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This thesis is a collection of poems written during two years of study at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro MFA writing program. This collection is an attempt to articulate questions of failure, confusion, uselessness, and love.

CREATURES WITHOUT NAMES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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The Brick Thrower

First, he found the brick.

He plucked it from a patch of clover,
dressed in grit, with green wheels clinging.

He found the brick in the downy curls
of a clover patch by the bridge in the hot dark.
There was no sign of who had left it, how long
it sat alone, collected the ruins of webs.
He looked at it in his hand.
He closed his eyes and it was heavy.

The brick was there when he arrived, and he found
it in the dark by itself, alone in the clover,
pulled it up with a fated momentum,
like a man pulls a machine lever
on his first day of work, never knowing
how many times he will pull the same lever,
how many days of his life.

The brick was almost grown over, but peeking
red through the sigh of green leaves. He found it.
He felt its dust, and the weight of endless headlights.
The cars passed by underneath the bridge
as islands of light on the dark lake of the city.

I was driving the car. She was with me.

We were passing so fast in the dark,
as if to escape, ignore, scrape off
and wipe away, to take the light
away with us to the clean, secret places we were going.

He found the brick. He rubbed a scab of dust from the corner.
Once, after those red-cloud days at work, the big man
would sit at the table, and rub his eyes so hard and
for so long, that the boy thought the man would
bleed from the sockets and go blind as a prophet.
The boy carried that pain with him like a doll.
Then he found the brick. Headlights passing underneath.
He brushed a stem of clover away
like an eyelash from a pretty girl's cheek.

Give Me One Good Reason

The way egg yolks look like
finches' eyes caught
in the light of a fire, the way
they taste like whatever
you're thinking about
when you eat them.

The white spokes in a wheel of lemon.
A dogwood that grows diagonal.
Most days, I don't have to imagine

anything. There's a crowded
library lobby on a rainy day, laughing
girls with wet hair. They sweep
the water off their book jackets
with their fingers, their boots squeak
against the marble and they don't
worry that anyone will slip.

A shrub with yellow leaves drinks
from the dirt
and eats the sun alive. The world
curls. I notice this, I stop
to write it down, but these good
things chase far and quick,
and nothing stops to wait with me.

Those That Aren't Death

If only not for endings. That bride
who stood perfect as a thorn bush
before a wall of mirrors all morning—
after the wedding, she wiped a crumb
of cake from her husband's perfect black jacket
and hung it up in the closet.

The two of them decided to go to bed.
Together, they put an end to something.

At the end of each day, the clerks
at the transit authority close
their books and someone empties
their garbage cans after they leave the building.
The supermarket locks its doors, becomes quiet,
and a white spider crosses that vast, empty
parking lot under lights and anxious breeze.

At the end of each day, the bus

pulls into a dark garage and waits for morning.

An old woman calls her cats
from a veil of yellow porch light,
two children appear through glass
as shapes floating in a warm bay of television,
and the whole city takes an hour or two
to put an end to something.

At the end of the day, my hands

are swollen and useless, but not
from work. My bed— a sack of locks
and gears. The dark is overripe.
Once, from a hotel window, I listened
to the ocean burn slowly through the night,
which kept no record of what
it had done, saw no progress,
reminded me of nothing but itself.

I don't know what I want, but I want it
to happen tonight. For this reason, I don't
sleep. Through the window in the morning,
I notice a robin bringing a spider to her nest up
in the gutter, and I know how she must pause,
holding it over her two hungry chicks— because
in that fading moment they are each the one
she loves more than she loves the other,

each the only one that matters.

The Barge

Dad walking faster, my bare feet falling on the burning
gravel as tender as plums, we heard the jail-
song of the barge from over the solid walls
of the locks. The heavy doors closed in succession
not with a crash or a clap, but with the sound of an iron
voice underneath the waters saying, "Wrong," and "Wrung."
Dad and I came to the rail to watch as the shadowed
waters rose inside the lock, and the barge ascended
with the grateful slowness of an athlete limping from the field.
I sat clutching one of my feet while Dad leaned and grinned.
No one could be seen on the barge or the tug. The operator's
station sat empty, but the waters continued to mutter and rise.
In the movies, this was how you knew there was a ghost:
when things were at work without people to work them.
When doors creaked open without being touched,
when the faucet spoke words, and especially when
someone said, "It's probably nothing," or "It must be the wind."

