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These poems explore, in part, the relationship between the home and the body, and the elements of experience that build the self into a larger architecture.

THE ONLY HOUSE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

to my family

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.

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I hear the weather  
    through the house  
or is it breathing  
    mother

-Lorine Niedecker

## **HER TASK**

When she goes, nothing needing care,  
dead house under one closed eyelid

She the egg, woven brain tissue,  
night after night the receptor's small fire

Suitcase a hole slowly filling, sorted  
soundless on the bedroom floor

Hours at her task: from a box of  
colored gloves she chooses one pair.



## I. MEASURING THE SPACE

## THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED

Sun silences the house. Between bough  
and twig a splintered branch. Mother stands behind  
the wall. It is miniature: the baby's coffin

floating rooms like a canoe at dawn, smudging  
wood floors like water. I want so much to see  
his face, eyelids blue and shining under lamplight,

but he is wordless, invisible. We paint Easter eggs  
for him, the prince in the moving tomb,  
and find them in the grass all blue and spotted, slick

with baby slugs. Before the service I refuse to wear  
my dress. Want to look older for the limo ride.  
Mother is a silhouette coming downstairs.

The women have eaten fruit and drunk their coffee.  
The sun is rising over the lawn where forgotten  
eggs are hiding. The Lord is risen indeed.

Lilies white the way to the humming car, full  
of believers. I sit to the right of my father.  
My cousin's dress is too big for me.

## TEMPORARY RIVER

When the streets flooded that summer  
and our homes became distant shores  
across the neighborhood, I had no boat,  
just one cracked paddle from the shed,  
spider-webbed. I loved you then,  
before we wore shirts, carried wallets  
and umbrellas; before we knew to worry  
about the river moving through town,  
thick with filth. The back yard was deep  
and tomatoes sank to the bottom.  
Like loose teeth, each carrot was torn  
from the garden. Our parents warned us  
of the rusted cans and snakes.  
But up to my knees on the patio, I saw us  
mirrored in the surface: your thin arms  
and wet hair; my dark eyes and bony shoulders.  
Years after, since our bodies transformed  
like a cloud the wind tears in two directions,  
or the morning after a small town in Texas  
slides from its foundations, I've never known  
why I'm living this life and not another.



## THE BODY

Bodies pick up and drop weight like dump trucks.  
I watch them gaining and slimming down the streets,  
rolling like beach balls or holding their baggy pants up.

The body barrels through all barriers; builds  
sticky bridges and crushes under its own gushing rivers.  
It leaks and groans and stinks. The body breathes.

Bodies fall apart every day and repair themselves with extra limbs  
like a lobster. They are confused, crowning craniums  
with metatarsals, and choking under rising water.

My body grows and shrinks constantly by large ratios.  
The body knows it is a Victorian monstrosity. It bursts  
through bathing suits and leaves oil and scent like a slug trail.

I follow the trail of your body around my block to the deli.  
I follow it further out to the field and lick the taste you've left  
on the bark of the trees and rusted latch of the fence.

## NEANDERTHAL

My blank-faced father  
when earth's glaciated  
skin respirated warm  
and frozen, over ice  
sheets miles deep  
and landscapes  
unstripped, rough-hewn,  
scampered, rattled  
his working bones  
cold and stinking,  
his thick hair sticky  
with sweat and filth.

Dumb slack-jaw,  
small-eyed mongrel,  
murdered, maybe,  
by his Sapien better,  
did he ever pause  
to consider the burly  
scraggle of brush  
blooming from rock  
or cry when he licked  
the blood from his dinner?

High thin wail  
not unlike music,  
stalking stride a quick  
glissé; under the ice-  
blue arch of atmosphere  
or the smaller domes  
of cave and cranium, he knew  
what earth's face looked like  
before we came along  
and invented beauty.

## TO MY MOTHER

Winter egg in the garden, dogwoods  
frozen. I slept past noon because  
you were gone, a little cracked  
for awhile. The boy said when he fell  
in the empty pool he became  
Humpty Dumpty. But not this season.  
Easter was fragile. Brittle. My sister,  
a mystery, sat naked on the stairs.  
The ice-cream man wouldn't leave  
our street alone; he played his tune  
all year. I waited to hear footsteps  
in your room, to find a small gift  
sleeping in a basket, to know you  
even when you couldn't speak,  
your bone face so clean.

