrap of pine. *Your grandmother
couldn't sleep with the moon in her room.*

*She'd flatten card-board boxes, tape
them tight around the pane to make night
black again like the moon was some kind*

of mistake. I remind him I'm a hundred miles
away, that the horizon's bone-thin arms
wrap me like that moth-eaten quilt

I keep carrying into winter. He tells me
the maples we planted are taller now,
but never how living looks beyond

his shop doors into a field of rotated crop
and loosened leaves. He stands on a quarter-
inch of dried sawdust and wood glue,

the stuff I'd spread on my small hands,
let dry and peel away like I was one
thin layer from being found.

Building Spaceships: An Elegy

Will asked if I'd run away with him *up there*—
 meaning the stars. We were on the asphalt
outside my parents' garage. His long arms tied
 around his knees like rope and he rocked his body—
brown hair puffed into a fro. *I'm good with cars*, he said.
 I could build a spaceship. We were seventeen and I laughed.

When his wife left him, he called to ask what he'd done wrong,
 why she quit loving, why I never did. I took the phone
outside my office and sat by the trash bins on a cement
 table. The human heart, it seemed to him, was a system
he should be able to tune like an engine in his shop.
 Who do I have to be for her? he asked sitting inside
his pop-up camper in Jacksonville where he'd been living.

It was November and he could still walk through night
air with no coat on. I repeated to him something I'd read
 about surrender—about looking out the window
for nothing in particular. Had the leaves changed where
 he was? I never asked. I squeezed my legs to my chest
and watched a line of cars ride their brakes to the next light.

Did he ever stand up and go out where the sun
at eyelevel wanted to turn the next trailer into a palace,
 the tall grass into a bed? Did he watch the tree
reach over the road towards a leaned-back pine
 and call that peace—a kind of canopy?

What I Can't Tell My Father

Sell the land. Mama needs a new hip.
It's that uneven ground that hurts—
the walking miles down narrow roads.

You built at the highest point
in the county and she wants to see
it from below—the fire of October trees,

a one-story ranch with clean gutters.
The cigarettes? I miss sitting on the stoop,
flicking, cracking your basement window

and blowing smoke into shrubs. But history
stinks between my fingers. Yesterday
at the zoo, I saw a mother gorilla holding

her baby through a thick wall of glass.
The baby stretched its skinny arm out
of the arms of its mother, who kept changing

her sitting spot—tall weeds, flat stone, dead
stump. I stretch my hand across the bed
at night. My cheek flat on the pillow.

How long will I keep doing that?
I want to grab handfuls of grass. Soften
my palm against stomach. I want mama

to walk for as long as she wants,
stand at the edge of the field
and trespass across the drying corn.

Thinking of My Grandmother

i.

Walking into the peach orchard,
away from the kitchen where her mother screams
on a straight chair for a ninth child's birth.
She's twenty and her baby sister Jane cries in her arms.
Their father, driven off to get the doctor.
Between the trees she promises God
she'll never give up her body for a baby.
Never stuff their valley with that kind of scream.

No phone wires clutter their walls.
No poles punctuate the roads.
When darkness comes, so would struck
matches for lanterns and more labor.

ii.

In the lamplight of my apartment, I close my eyes.
I sit at my cluttered table among marked-up books.
Twenty-seven and childless, the daughter of the daughter
she didn't want to have. If I ask her how to love the unwanted,
would she stand next to me, look at these scattered lights across
the city? Point and say *They over there and there and there.*

We are sight-seeing silhouettes, children of electricity,
makers of lists and long questions. Grandmother, I am the yours
you didn't want. Show me the sky-line of your youth.
Put cornbread in my milk. What's firm will soften.
So take me, lightly.

||

In Praise of Multitudes

When I say *you are*, *you* is more
than one. The English language knows
I am looking at a river, a string of rail cars,

a field of what's wild. When I say
hold on, the road will turn to gravel;
your muscles won't soften. When I say

you are calluses against cast iron,
the shut bedroom door, I am looking
through the key-hole. You are pacing past

my only light, looking out closed
windows. It's cold: could you hurry up?
When I say *the bottle's open*;

go pour a glass, you slide the black bottoms
of your feet into the kitchen. My dusty floor
might stick to your feet when I say

let's dance. When I say *hush*, the crickets
thicken. Home isn't where you leave it.
When I say *you are*, God knows

one isn't enough: that hope
gleans heaven here and there
like a girl gone to gather.