White Sun

She sees the black
filthy ring in the bottom
of the sink and thinks
of her wedding.

She sees the white
sun sliding down
the muddy sky and sighs,
her emptied lung—

a tulip closed
by darkness.

Verisimilitude

The moon is a pale green paper
plate hanging from a dark wire. The man
who holds the unseen rod helps the moon fake
a broken green arc across the pages of the sky.
The sun, huffing and drumming in the distance,
pretends it will rise, but it won't, the yellow
fire stapled to the green foam edge
of the fake horizon, fake mountains, buildings
made of shoe boxes and cans. A toy train
clicks along the plastic tracks, fake children
play games at the switch yard, feel the rails buzz.
The people who live in the boxes and the cans
make tiny dinners and watch the war on TV:
the black bombers lift and fly away in soft patterns,
like papers spilled from a briefcase on a windy sidewalk.
Of course, they're off to kill someone. Leave cars
inhabited with red and black lumps. Take real walls,
real bodies, and make them into strange
imitations of the things they once were.
The tiny people can watch this on TV all night
without stopping, because their fake sun tells them nothing
about the passing of time, about starting over new.
If we, the real people of the world, wish, we too can watch
the war on our TV sets, in which we find all the evidence
we need to conclude that real people do burn up and disappear,
real walls crack like bread between our hands, a real voice

repeats one name over and over in a cloud of hot dust.

The real TV can be turned up as loud as we want.

The real sun really moves. This morning it rose
like a young wife from a strange man's bed, it wobbled
through the sky like a bent wheel rolling, it grew
heavy with bad visions and sank into a dumpster.

Cutting Away

I saw the message and called your phone.
You answered, and said, "I can't talk."
Then that click, the sound of the last footstep
before arriving at a door
at the end of a long hallway.

I was alone in my apartment.
I called my mom and no one answered.
I called a friend, and the ringing went on forever.
I called myself to see what would happen,
and the phone said that I was busy.

I walked outside.
Three men in pulleys
and harnesses were cutting
at a tree, cutting the branches away
from the wires and the poles.
Dim violet birds were watching,
not even frightened
by the reeling laughter of the circular saw.

I checked my phone and saw I missed your call.
I called you and a machine answered.

The Peace Which Passes All Understanding

The woman is at church alone. She breaks
the heel off of one shoe while getting up from her knees.

The floor is a cold word.

The hymn explodes around her.

The man will not come to the church anymore. Can't stand
the sound of the words repeated until they shrivel,
spoken like a creaking wheel turns the mud.

He sleeps on Sunday, says he'd rather just have his Peace.

Back home, limping through the doorway,
the woman finds him at the wide window,
in the bright chair, doing a puzzle with the cat in his lap.

The man and the cat in some kind of unison:

two mellow moons reflecting the sunlight.

He doesn't let the cat outside anymore— not with the
coyotes they hear at night, and the neighbor kid's new gun.

It has learned how to sleep more than ever before.

In the kitchen, the woman tastes mildew and spits

in the sink. She throws the bottle
in the garbage, sees a puff of fruit flies.

She listens for the man to make a sound,
but nothing---not even the rustling of a page.

She knows that once, he believed as she did, and he
loved the Lord

far more than he loved her. But if there was no God,

and the love was real, what was it he loved?
She hears him now, quiet, whispering to the cat
in a stupid flurry of baby talk, as if to say,
"I'm sorry I woke you up, you little fattie," or
"Don't chase the rats. Don't ever get lost."

Sounding

A note, after it is first played,
rings by itself for some time. The player
moves her thumb away from the string
and the brassy blur. She wipes
a strand of hair from her eye
in training for the wish that one day
a darkened audience will witness
the wild, profound firmness of her
forearm as she does this, and after
she is composed, the note
rings quietly, still. Ready to strike
the next in silent air, she touches
the first string again with the inside
of her knuckle and the sound stops,
like a man snoring in the dark
whose breathing is suddenly obstructed
in full.