**MARIANNE MOORE ON PEGGY JAMES**

*-For Kathleen*

'Queer shades of blue silk' and Boston shoes,  
a hand-made watch chain glowed in her hand

while her eyes ticked timelessly. The white goose-  
down comforter. The pillow puffed

like a mushroom full of powder.  
The carpet was mossy-green and I thought

it all added up to something. Our very own  
Nature. She was she, but the idea

was my real affection. I thought her Father  
had words enough for both of us. As one of her

'birds,' I flew furthest, returned first. Her silence  
was our religion: the faraway water-lily,

always under too much blue. Almost  
happy, I slept in the nest she wore like a halo.



## THE SPIDER

When I was young my boots laced up,  
when I was young my hair laced down.

Father stoked the fire in the parlor  
where wallpaper grew vines, cradled buds  
and birds. That winter, my belly waxed

until clouds parted in the room  
and filled with spools of wool (scent of lanolin  
and smoke), and the brown birds hunched  
and fluffed their skin. They watched

the vines bear fruit. Needles click-clicking  
by the fire ate the wool in gulps and spit it out  
changed. Fingers moved in automatic rhythm.

My belly knew no measure. The room  
was full. The room was empty. Weight  
held me in place and I could not hold it.

The yarn I pulled, my needles carved the light  
until the flooding moon began to wave—

I couldn't call for help. But before I lay  
my burden down, I spun a web around myself.

## JONAH

Praying in the belly of a wooden fish  
my sister cried out in her cage.

Through her shrieks, the ticking stopped.

We watched from the bow  
of the sofa grown suddenly silent.

The waves of broken glass stilled.

The inner workings of the grandfather clock  
halted around her tiny body.

Pendulum on her back like a long tongue.

She had been quiet until we cast  
her overboard, fearing for ourselves.

Gave her over to the ravenous furniture.

Ordered by God it fell, swallowed her  
whole in the living room.

Even then she did not repent.

## SISTERS

the duckling in the shoebox dying fluttered fast  
its leaves and twigs I am green  
transparent sister told my sister her legs are not  
gorgeous crawling to the bathroom  
said you both like that anorexic look but not me  
on TV a wrestling match the mean  
woman in leather tore up the drawing from that retard  
who loved her once I pissed my pants  
laughed too hard sat in the driveway for an hour  
on the bus the drunk girl cried  
I've just been through hell I'm supposed to be  
a bridesmaid where is my dress  
I've lost the two people the African Gray in summer  
flew up into the trees from my father's  
shoulder where are the two people that I love?

## TO MY DAUGHTER

- Nov. 4: I find you hidden under decomposing leaves, curled cold like a sleeping grub. I touch your face egg-white but smudged with crumbling earth.
- Nov. 5: You scream tattered moths as I lift you from your crib. Your winged voice flutters my cheek, then flies wildly around the room.
- Nov. 27: The Civil War. Hearing your shouts from a burning tree, I watch your arms wrapped tight around the body of the hickory, like a chased cat.
- Dec. 1: A terrible light pierces the windows, *the eye altering all*. Looking back, you are an eaten peach, your flesh cut off roughly from the center.
- Dec. 9: My body bulges with your pulsing weight. Outside, ice. I spit out a silver key and try it in my wooden navel. Opening, I extract your tiny, ticking heart.

## **FABLE**

I pull myself from the water  
by my hair Shake the leaves out  
of sleep All one color when  
garage-entombed at night  
I am perched on a child's bicycle  
wearing mother's nightgown  
frayed lace through winter  
growing back to perfection I am  
the oldest daughter in the story  
the one whose shoes floated  
downstream Who baked bread  
in an underground oven  
The dark jealous girl walking  
barefoot before the king  
So far north now and never  
east of Helsinki I make my nest  
and lie in it Run furrows  
with my fingers in cold so close  
it doesn't feel like weather

## MOVING FORWARD WITHOUT FORGIVENESS

It had charred a whole stall by the time he burst  
the barn door. Goats leaned and paced.