Babysitting for Malika

*They cut me right across both
nipples, she says, unbuttons
the top of her leopard-print
pajamas. The swelling you see
is saline. After the chemo,
they'll insert the implants.*

I watch her son run across
the living room because he's just
learned to run. She hands
him a bowl of cut apples,
which he takes in both hands
like gold, says, *Aaa-pull!*
A turned-off television
frames our reflection—
two women on a couch, a playpen
filled with plastic balls, a boy
making the sounds of truck, dog,
tractor. We watch him name
what he sees like Adam in the garden,
trying to make sense of what he's been given.

Video Chat: My Sister at 7 Weeks

The fetus inside Laura's belly has a tail
that'll disappear in a few weeks. *Let me see it,*
I say, and she lifts her shirt, caresses the flatness.
I keep watching it, she says, like in the Spring
she told me she'd watch for planted parsnips,
beets, and fennel to break the surface of soil
in the dark morning. She spent the day
selling insurance, hoping for the pummeling
winds of Northeast England to lay off. Here,
the trees are losing leaves. I kick through
twenty shades of yellow on the way to work.
The cold came early in the South. Behind her,
the gray tabby walks the height of bookshelf,
stops to bathe. The upswing of green hill fills
the glared window. I can't touch the skin housing
the blueberry-sized he-or-she with paddle-like arms.
I can't swim the length of ocean. But I think
of things like: adding a human to this world
makes us consider the words Aurelia, Oveda,
Henry, Thomas, Lucille. The heaven of it all—
getting nauseous in the kitchen, passing up the wine.

Saving the Earth

One summer in college I drove into the county
to weed acres of garden rows at Perrywinkle
Farm, bunch wildflowers for market, mulch

amended soil. The carrots I pulled from the ground
tasted sweeter. One girl muddled mint
into my jar of water and invited me later

to jump into the pond no one could see
from the road. That fall, I wrote a paper on the state
of food in America, interviewed the sisters

who started Yesterways Farm on the day
they processed chickens. Like a good journalist,
I rolled up my sleeves. They gave me a knife

to cut the oil gland, the legs at the joint from the dead,
naked chicken. That same year, I read *Silent Spring*
and chewed Slippery Elm bark when my throat was sore.

I taped a DO NOT ENTER sign on my bedroom
door when the roommate, scarred from seeing
too many roaches, called the exterminator.

And when I awoke to men with chainsaws
behind my house, I stormed towards what sounded
like a gas powered swarm of bees,

waving my hands asking *When will you stop?*
It was all I could do. The wild earth was tamed.
My body had adjusted to fluoride in the water.

The view from my back porch was a shallow
forest of the same kind of tree. When I sat
there in the evenings, I liked to pretend

it was virgin wood, that only the animals
owned it. In the mornings, I liked to turn over
and see it there—standing.

Library for the Blind

The bed-ridden Pauline in Bent Creek
won't have any sex in her audio-books,
any cats or British accents either. She calls
the toll-free line from her daughter's
spare room before Lorena Leonard on line
two, who wants everything on Porter Wagoner
and Mel Tillis— her quivered voice holds
tight to the silence, while I see she's had it all.
What about yodeling? The two-step dance?

I break twice a day, walk laps around the abandoned
furniture warehouse next door. I pass co-workers:
we smile, nod, leave one another alone. A pink bath
towel hangs from a branch beside the building's
outdoor spigot. Wisteria clings like an overgrown
child on everything green. I let the sun sit on
my skin, purposefully mistake concrete
for countryside. I could climb the steep bank
of brush and get to the train tracks, but I don't.