The Arsonist

Thrill the yard with threads and thimbles,
fire embroidered field to farmhouse.
I want them to find me, burned and hiding.
Find me beastly, find me with feathers
in my teeth... too much today.
I keep the company of gulls and crabs.
I cook meager, I keep quiet.
Shrunken shanks of meat shaken
of their blood in my gutters, bolt-red
puddles picking up pieces of the fire.
I know I'm crazy; Should I know?
I work the lawns, whipping white
grass from yellow stalks, yet
spring comes, carries its coolness,
and still nothing is green. Nothing.
The world is white pine, whetstone,
vodka and rot-vine. Violet air.
Makes me want to send messages to the world:
"You are not working the way you used to."
Makes me mad, makes me tremble the matches.
As a kid, I would climb to a sycamore's crown
and crouch there all day, like caught in a wooden claw.
Now I belong below, I still burn for them only,
the way you burned for that beautiful boy
or the way Great God burns and glows
when He thinks of your lonely heart.

The Last Supper

The priest opens his mouth
and deposits the tiny, heart-
shaped lump of crab
meat in the cup of his tongue.
He chews terribly with his gray
teeth, and the soft morsel
surrenders its shape, becomes
darkness, becomes something
other than itself
in fragments in the gaps and bare
gums. The priest takes
a sip of wine, a pleasant
wine, but sulphurous, with the taste
of old rooms and webs.
He scrapes his tongue against
his top teeth. His lips
leave purple wings on the napkin.

Far away, a church
is letting out. A different
priest stands beside
the tall doors on the cobbled
step; only the oldest
stop to speak with him.
He says hello, thank you,

hello. His feet hurt.

Back at the table, the first
priest pries open
a crab claw. He looks
at it in the light, the orange
freckles against the white
and fluffy shining bloom
of meat. Behind him, suddenly,
the guard raps on the metal
door with the heel of his rifle
and tells him to hurry up,
motherfucker, we haven't
got all fucking day.
The priest crushes another
claw between the table
and his dry, silent chain.

Across the country, the other
priest arrives home
to bright, humid rooms.
He tries to masturbate,
but he can't finish. He falls
asleep in a chair. It is dark
when he wakes again.
He wants to boil an egg,
but the stove refuses to light.

The Werewolf's Husband

Waking from a dream where I lay chained to a staircase
while a faceless witch drank blood from the back of my hand,
I reached for my wife and found her pillow cold, her half
of the blankets shucked and twisted. Across the dark room,
the bathroom light was off, the door hanging wide and cruel.
She lost her wedding ring last week— “Down the drain it went,
like that! Like those parts of movies you miss by yawning,”
she said, and laughed like a sunflower shedding petals.
She kissed me (hard) to shut me up, a hint of dark moss
and salty iron on her tongue, and the way she dug
into my buttocks with her small fingertips, like hard
little knobs and buckles in my skin, I felt alright again.
Even gone, under nights with burned moons, she was my truth;
the blood that gave my heart something to do.

The Middle and the End

And standing above the huffing black water,
the old man grips his wedding ring,
turning it around and around on his swollen finger.

The lighthouse begins to sweep
its moldy, yellow arm across the waves.
Terns float into the light from some underworld.

Far down the beach, two sunburned grandchildren
are looking for the man. They play a game
where they follow any footprints they find,

but all the prints lead into the waves,
or up toward the dim beach houses
with those candles in the windows,

like vampires' eyes beyond the grass.
The children go farther down the beach
than they are allowed, and still find nothing.

"But Nana, we looked everywhere,
and we couldn't find him!" they wail.
Their grandmother laughs, saying, "He'll turn up

when he smells this popcorn," and she shakes the skillet
over the blue flame. Through the window,

the beach is motionless, the black waves
pouting and grinding their teeth.

Proper Nouns

On Lee Highway I sank into pits of yellow lights.
At the corner of Fourth and Market I held a dirty cat.
Dark windows like streaks of war

paint at the James Building
and windows broken farther down
the street, lights that fire blue under the upward march

of incoherent words. A skinny old man is drunk and won't
get in the crooked car, the officer a whirring, looming, navy
colored motor of *Sir, please, sir, sir, please—*

eventually the old man is loose and cramming
his feet along the side of South Holtzclaw, the road that narrows
like the head of a mattock,

fades into the burned sighs of factories and trains,
a city built for war: Gunbarrel, Shallowford, Lee,
and Signal Mountain piled with lead and crumbs of teeth.