The one pig cried like a baby. Somewhere  
in the forest, the cats long gone.

He saw tongues escape the window, thrusting  
with the elation that comes from spinning  
till the ground stands up and strikes you in the jaw.

Some things are over long before they happen.

Before it spread and the whole thing crumbled,  
he kneeled on the grass, cursed  
the gelding kicking at the walls, mosquitoes  
staging midnight tricks, drinking

his insides. Adrenaline line like a cut fuse,  
hose choking, and the house up the slope  
still frozen in its glow.

## II. THE FLOOD

## STILL LIFE

This is my portrait: watercolor Wednesday,  
a fruit bowl on a rustic table. You know  
by the color of the apples their sweetness.

You know by the lemons' yellow, extra bright  
without shadow, glowing ripe, each one  
with two hard nipples. You know it's sour.

From far away the painting looks familiar.  
You've seen it in another gallery. Not  
beautiful, but beautiful enough. This is

not a portrait. It's a pomegranate.  
Touch the skin of heavy color, imagine  
the bloody mess inside. The darkness.



## ANNA MARIA ISLAND

Waiting patiently for the end of the struggle,  
three pelicans pass a fish between them

off the edge of the pier. There is a shop  
where I could buy dried heads of alligators,

sand dollars, shark teeth, and baby sharks floating  
in bottles, skin puckered as in the womb. Here,

everything is taken apart and moved.

At the island's museum you hung a fifty-pound  
replica of De Soto's armor across my shoulders,

snapped a picture as I smiled. One summer  
his six hundred men raped the island women  
and drove broken-legged horses up the coast

to nowhere. They spent years hunting  
imaginary gold. We watched a short film

starring local actors made up to look like natives:  
white feathers fastened to nylon hair. Then,

at sundown, a boat carried our party through  
the inter-coastal waterway, where the dolphins

racing under the bridge sometimes jump in pairs.

## THE LOOMING

When Philomela opens her mouth  
a red ribbon unfurls her voice in velvet tatters

no hands to mend a day full of holes  
a day without seams or linen borders

the television doesn't feel anything  
it reflects no lungs behind the glass

or warp to touch the tightening weft  
she dreams him one thousand miles away

so they need to meet again for the first time  
to start at the scene when the needle was still sharp

and she had an ear for rhythm: thread running  
again and again through the heart to make it beat

## WANT

Abdomen full of ancient animals: aquatic  
organisms living off my structured dirt;

cones and gills, intestines, hermaphroditic  
worms. Glandular pulsing under

a concealed ocean. They've escaped  
evolution's curse: to be made obsolete.

Instead they grow inside us. Bottom feeders  
have no smell or sight, reach glowing

tentacles through the deep. They must  
use some other sense to find their food.

## **ATLAS**

crawl through the paper

my belly full with empty

air in the arch

my loam cradle

chest a deep mantle

beneath my veins arrive

the edge of winter

ink the snow barrier

acid eats the white layer

cold's volume laid open



## **OPPOSED TO YOU**

Me as opposed to You who pace  
instead of take the trash out or scrub  
the greasy pan. Me as opposed  
to You who doesn't think he needs  
to step out for some fresh air. Me  
as opposed to You who drinks and shouts  
and never blinks. Me opposing  
the way I hint at things to You.  
You who chose to see my disapproval  
through to the bittersweet end.  
Me as opposed to my own posing  
for You. Me watching You swirl  
vermouth in your mouth. Me opposing  
my sleep-drenched body in the bleeding  
shower. We opposing each other  
for five days, not speaking. Me opposed  
to touch after so long touchless. You  
deciding all this opposition is finished.  
Me my nipples shocked in violent  
volts from You your fingertips while now  
You drink Me in hasty gulps, in sips.

## SEE, I CAN'T STOP

I meant to say something about what grows  
beneath the bark of the trees. The specks  
of body pulsing the trunk invisibly.