Inside the warehouse, they're filling bins
with boxes of Braille and tapes that will truck
into the swamps of Pasquotank County,
lean into the foothills, sit by hospital beds
and put Mr. Zebron to sleep. Back at my desk,
I answer the phone, say my name slower
for those who can't hear. Send a Louis
L'amour western for those that can't see
to drive into a dusty sunset.

Tuesday Night

I lay the sweet potatoes on
the roasting pan on their backs
or bellies—I can't tell. The oven
is heating and the cat box

needs cleaning so I dip the plastic
shovel into the litter and grieve
that Frankie doesn't go outside—
sit high in a tree or lie back

in a lush patch of clover. I stare
out the window at the neighbor's
raised beds and convince myself
he'd eat all their basil, puncture

the flesh of their first red tomato,
then run far away. What keeps us
where we are? I throw the plastic
bag of clumped urine into the bin

by the road and look down a few
blocks for a sunset. The sky is pink
past the stoplights. Nothing in nature
is as sudden as turning off the lamp

at night. Inside, I push the pan
into the oven and remember the guy
in my class today who said:
People don't feel strongly anymore.

Feel strongly about what? I wondered.
Truth? Lemonade? Later, on Wheel
of Fortune, the contestants try
to spell a phrase. I spoon buttery

potato into my mouth when the bearded
high school teacher from Kansas City
solves by calling out: "Stop what you're
doing." I freeze and watch him,

laughing in victory, slide into
the front seat of his new Chevy
Malibu and hold the wheel like he's
headed some place no one can see.

Ode to the Mailman

You park your truck and walk up and down
this street, stopping at the blue duplex,
Presbyterian Church, corner store.

Everywhere. Once, when working
long hours in an office with no windows,
I envied your walk against the wind,

into the sun—how the rain hitting
your cheeks came as some kind of relief.
You touch and deliver envelopes sealed

by the tongues of strangers. People open
them hastily with their fingers. You must know
every crack in the sidewalk, every divorce.

Tell me—do people on this street change?
I walk up my front steps after work with keys
ready and lift the box's trap door. Nothing.

Do you remember the card my ex-boyfriend's
daughter sent in the purple envelope?
My mother's beautiful cursive?

Or are you just the messenger—filling small
spaces with coupons to restaurants
where I will never go. But today, when I pass

you on my way out and you ask if I used
to live on Walker Avenue, I say yes. You grin
like dots are connecting, like you'd wondered

about the girl who moved from the third floor
apartment, who sometimes wrote cards and sat
outside on a creaky glider when it wasn't too hot.

Leaving means going south

The morning I left the man who builds guns on the Eastern shore of Maryland, I had a coat pocket full of hand-rolled cigarettes. At breakfast, he opened a can of beer, stirred grits, but added no salt. He opened a can of biscuits and brushed them with butter. The sun was out. Smoke smudged the air I couldn't fill with words like *stay* and *next month*. He turned on music and the slide guitar sang questions so loud. Vertical blinds swayed in front of a sliding glass door leading out to no deck. If I had opened it, I would've stepped onto a lawn sprinkled with empty shotgun shells. I would've sat in that dry canoe, gone further through the woods to lie in the muddy river. But I read directions home from the back of a gas station receipt. I circled Washington D.C. on wide highways—afraid of the guns, that long and straight land.

Burning the Scrap Pile

I start the fire with the fuel of pine knot.

It knows to stay inside the stones I dug
from the creek bed. It grows in greed and shows
something other than surrender, swallowing
the fabric around my daughter's old mattress,
eating the scraps from today's meals,
the napkins, the chord off the old coffee maker.

There were the mornings I poured it burnt
and watched the frying eggs' white ends burp
over iron and butter. The landlocked yolk,
trembling yellow eye, I specked with pepper.