We used to drive on Brainerd Road with my grandmother.
She would stare out the windows and say, "Mercy."
We passed Lindsey's Liquors, with its nauseous orange doors

and blackened steps—and on those steps a skinny old man
with a green coat and a woolen cap even in the heat of July,

and she would say, "Mercy me."

I thought that Mercy could have been the man's name.

I also thought a Civil War could come again.

Everything is wrong and can't be fixed,
the place I love explodes inside its name.

The New Saw

When I use the new saw, the old dog
likes to sit and watch.
She nods her soft head.
The bubbles of a growl
percolate in her mouth.

The new saw shines hard,
catches the light
like the wet tooth
of a laughing drunk.

I can only guess
the dog doesn't understand
that the light doesn't come
out of the saw itself.
To her, I'm cutting wood
with a shrunken sun.
In the same way, she thinks that
her food bowl feeds her,
and that her leash walks her
through the deep leaves.

I work the saw.
She watches the white sun jog,
until a length of pine drops
from the edge of the table,

and she finally barks, just once.

I wonder how long it will take
the blade to become brown and mute.

When I'm tired, the dog sleeps beside me,
sheds warm grass and hair
in my bed. I know sometimes I talk in my sleep,
and she thinks the words are coming
from the bed itself, or from the moon.
That moon glows through the window
like the open mouth of a black snake,
and she hears some severed voice
in free-fall, saying, "Don't go yet..."
She is too scared to bark, or even move.
This is the hardest part of her day.

The New Shame

Standing in the drunken door's light
suddenly, the girl

I loved without worrying
is there, her face a green shade,

like a nurse
who enters the recovery room
on cotton footsteps,

and you turn your stiff neck
to see her coming to your side,
but there's no tray of food,
no sterile apparatus,
no tiny cup of medicine,
just a type-written note
and a straight mouth.

The Few Drops Known

There's life on the moon.
We put it there ourselves:
women in short silver skirts
holding moon-shaped platters of cheese,
ghost men with black eyes
who walk in clouds,
deposits of ice, neon gas,
spiny relics, a trace of bacteria,
any excuse to keep wringing
a gray rock for gasps and pink drops.

There is love inside this stupid heart.
You can picture it this way:
a yellow leaf drifting in a puddle
that reflects the night sky.
The puddle is cold and filthy.
The leaf like a flat hand pushing.
The sky, with all of those planets
and infinite pits, so heavy it cannot be held.

Look Away

Someone has a picture, and you're in it.
An old and broken undertaker with an aching body
has your picture in his wallet, but it's just an accident.
In the foreground of the shot: the undertaker's
youngest daughter, snaggle-toothed and sunburned, squats
to pet a dirty cat on the blank sidewalk
in the rough sunlight by the choppy green river.
In the back of the frame, there you are: walking with a friend
who is no longer your friend—both of you turning
to look at the cat and its crescent-shaped patches of bald skin.
Your mouth is halfway open, saying, "I wouldn't touch that thing,"
and your friend peeking at her wristwatch while you're looking away.
The same stray cat is far away in another picture, standing between
the legs of a tiny boy with a football. A print of this photo
has been left leaning against the wall of a hospital room
with a bed recently made,
the white, nervous lights recently put out.

At home, you might sit by yourself,
and stare at a picture you once took of a man in a red jacket,
standing on the cracked bank of a gray lake.
Such a thick, dark red jacket on a warm day, hands in the pockets
of tight jeans. He looks hungry. He looks recently divorced.
And the camera around his neck, too— like the clean
knife tucked inside a thief's belt, waiting.
You might wonder if that man took pictures of you

when you were looking away— if he keeps them at home,
puts them on his desk and looks through the brandy bottle
at your blurred figure, or uses the picture frame to kill a spider,
or grimaces when he brings a woman home, and she lifts
the photo from the desk to ask who you are.

Looking at a stranger with his back turned,
standing against the gray lake, maybe you feel
guilty yourself. The jacket reminds you
of a spot of blood on a black tile, and you realize the man
could be long dead and you would have no idea,
so you throw the print away. There it goes:
it clacks and skitters along the sidewalk in the breeze
until it becomes caught in a crack between sprouting tufts.
Soon, a sickly stray cat finds the picture, paws at it,
nuzzles gently. Then she finds the corner where you held the print
between your thumb and forefinger. Here you are.
She sniffs the scent of your fingers, that little artifact,
in quickening breaths, and feels
very near to discovering something important,
like she couldn't stop or turn away if she tried.