Light falls best on a crow's wing,  
on a dark thing that gives weight to the palm,  
shakes the branches and leaves.

The clay we formed into human shape  
bruised the knuckles and pillows  
of our fingertips. The meat we touched.

Our history and future equally malleable—  
crumbling pages we can't quite read:  
Two bodies or one. Twenty-four ribs  
or twenty-three.

When I left you at the traffic light, evening  
tasted of your cheek. Sounds poured in  
my ear without meaning.

The crows are harder than the robins  
and we find their movements sinister. Poor  
shining things. A broken earring in the gutter.

## ON LOW LAND

After the hurricane, you could hear the few remaining  
leaves click against boarded windows; it was so quiet.  
The far-off oil drills kept pecking the earth  
like starving crows, and in between that distance  
the train tracks under an inch of silt. It was like that  
for a week after I sent you that letter—silence  
where there should be sound, then the lost gulls calling.



## **GUNSHOT**

In the cave all sound moves like ocean  
water molecules: snap of twig under a quick  
paw; dusk light coo from an invisible beak;  
from the far-off highway a muffled moan.  
Sounds disarrange and tangle at evening.  
Somewhere, a young girl is crying. She begs you  
to tear out her throat. Your blood is a mountain  
lion roar. Night fills with your cruelty.

## GAIKOTSU

*Numerous paths lead up from the foothills,  
But behold, a single moon above the peak.  
-Ikkyū Sojun*

When flesh hangs too heavy  
on my foundations and its dirty wounds  
weight the words that grow in the air  
between us, I wish for the hush of a razor  
to shave us both to bone. Our perfect  
skeletons would dry up then, and we'd pile  
our organs into wicker baskets:  
under bare trees burying two slick  
livers, yarns of pink intestines, four  
exhaled lungs. We could pretend,  
while placing my blue-bird womb  
in that grave of dirt and blood that it had  
not already died in grief, that its absence  
does not somehow bring me fuller.  
But pretending then would be no use.

With the frames of our bodies feeling  
each breeze, our iliac crests  
would be two pairs of boats toppled  
toward each other by masts of spine.  
Our smooth scapulae would resemble  
nascent wings. When we finished laying  
down the dregs of our senses, we  
would turn to task, emptying our home  
of its insides. Pine chairs, thick woolen  
blankets, yellowing books, and  
unseasoned bathing-suits would clutter  
the dark lawn. In echoing rooms  
then, we could converse in silence:  
one white moon nodding to its reflection  
in the face of an undisturbed water.

## HUL GIL

*(Poppy, "plant of joy")*

My first lover was Adam. I've cradled  
generations of ever-infants, born  
of Aphrodite and Adonis. When Syrian  
mourners sip my juice their wails  
become whispers. I am the secret, turning  
loneliness into art, 'the excessive crying  
of children' to snow nesting in a tree stump.  
In summer, my flowers speckle  
the plump mouse with shadow. Each  
wears her heart on her sleeve.

You lie on your side in the traditional pose:  
slender pipe slipping a lizard's tongue  
from your lips. Liminal, I untie  
your mind's tight laces; drop them  
to the pillow, lazy in spirals. Over the bay,  
the moon is a new coin. I am the ghost  
in the play: only visible to the hero.

**DEAR JESS,**

Correspondence is all we have now  
each tree composed of an unknown number of sheets

if I wake at 3 am and walk past the drunken stragglers  
to the church across from the bar

and sit on the concrete steps for an hour  
before I start to freeze

and four men ask me for money and one sells me pills  
and I find two ball point pens

and a drugstore receipt in the grass  
then I can set to work on a day of infinite limitations

it is lonely here

I hope sincerely all is well on the inside  
I am without almanac or dictionary or map

and have been researching the slipform method  
of bridge construction

please send word

## MOVING FORWARD WITHOUT FORGIVENESS

The porch railing finally  
gave way and the wasps'  
nest bloomed and the street  
glitters with wind-shield  
glass. A black dog  
drags a woman past  
the factory. She leads  
a boy with a crooked stick.  
Don't tell me there aren't forces  
pushing you from this time  
to the next. The rusted  
hook unravels your sweater.  
Tomorrow the fallen branch  
will fill your ribs.