Laura played *The Entertainer* on
the upright piano, the winter fields losing
color out the windows to her right. My wife
stood down the hall folding towels, moving
her stiff knees like a prayer, a metronome.
The fire spends time on the mattress springs,
holds them in place and I watch the forest go dark.
The leaves curl up, hang like loose ears.

The kitchen lights come on and my wife looks
into the sink. Is she fumbling for a last fork?
Returning to scrub the soaking bowl?
We're growing older. I lean on the stick I use
to poke the embers and crouch down to blow
into the fire—not caring anymore what's burning,
be it broken or whole. I just like to watch the light—
the old of here that heats my nose and stirs this stuff,
this seen-before, flashing vacancy.

Laura, when you go into labor

Imagine me standing barefooted on a chair, prying open a stuck window.
When it opens, winter-protected dust decides how to move.

Think of our father plowing a path in the woods where we'd walk. Watch his red Massey
Ferguson uncover rocks, roots. Stomp through dead leaves until the next clearing.

This one has horses. Put yourself on a ferris wheel—how slow and thoughtful you'll see
the sights—sea of grass, sky of trees. The sun, a gold quarter, going behind clouds.

Or stand on the top floor of the yellow farmhouse we'd pass on Saint John's Church Road.
Cats twist on their backs in flowerbeds. Look between your feet for light between floorboards.

Follow the sound of a faint knock downstairs and spread open the sheer curtains.
Pull knobs on the cabinet doors. Set coffee mugs on the counter and fill them with water.

Water the fern. Run to the door and open it. Open it wider. You are bridge to somewhere.
Here, here. Let me hold her.

Ode to My Eyes

You're always at work like my father,
kicking up rocks.
Can't be still, even when I put a lid
on your bubbling-over,
your quest for stray earrings in a corner I haven't swept.
You read words like they are mountains,
dark rooms.
You dig your heels into blues.
You kneel and bow when I turn
the corner into April,
the pink lips of a lover.
At night, I think I've lost you,
scan the room for red numbers.
Only seldom will time save us.

I sleep when you tell stories: Aunt Janice playing hopscotch on an icy sidewalk.
Then a slide guitar. I am awake to carve them from confusion over breakfast.

You can't taste the cayenne in the eggs,
hear the whimper of the dog in the house
you make white and magnificent against sky.
You open to the flood of face, field.

I hold you in place—wait for clouds to move over,
Mars to focus, redden into view.

When my blind co-worker asks my favorite color

I don't know how to say
Green, like the grass,
not like a lime or frasier fir.
But when I do, her whole face lifts.
Her eyes move behind her lids
like children in the morning.
Does she know the malleable
sharpness of an uncut field,
I wonder, or the oily pores of a lime?
At Christmas, does she reach into
needle-like leaves, looking
for the strongest branch?
She nods like she's always known
the cool of spearmint. The cool
of March and sitting outside under
the hickory's first leaves when
the adirondack creaks and the rest
you hear is wind. The bite into a Granny
Smith. The margarita: the barely-there
way you slide into a hammock
sleep. She nods like she's always
known, and maybe she has:
the cactus in the breakroom
sitting before sunwarmed glass.

State Fair

It rises from dust, rakes in the populace,
feeds them fried Twinkies, fried trees if they could
put them on a stick and powder them in sugar.
Bodies bunch up: the perfumed, the balmy,
the whole way to watch the potter at his wheel,
the carver and his knife, the knee-high rope
around an old America. Somewhere amongst
the sound of shrill children holding stuffed
Sponge Bobs, the banjo in arthritic hands infuses
the air with song. People eat their corn and clap,
make way to the cow barn, the high swinging
swings, the plastic horses that travel in unrelenting
circles. The clogger stumps the bowed stage
with free-style shuffles, his flailing limbs
like broken lumber. The fiddler leans into
his shrugged shoulder. *My body is too still*, I think,
wishing there was a skirt I could put on, bells to tie
to my shoes. I watch the judges hold scores for jigs
that were done on porches with no reeling film,
no expecting eyes, but mountains and mountains
and more tunes than they had legs for.