You Didn't See It, You Don't Know

Tucked under the bridge railing in a wrinkled loop, I find a ten-foot strip of gray tape that looks pulled straight out of a cassette.

I hold it up to the sunlight to see if I can see the music printed inside it, like liquid flowing through a clear pipe, but before my eyes adjust,

an older boy with red hair ambles past, takes the tape from my fingers with one graceful whip of his thick arm and tosses it over the edge of the bridge. His friends point at girls and pass on. They don't even notice what he did.

The tape catches the wind and floats for a second like the giddy thread of smoke from a blown-out match, but then falls away toward the water, becomes smaller and smaller, until it could just be a glint in the waves, or a dirty coin discarded, or the severed wing of a bee.

"Maybe it was an accident?" my mother says, and I answer: "You don't understand. They were bad. They were bad men."

We Go Together Like Cheese and Crackers

Just as I began to slice the cheese, it said,

“Stop.”

I dropped the knife in surprise.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “Was I hurting you?”

The cheese said, “You're cutting the wrong way.

You want slices, not cubes. Make it fit the shape of the cracker.”

“Oh,” I said. I stood frozen.

“What a moron,” said the cheese.

I could almost perceive the cheese scowling, the orange

shifting and darkening. It was a Cheddar cheese,

which is known as a “sharp” cheese.

I picked up the knife. “Should I cut here, like this?”

The cheese said nothing.

I waited, pointing with the blade. Still nothing.

So, I began to press the knife into the soft corner,

and then the cheese said, “Stop.”

I took that cheese back to the store. I didn't want to sound

like a wimp about everything, so I told the manager

it tasted moldy. She gave me a free cheese in exchange.

They took the first cheese away, through a dark door, with fog

on the clear plastic window. I don't know what happened to it.

Back home, in strong defiance, I cut the second cheese into cubes.

It was delicious. I loved the way the pointed corners of the cubes

jabbed into my tongue just a little at first, but finally gave way

to the pressure of my jaw. This cheese said nothing.

Later, Winifred came home from work. She looked in the fridge.

“Did you get any cheese at the store?” she asked.

“Sorry, I ate it all,” I said.

She looked at me funny, but came to kiss me anyway.

Right after her lips touched mine, she tensed up and said, “Oooh, stop.”

I asked what was wrong, and she said, “God, the cheese.

You taste like an enchilada.”

Now, from inside me, I heard this new cheese saying,

“What a stuck-up bitch.”

“Hey, now, she's my wife,” I said.

Winifred asked if I had sent out any job applications during the day,

but I told her I had been too busy. The cheese began to laugh,

and I muttered for it to be quiet.

Winifred came and sat in my lap. With two fingers,

she pressed a white mint between my lips.

Then, she laid her thin, purplish hand on my stomach

with a mournful curiosity,

like a new widow touches her husband's closed coffin, imagining the face

a stranger decided she couldn't bear to see.

The Wine that Waits

water from a deep lake in the snow;
a twilight that rises through your body;

a hand that touches
the tatters
until they form a flag;

a mouth that breathes on
the ashes
until they become a tree;

the laughter you hear from another room,
and you follow to find out what was funny;

the smoke a lost traveler sees
rising from a chimney in the forest;

the gaze of a terrified rabbit;
a quick glance toward the sun;

a fiber you wear when your skin is heavy;
a song with words but no voices

Where Babies Come From

You can think of dying
like the sound of a door latch
clicking in place behind you
at the end of a dark Sunday,
when you realize you haven't spoken
a word out loud since you woke up.
See yourself surrounded by dead tables,
crushed between bookshelves.

You can drink until you blur
the call of the loneliness
that owns you. Then think of dying, again:
This time like a typewriter
you hear through the wall, clicking
and whirring for hours, then, suddenly,
quiet. Watch a man walk
between the sleepy shelves of a library
and see him drowning in the syrup
of his quiet.