### **III. UNDER CONSTRUCTION**

## ABOUT THE HAMMER

I've fallen in love with a bear  
whose wooden claws aerate the great  
fields. Every morning over coffee  
I read my dreams from crumpled newsprint  
while he lays the hammer on the table.  
Across each tool we write the first  
three objects of its use, and our voices  
sleep in the telephone cradle. So lucky  
he and I. Our home is a small museum  
of labor. Inchoate ripples expand  
over fields for miles, making  
concentric rings. Taking hours  
at the shelves to choose from among  
the labeled jelly jars, we can no longer  
separate words from our work. The sounds  
become less and less familiar. This  
goes on long into the night: his dark  
hair over candlelight, implements lined  
on the yellow tablecloth, row upon row.

## BODY JUNK

As if suburbia of the last half century vomited  
this warehouse of broken tables, televisions, scratched  
bedsteads and rusted refrigerators, hingeless, sardine  
packed behind a storefront and stacked, palms pressed  
against the twenty foot ceiling—legs, I mean,  
wood carved by hand or machine, knobbed like the head  
of a bone. Try to contain this clutter in the bowl  
of your broken eye—the egg cracked by sight and stuffed  
with stuff— while all the bodies pour over it in gingham  
and leather and tweed like scavengers, beehive  
hair lopsided or shaved for war, silver watch faces  
peeking from breast pockets, girdles showing, elbows  
and ankles shot out from the belly of a yellowed washer,  
wiggling feet. What's here that we can use? The whole mess  
is infested with ghosts and their endless appliances,  
their chairs with no seat, doorless cabinets, fractured  
mailboxes in thickening dust, frayed electrical cords—  
all a woman could want if her bones have no meat.



## BODY EXHUMATION

I am the woman lying on her side across the van seat,  
wearing a gray face, apparitional through greasy

windows as you walk past the railroad ditch  
early morning on a whim, wanting to watch the sun

rise like you haven't in years. My life is under yours: in-  
consolable, bathed in drainage, a midden of cracked

bottles, swollen tampons, rusted metal sheets cast  
from the clamor. You flasher of future, your liver and lung

are fleshier, pinker. When they excavate me they will find  
my many napkin writings, twenty rooms I built

from twine, dictionary of waste in which I define  
your failure. Meanwhile: I'll retire to my atrium, washing

my perpetually warm body, liquid touching liquid  
as it cools. The pipes are beginning to freeze, the all-night

factory shuts down at five. When the lights die you  
disappear into a wooden structure and wonder

what you've done. Even if you'd brought your camera,  
you couldn't click me. My face is an aluminum dish.

## THEY'RE STILL HOPEFUL

As the train propels them underground,  
windows fill with concrete, forcing

out the water and the bridge. Square  
in the flicker they watch, wearing screen-

printed messages. The pale one who stepped  
on at the last stop weaves between poles

his fervid recitation. He is too young  
to be too crazy, but she, the darker,

doesn't look up. Sick film of electricity  
snaps them onward, lights it all rocking

to the tunnel's tomb rattle. In reflection  
a big-eyed boy wrapped in bandages;

bag of dog-food at a woman's knee. All  
around them, the plexiglas unflinches.

## **FOR THE HUMAN BODY**

In the funeral parlor your still, blue face mirrors  
my own meaningless features:

vacant versions of my moving eyes and mouth,  
yours paused in pallor.

And on the hospital's blue-black screen,  
I watched you swimming:

webbed toes, belly round as a loaf of bread,  
your infinitely large, translucent head.

## JANUARY POSTCARD

All night we wanted a snow-day, but found instead a basket of shredded letters in the yard. After betrayal the task was waiting to watch the diction peel apart into bales of hay. White threads stuck in our hair and I was embarrassed for writing what was unwoven, for slipping you slips of pain beginning and ending in the brain.