L Train

I ride under a grinning city,
hold tight to a metal pole. Three boys
tell jokes about their mothers. Three
and sixty times I think about you.
How I haven't loved you evenly—on all
sides. The night is purple—a bruised host
of hundreds touring the sky in need
of headphones, wine. I see the white
lines of their journey. Here, where girls
cross streets with unlaced boots, scarves
wrapped and tied to their chins—space
means something. Roads don't go empty.
Fine women leaf through racks of fabric,
pause over gold strings of lace. I could kiss
your ear, here. You could touch the loose
ends of my doubt, whisper to me, *Tonight,*
tomorrow... But what can I do when I can't
stop the car for the wide sight of field
and jump the ditch just to get back in—
sing the broken chords of stumbling on.

I'm Trying Not to Worry About Arriving

But what about the way I knew I was home by how many potholes my mother hit coming down the driveway. The dogs jumping in the backseat with their fleas when I opened the door to get out. How about the worn middle cushion on the couch cupping me and my sister, the island in the kitchen where my father kneaded dough for a pie, said to me, *Now watch what I do.*

In the bedroom where my lover sleeps, I crawl into warmth I didn't make, press my nose into the clean plate of his back. I show up on my porch steps after work with keys in hand. Once inside, I am in the sight of my kitten. He arches his back as tall as an exclamation point and trots to the door. I sink into the bathtub's hot water. How did I know I would? I didn't. But I dip my hair back and arrive again: horizontal, going nowhere.

Nightlights

The year I spent in Sweden, I'd walk
around the botanical garden

and sit on the bench beneath a stone angel
whose nose had broken off, thinking

of a boy back home who loved cocaine more than he
ever loved me. The color in his cheeks,

his weakness opened towards me
like a closet, I'd hand him a cup of tea.

We'd talk to small children,
learn to speak the language slowly: *The sun is out.*

I love the color blue. The tire on my bike is flat.
We'd take a bus to a fishing village

and photograph docked boats, trees growing down cliffs.
But distance had made me kind. There was the time

he was too high to remember I was coming.
The time he left while I was there and didn't come back.

Aren't I enough to make you better? I wanted to know.
But I was so far from him and the streets

were lined with so much color—cobalt doors,
yellow storefronts. People did what they could

with a winter like that—so frugal with light.
Riding back home on my bike at four in the afternoon,

I'd scan the sky for its stars, find a window with an electric
candle and pedal slowly past.

Meditations on South Mendenhall

It's almost noon, and I'm still holding a cup of coffee with both hands. My cat stands at the window on his hind legs and watches cars pass like beads falling off a broken necklace—going somewhere and going somewhere. What do I know about intention—about going somewhere and meaning it?

In Genesis, God tells Abraham to hike to the top of Mount Moriah and sacrifice the son he loves most. The next morning, Abraham wakes early and loads up his donkey. What did he understand that day walking up the mountain with Isaac, who carried the cut wood for his own burnt offering?

Sometimes, at rush hour, I cross four lanes of small-city traffic and find the creek to walk alongside, winding past a basketball court, a meadow smothered in sunlight. And on its bank, I somehow expect a voice to say *Go here. Give this. Or simply: Go back home.* But I squat and the water pushes past the stones, leaving itself behind every place it goes.

III

To Stay Together

We try sitting in the kayaks on Sundays,
flying to Dublin in the summer. We get away.
The sun hits the water. The oar splashes the water.
I want to be a fish. We want to keep trying.
In the middle of the night, I stare at the space
between his shoulder blades. The map of moles.
He wakes to me touching him, trees waving their
shadows through shut blinds. We make love.
I want to know if I love him—if touching his body
while he dreams up past lives would keep me
from dreaming up my own. In the mornings, the fried
egg on sourdough wears the basil, lays on top
of the tomatoes. We smoke pot together, get naked,
and try to open up our bodies like windows. Stick
our heads out of windows. We know there is something
to try for when a thousand puzzle pieces lay across
the kitchen table and night after night we study
their patterns, put faces together—find arms and legs
that belong on the same body. We are silent.
We are trying to make a picture.