You can worry about loneliness
with that fluorescent, medical emotion,
asking yourself, "Am I depressed? Is this
what they say depression is?"
You can worry till your teeth are sore
and you crackle awake in the darkness

with a taste of salt in your mouth.
You can let it take on that embarrassing
tone of stuttering sexuality,
you can find another one like you and
replace each others' bodies with ideas. Say:

if one girl finds one faint fingerprint
of solace in a book. If she takes it outside
to read when the day is done and the long door
looms. If she sees a boy reading by himself
in the garden and thinks: he looks different. Not
the driftwood face and the iced eyes
of the men she knows.

If the boy's living countenance takes in the pages
of his book with a bright, gritty thirst, and the green
daylight gurgles in the tree above him.

If he looks alone, and clenched with possibility.
She thinks: I can help him talk, bend his solitude
into shapes, grow him like a vine.

The boy under the tree lifts his eyes
to the girl, to the battered cover of the book in her hand,
to the ropes in her neck slackened
just enough to trust, and the boy's pupils
swell out from the center
like the path of a plague,
or the halo of a bomb.

Fangs

I stopped a wolf trotting by the creek.
"What are those for?" I asked,
and she said, "Rabbits mostly."
Then she lunged and took hold of my ankle,
and I had to slap her skull with my hat
until she let go. We were both panting.
I asked, "Were you really that hungry?"
and she said, "No, just curious."

Vacant Like a Valley

They played a game where someone hid the ring.
First, it was the wheelwright's turn to take the ring away.
Heads raised, eyes shut, counting aloud, the players leaned against
each other like goats in a pen at night, sniffing the musky breeze
from the edge of the woods. The count finished; the players prowled.
They looked in all the drawers, flipped the furniture,
held the wheelwright down and checked inside his mouth.
They looked until the man without an arm
found the ring stuck inside the shade of a lamp.
Drinks all around. The woman with the hatchet asked,
“What if we hide the ring in the valley down below?”
They liked her idea, gave her the ring, now warm and wet
from being traded hand to hand. They huddled up again, this time
like trunks of pine fused by sap, mountain wind, and a great fire.
When the count was up, down they came through moss and rocks,
and found the hatchet woman in a drooping branch.
“I’ll never tell,” she said. And so the search began. The husband and wife
who kept the lighthouse slipped on river stones and drowned
in the green, giggling pools below, but the search would not end.
At night the lanterns scribbled through the trees, and everyone
swore at themselves while turning over rocks and rotten logs in vain.
“Nothing here but worms and mold,” the wheelwright said
to his partner, the girl who chewed blue gum. The girl smacked
her mouth at him without a word and kicked a flower in half.
All this time, the hatchet woman stayed in her tree, smiled so darkly safe,
never gave a clue. Soon, the barley farmer brought his scythe and set

about

to hacking all the valley's grass away to make an easier game,
but all they found perched on the flat earth was dew, gray stone,
and the litter from their camps. The girl who chewed blue gum
found where a snake had shed its skin the night before,
held the dry ribbon up to the light, and felt okay about quitting
the game to take home her papery prize. Alone, the wheelwright grew
dark.

He spent one foggy morning wading in the river, catching turtles.
Eventually, the hatchet woman came to him. She asked him, "Have
you given up the game?" He said, "There's nothing in this valley
but mud and spiders." It wasn't true, of course. They knew the ring
was somewhere. From the unseen shore, miles away, a freighter vessel's
horn blasted through the valley's mist, and everyone stopped to listen.

Rembrandt's *Andromeda*

In Which the Princess Is Offered as Sacrifice to an Unseen Sea Monster

Andromeda hangs from shackled wrists, stripped,
mouthing a silver moan.

She peers over her shoulder into a mess of dark
oils, grass wicks and charred foam.

One knee is bent, her muscles slackened in supplication
to the often-imagined motions of death.

One cannot see the creature in the frame, only the girl's eyes
turned up, her blanched skin and banded breath.

Andromeda declines to scream. Her arms loose leather.

All feeling falls behind
the sight of the spines, and the red, red mouth.

She remembers, now, a past moment: the dark-skinned serving boy,
behind her bathing chamber's shroud.

His eyes were litters of mice. Petals, twirling oars.

She touched his rough wrist.

She imagines, briefly, that the boy learns of her plight,
comes riding through the sick mist

on a stolen horse, with a sword gleaming violet-white.