A highway town composed these blank spaces—the gutted motel and back-lit drive-thrus. Everything here is disposable. The white square of field where ten years back the dog ran furious circles, tracing patterns in exploding snow, was bull-dozed. Now the season forgets itself: morning's metal blade skates over a photograph. Mirrored lake surface.

## **PRAYER**

skin beneath be tender  
spread its wing over mud fields

evening fill my quiver

may my purse empty  
tongue hot on the lamb  
mother's whole mouth hungry

after  
birth

thaw expand the house's frame  
bales of dirty fleece  
sour the bedroom air

TV static speech

'I thought you'd never come'

slow the forest path  
the slowest walker's pace

## **FASTING, DAY SIX**

Morning, you  
winter me until  
all that's left is this  
glow picked up  
by any air. Glass  
chimney lifts  
from the lamp,  
my spine holding  
its small hurricane.

**FASTING, DAY EIGHT**

What little light  
worn as white  
canopy. Rope  
chokes the metal  
eye, pulling wind  
through my throat.  
Today, again,  
I accept nothing  
solid of this world.

## SLEEP TALKER

At 4 a.m. in this unfamiliar bed  
the phone uproots my sleep. Your voice  
tunnels its dream through autumn's  
overflow, unrigs each image  
like a ship. Unwinding ropes and wires,  
I try to wedge my head into  
the splintered crate. Your calls  
at this hour link our ports, the brain's  
underground moats channeling  
a procession of vessels, trim  
and tender as leaves. In my fog  
I feel them bumping at the edges,  
hold the weight of glyph against  
a rising pillow of steam. I wonder  
how you dialed the number, how  
these lines I walk like metal  
tracks between the backdoors of every  
station in the state led me here.  
You are there each time in the moment  
before the connection. Deepening  
sigh and quick slipping, autonomic  
finger on the blinking shutter, until  
the room where we meet contracts  
to a soft cavity, your rough breathing.



## THE MISTRESS

Half-sleeping you brushed my hand off—  
*Wait*. So in my dream your tie unknotted,  
waistcoat with watch chain, English cut suit  
unraveling. My ribbons fluttered. Corset  
wrenched open like a fowl's rib cage.  
Wigs tipped as we backed into the pantry:  
breath catching between the walls,  
hiding from the party.

It was silly to try and live  
this way: kept woman ignoring history,  
speaking with stockings under a wooden table.  
Dust-covered. Maybe I wanted you  
to pay me. Trade in fur and fabric, hair  
and skin. For you to buy costumes  
for every character and me to wear them.

## THE ONLY HOUSE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The stove doesn't work. The food is painted  
on the refrigerator door. No stairs join

the three levels, and the residents flit  
between them, colorful, mute birds. Days

pass with the click of a switch and no matter  
if Baby bathes with his clothes on, or Mother

in her fitted purple jacket, heeled shoes,  
and with her wild silken hair spends a week

face-down on the laundry room floor, or  
if when Father goes to work he is really only

waiting behind the sunroom to come back home.  
There is a birthday party nearly every day,

no fear of death or failure, no mortgage  
to pay, no money at all. And if the tiny pink

phone in the kitchen never rings, and the doors  
don't open, and if the family can't bend

their knees to kneel in the warm square of light  
on the plastic-wood floor, they are still

ready for you to set the table, snap the garden  
fence back into place, position the pink crib

next to the blue, fix the girl onto her rocking horse,  
let your hand push the thing until it topples.

## CONSTRUCTIONS

1.  
slowly I replace dismembering  
piece by piece the engine old  
contraption hinge and handle  
rusting hardware parts without  
purpose the patched-up  
parachute wilting those wings  
I glued foolishly thinking what  
I bought was a machine

2.  
snow-ash not yet not  
yet snow learning a parallel solitude  
mousing my way into the dream-  
boxes you built light creeping  
I might turn into a tiny room leaves  
follow feet across the kitchen  
coffee grounds hill beneath the lid  
poise of the measuring spoon

3.  
this is to the animal I found  
in that room I wanted so to eat  
your many seams and scars lit  
by the picture window trap you in  
a cage of my making where  
you would sleep for years one eye  
missing inaudible movement  
your chest ticking almost