Gravy

If I keep digging under
the driver's seat, I'll find one
more quarter so I can park.
Or a tampon. A bottle of water.
That old sound of sloshing
at stop lights. When I first met you,
I'd sit straight in your truck
and tell myself *It's just lunch*.
It was just chicken salad
on croissants, dining outside
on plastic tables. I'd watch
you while we drove on Capital
Boulevard past the Denture
Makers, Sally's Adult Video,
Raleigh Tire and U-Haul.
You knew where you were going.
And the world was flat on its back—
reaching like hell to flip us on ours,
make us stare up and forget
what we ate, the underwear
we had on. My favorite ones
I'd accidentally swept under
the bed four months ago.
That's simply where they had gone.
I thought the world wanted me
to keep stirring the gravy around
with a wooden spoon, because
as soon as I looked away, the gravy
would boil over. The world said
give the spoon to someone else.
So we watch the birds fly over Wells
Fargo. It's hard to believe
they get up that far.

After Fondue, We Try Dancing

Our bodies bend like new shoes. It's our second date and you tell me your love for metal music—*Like walking into a wall of sound*. My mind is all hips and distorted guitars. Upstairs, on your pillow-topped California king, I could roll over twice wearing your t-shirt and not fall on the floor. Facing each other—I learn your wife left you and that house and I imagine you on a ladder painting shutters and her inside stirring the spoon around a mug of tea. The carpet was whiter then and the television not blocking the fireplace. In the morning, you cut cantaloupe and lay it on a plate. I sit on the deck in the already thick heat amongst those fenced-in young trees, the mosquitoes that have nothing to do but eat.

On the way to your father's funeral

I find a run in my panty hose and we stop
at Rite-Aid for another pair. In the car,
I inch into them, my white winter legs
bent like camel crickets on a highway
lined in forests cut clear. You're watching
what you can: miles of stumps and saplings,
a road narrowed by cones, my shallower
breaths. Our bodies are carried like sloshing
buckets of water from the spigot. I take
your hand like I want to wash it, smooth
summer into it— hydrangeas and hot sand
from the press of my thumb. We pass mountains
so worn we don't look to see what houses
they're hiding, because our land is flat.
And when we reach the yard you'd mow
as a boy, muscadines still growing, your
stomach doesn't growl. Brothers in black,
sister between them like they'd always had
those clothes. *You go on* and I sit for a minute
in the car, think to call my father, ask him something
small about tomorrow's forecast, the distance
between planted seeds. But I open the door
and stretch my legs onto a ground expecting
frost, the first hard shovel of being broken.

In This Development

Dog trots the perimeter of bed, *Who can I kiss with tongue and teeth?*

You turn over like white laundry,

tilt your head towards the stilted houses of birds where joy could land on your shoulders
so softly that you don't think to take it in your hands,

blame it on the weather.

After the storm, the rainproof house lets you hear crickets just fine,

see the last cows on the hill.

Walking the slope of driveway to the mailbox, you expect something written, well-traveled.
You see cracked paint on the house next door and touch your face.

This could be you forever, looking through other windows.

There are children in the yards—blurred pipedreams.

For a while, they'll take their pains to their mothers,

pile their empty plates. They'll shrug it off when they're told:

Your names will need more time.

Talking on the Phone

*Most of what you feel is normal, Sarah says.
But what about the rest?* I ask, putting on a pot of tea,

sticking my hand out the door to feel sharp cold.
There were winters I'd leave home on a jog.

Hills ahead would rise like an overslept body
and I'd think: *feel* with two letters swapped is *flee*.

Sarah asks, *Have you tried meditation?*
There was the time I did a yoga video filmed

in Turks and Caicos and after sevasana, the instructor said:
Now I'm going out to the ocean. You go to the ocean inside.