Impossible, she knows,
since her father hanged the boy, then had him cut to pieces
while she watched. His dead eyes like stumps, skulls.

Andromeda now quiet under the eager shadow.
Completely unafraid, a white bird sets down
and pecks for bits in the sand between her toes.

Horror

Falling asleep in the shower
my shoulder wedged against the wall of tiles
my slack body under the tongue
in the loud gray
sunken mouth of the light

The water fitting some device
tight around the base of my skull
so that I cannot turn and look

A scene comes copious and grim:
The water calls my sister's name
She drops from a tree and runs
years ago in a yard with hacked clover
purple ants and curved copper remnants

I push off with my bike
angling to meet her running
I cut the skin from her leg with the wheel
and she falls shrieking from me
I see myself looming
mouth closed
remorseless as a cat

Then the sound of water dragging
It turns a new light on

My dead grandmother
gazing up the stairs in her house
with a horrific longing
her feet miming the motions
of that familiar forbidden slope

All those things
left up there in my father's room
They know the dust is coming and
they all want to go back to something
long ago and loud
and broken bright

I begin to think of time as a thing
that does not pass
but swings its mass against another thing
until both shapes are cracked and dented
and the illusions of faces appear

So this it does

My sister's leg heals
and my grandmother
hides a bruise on her forehead
with sunglasses and a floppy summer hat

Someone Finds a Coin I Lost in Italy

I did descend the dry and flowered hill with crushing steps
where the naked valley pulled my body like a drain,

but she was not with me. We did not lose
our way in gray halls underneath the sanctuary,

nor did we jog the maze of cobbled streets
listening for the burdened purr of English.

I did drink wine from a shallow bowl, but
I did not throw that bad tomato in the lake.

I did put honey on bread, and I did wipe the flour
from my beard with a dry, dirty swipe of my forearm,

but she did not make fun, we did not watch the speckled
snake eat crickets at the edge of the garden.

That pile of hopeless rounded bricks is there
wrapped in rusting wire, but we did not lean against it.

I did not close my eyes to violet rings.
I did not feel the grass against my arm

and think of eyelashes, but now and then I do come awake
and reach in the dark for a flutter against my skin,

many times it has been a brown
spider, or a black and banded spider, with me in my bed.

Long Rides

I.

The dull pool of hours releases
as honey drizzles from the lip of a jar
and piles upon itself in fading ribbons.
None of its shape is kept.
It hardens and melts again.
It boils, and the pain of being
alone so long rises
from it in hurried hairs of steam
to condense in another place and grow cold.
Only time could pass in such an unreal way.

II.

There are dark acres along the road
where nobody walks. Straight, branchless pines
go infinitely far. They rise from the infinite mat
of orange needles at a perfect, repeating distance
from one another, with perfect roundness, in straight,
perfect worship of the sun,
as if they were anything but living:
the teeth of a hairbrush, jail bars, Greek columns,
the forest like a stage
dressed for a play

set in a forest.

The deep mud
in the ditch along the road
dries in the sun with no tracks running through;
with a surface as perfectly smooth as a pond
lined with plastic,
in the garden of a large house.

III.

Wind shakes the car, painted metal
panels rattle away the lost
hours in quarter-second ticks.
Something is happening, but
nothing happens.

The roads that run though South Carolina
feel not driven, but tumbled through,
recalling the slackened faces
of people you have failed,
forgotten, to whom you made
ramshackle promises before you
simply went along being who you were.
In one town, at least half the buildings
are gagged with boards
and spilling broken glass.
Businesses once painted white, now the color

of bad onions. Ahead, a tow truck
grinds through the valley, dragging a tangle
of chains behind it. Sparks fly from the road
and land in the wet grass, recalling the person
who told you she loved you, and the rainy
silence that followed.

IV.

Nevertheless, distance does a good thing:
it passes with the sincerest promise
that your body is real, that your feet and your hands
and the old car are, in fact, things,
and that the house with the cream bricks
and the black mane of char around one window
are not simply part of a dream churned
and mangled by time until it is believed.

After crossing the lost miles:
Now raise your eyes from the work
of being what you are and find you have come to
a place. You are here
in this place and you bargain with it.
The pain of being alone so long
lifts away
like a curtain.