That's not the same, I thought. But go there anyway,
Sarah says when I tell her about the litter along the ocean's

windy shore. But losing this love—it's like watching
antelope on the nature channel disappear

into the distance and wanting so badly
to look for them behind the television.

Domestic Proverbs

i.

Out on the porch wet with old rain
I swear I see a man I loved once knocking
mud from his boots.

You're still here?

Whole worlds live caged
in my mind—roosters on city roofs.

ii.

With knife and fork, bright flesh of kiwi,
butter and thirsty bread, I make my body believe
I hunt through dark mornings to stay alive.

iii.

The yolk forgets its form, floods the plate.
For the blessing, I say *I am full*.

iv.

The sink swallows what I can't,
holds captive small spoons.

Through the window, I see my neighbor
hold her cigarette with something like love.

v.

I pick up knitting needles, pull one acrylic loop
into another, look up and around between rows.

This is how a hat grows.

vi.

Loose screens knock
on the windows of the house.

I run to see who it is— remember the boiling water.

vii.

Every winter, I don't change.
I wonder about warmth taking so long.

Ante Meridiem

This skinny hour—

 floor-boards damp with rain
pressed down like piano keys.

 I follow them to the sink, empty
but for butter-knives. Bread gone
 but the heel. How I've let things

dwindle, let open door-ways
 whisper about the better future.

God could change my heart if I let him
 hunker down among the soft grip
of summer and point at that July path

 I took to the water dragging kayak.
Water lapped the bank and it was clear:

stay here. Sun knew no better
than shoulder, petal, leaf. Turtles risked
 their balance for a branch. They did
it in pairs. But on the lake's edge,

 I pushed off and dipped the oar,
decided to be—majorette, toy working
 by battery towards coves—shaded,
sewn-in, minnows following after.

 Now through this window above
faucet squaring off a portion
 of old oak, I chase a squirrel.

From inside the frame,
 it climbs out.

Somewhere off I-95

I stop at the BP station.

Can you get me to this place?

I open the map that has been
opened a hundred times like a palm,
creases like ditches across lakes
and train tracks. The cashier follows
the highway with her finger,
winds around cities like it's that easy—
like stoplights don't make us cuss,
potholes don't send us swerving
to the next lane. I tell this woman
I am lost and she leans over
the counter and puts the map back
into my hand—her eyes, two yellowed,
fading globes, her hands cracked
and folded, like she's done this many
times and gives me my next two turns.

After Dark

We lie so close, your pores are flower pots.

I count them like rings in a tree stump—

how much it rains. I take off my clothes
like they're cast iron, dropped subjects.

Pretend the train is a broken orchestra
wailing about always going.

Have we always been?

Winter won't give us any snow,
so we fish into the inches between us—

between belly-button and bent knee,
bottom lip and neck—find a grass-stained

blanket, basket filled with blank
Polaroids. We show up slow, shaken,

sit slouched in the lap of Our Lord.

Keep kissing the mouth that feeds us.

Spring: Some Directions

When you find this patch of grass,
listen to cars spitting by—they too
are trying to lie down. Caution tape blocks
you from the creek and thoughts—
untaught children, water-down
and walk up to doors. They don't knock.
Knobs fall off in their hands.

When your friend calls to tell you
about her trip to Africa, tell her the supermarket
aisles are out of canned tuna. The cloud above
your head is gray. When she asks how you are say: *gray—
the cloud above my head is gray.*
When she asks you about love, tell her
there is a blanket in a park underneath a man.
He holds a book and points at certain words.
You don't care what they mean because
he is beautiful. And the clouds sometimes turn
purple. His arms surround you like lake water in July—
lake water when the wind wrinkles its ironed coat.

These are longer paragraphs than you
imagined. Have your feet felt the fruit
of the sweet gum tree? The burrs
and the mulch and the inch worms
spinning the silk you walk right through.

Swimming Area

In the lake dug out by men at dusk
we're sitting on the PVC pipe anchored

to the dirt floor looking around, surrendering
to what? A family to our right, each one

stuck in an inner tube passing laughter
as their retriever's head aims at distance.

I can float, I say to you. So I lay back—
my wet suit darker green, breasts and eyes

pointing at the pink and orange sky.
I am in love with the waving crowns of pines,

body flat on water, tiny fish evading
our uncertain limbs. I don't feel them

as they move past on their swerved paths
toward something else. *Where did you go?*

I find the ground with my feet,
feel for your hands in dark water.

The stars aren't out. The motor boat turns
off its engine, drifts into that cove.

Sabbath

The Sunday afternoon you said, *Come here. Let me hold you,*
the screens on the windows had caught all the rain. Water
filtered through the fish tank smeared with algae and the yellow
dog laid her head on my shoe. Your words blew across
my ear and I wanted to find a book to check them against:
show you we're both wrong. That on page fifty-three,
happiness plucks berries and shows her softness to the sun,
that the nails we've driven in the walls missed the studs
and what crumbs will sometimes hang like a picture. My ear
against your chest hears the strength of a sprinter—*yes-yes-yes*
wearing its crescendo. I never said I was sure. But your hands
move across my back and cross whole counties, remind me
that needing requires nothing to be broken. No walk around
the same block and back home holding the wrong key.

Ode to High Heels

You peel my flat feet from the floor,
angle them forward like slashes,
on-ramps to ankles. It is you
that makes me tower in the mirror.
You are—exclamation, staccato,
reason to dance how I dance,
reason to say: *Dance how you dance*.
I wash the clothes wearing you,
bend over to sort piles. I find coins
and pens in the pockets,
the stain when my breast caught
the juice of a pear. I sway in you.
Down the grocery store aisle you
make carrying the cornmeal sexy.
I stand straight in you when I say *No*.
You cut into me by the step.
My skin can't keep up; it reddens
and rips. But by night, after hot shower,
half-bottle of red, I sling you to the floor
like dying petals. In the shadows,
I can't see your fuchsia sheen. I forget
where you've fallen when on my island
of bed my toes—soft, unpointed,
spread like an unfolded Chinese fan.

August Overgrowing

A birds' nest has fallen from an oak
onto the hood of my car. I take the stairs
past the apartment where the girl strings lights,
plays the viola at a white table, then see the abandoned
home on its belly. That's how it feels moving forward:
*I carried boxes up the stairs. I filled the vases, kept
answering the door.* All those twigs.

It's the leaving, though, that drapes across my eyes like garland.
Paul Simon sings about it: *You don't need to discuss much.*
There's no: *Put your hand here; my feet go there.*
Just step off the sidewalk onto the grass, get on the bridge
out of town, then turn and watch the sun run out over the city.
Head south to sit inside Maw-maw's weedy garden.
Didn't you know I'd end up there?

I thought it wouldn't be so woody and strung tight,
that the further I got up the hill, the clouds would part
or break up with rain. I thought I would change.
Across the street, two women talk in the church parking lot.
The one with crossed arms nods when I place the nest
in the grass and get in the car. I needed to buy some milk,
and just couldn't say where those birds flew.

Getting Clean

The honest body in bath-water.
Belly button as communion cup.

Long and veering toes: icebergs.
Submarine ears open to the smear

of piano downstairs—the creaky opening
of stove. I almost smell my mother’s

kitchen, tell her *Your roast is so tender.*
Your sweet soul, so good.

She loved the praising her mother
never gave. I loved it, too, wanted to say

*Let’s pull up the shades and ask
everyone if we’re beautiful!*

But I had to leave that house,
tiptoe off the deck’s rotting steps

until the horse-grazed knoll
broke me open over its knee.

Every sheet wouldn’t fold flat.
The bath water got cold.

Like tonight, where I sit whole, dripping.
And ask what comes this way,

but the swallow of an unplugged drain,
the shiver of standing straight up.