

RUTSTEIN, AMANDA BOWEN, M.F.A. *The Audition*. (2010)
Directed by Prof. Stuart Dischell. 41pp.

This thesis is a collection of poems written during two years of study in the MFA writing program at UNC Greensboro. Poems concern circus performers, eccentrics, and an attempt to give a voice to the voiceless.

THE AUDITION

By

Amanda Bowen Rutstein

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

Greensboro
2010

Approved By

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

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

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
There Is a Thing About a Curtain	1
The Sword Swallower.....	2
The Lion Tamer Gets A Bear.....	3
The Bearded Lady Makes a Stew	5
The Lion Tamer	6
The Love Letter.....	7
The Clown to the Ringmaster	8
When Dreams Came	9
The Lost Boy.....	10
Frieda Pushnik Models	11
The Contortionist	12
Extraneous the Six-Legged Cow	13
Sweetheart.....	14
Rosemary	15
Until I Learned How to Balance My Hips	16
It	17
Muzungu	18
A Story	19
In the School Kitchen.....	20
A Rainy Day	21

The Human Cannonball	22
Supine	23
Baby Ruth Thinks Back	24
The Circus Sleeps	25
Stargazing	26
She Tarnishes the Silver.....	27
The Wife of a Cranberry Farmer	28
After the Baby.....	30
Bones.....	31
The Hoarder in Summer.....	33
Taking up Space.....	34
Vanity.....	36
Insomnia.....	37
Yesterday's Tomato	38
The Cat Lady.....	39
Myopia	40
The Audition	41

There Is a Thing About a Curtain

Everybody wants to know
what is behind a red, velvet, curtain
with gold tassels at the bottom and two
long red ribbons made of satin guarding
the darkened mystery standing behind.
Suddenly, a noise and the crowd goes quiet,
but still the man in the black top hat waits.
Many confuse this anticipation
with frustration and start to gather coats.
They tip their waiters and shrug to standing,
then slouching to the exits, simply leave.
Those with patience grin and loosen neckties.
One kid tempts another to take a peek.
He creeps across the sawdust and peers in.
He sees what he sees, but still will not tell.
A drum rolls and then more silence.
Someone coughs and the crowd shifts in their seats.
The top-hat-man bows and steps behind it;
the dust motes dance in the spotlight's glare.
He comes back out and clears his throat again.
Just then, the lights go out and someone screams.
It's a blackout and all are asked to leave.

The Sword Swallower

First I show them this:
the finely sharpened blades—
both sides cut through canvas
held taut by my assistant.

My practiced wrist knows
to flick it so they can hear
the two-toned whistle
of air on steel.

With my head upturned,
aligning my mouth and esophagus,
I can lower it straight down;
the hilt becoming a gilded smile,
sweating with the breath from my nose.

I feel a dull pressure—
our internal organs
have very few nerve endings—
a subtle ache so foreign
it seems to extend beyond
my body—a phantom limb.

My throat opens
like a paper swan
coming undone,
then closes like a fist
around the quick edges.

Some yell.
Some gag.
Most are stunned into silence.

I see none of this
only their crazed relief
when the sword is once again
pulled from my bodily sheath.
The hot air rising with it,
a hint of burning pennies.

The Lion Tamer Gets a Bear

I smelled him before I saw him.
The scent of soot and vinegar
swilled the air as they led him in.
He staggered on his hind legs
under heavy chains.
He towered over the guards.

The lions sneered at him;
grunting snarls from the backs
of their deep stalls,
their eyes shining.

I was instructed to tame him,
but it was clear he'd been broken long ago.
He sat boulder-thick against
the bars of the cage.

He would not challenge me
the way young lions do at first.
He would not meet my eyes,
looking away as if embarrassed.
There were fine lines of naked skin against
the sides of his head where the elastic bands
of his show hat wore away his fur.

At first I whispered to him:
hey bear, hey there big bear.
He did nothing.

I opened my hand to him
but he would not approach it—
so I thrust it under his nose,
dry and soft as velvet.
He sighed and sank further into himself.

I began to bring him things then.
I brought him apples and honey,
halves of salmon, ice fresh.
He would take these offerings and turn away
eating them politely with both front paws.
I bathed him myself one afternoon
sinking my hands knuckle-deep into his

russet fur until he was white with lather.
I poured whole buckets of warm water
down his back
but even this made him wince.

We had no show, the bear and I.
Crowds would come into the animal tent
and leer at him or try to provoke him.

The Bearded Lady Makes a Stew

I straighten my apron
and start with the onion.
My mother taught me once
to smear a little cold cream
under my nose to keep from crying.

When the onion glistens in the pan—
a pure translucence—I add
the other, harder, root vegetables:
carrots, celery, and potatoes.
Their colors become vibrant in the steam.

The flavors mix and settle in the air
around me, and I cannot tell
if it smells more like winter inside
or outside. Winter is a time for stew.

I will let it all simmer for now,
and later we will eat it from white
bowls, sopping up the broth with
a hearty brown bread.

The lion tamer comes in.
He sneaks up behind me,
and I anticipate his hand next to my cheek.
He smells of his well-oiled whip
and the musk of large cats.

With the forefinger and thumb of his right hand
he tugs twice on the longest part of my beard,
and pledges in a whisper
he will tame me yet.

The Lion Tamer

The trick of speaking to lions
is to never break eye contact.
And how could you anyway?
That honeyed intensity.

Once I've caught their gaze
we are chained together—
our pupils cuffed.

They ignore the theatrics:
the crack of the whip,
my wrist knows when to snap it
because it is exactly as choreographed
as it seems.

Still, the crowd winces
as the lions bare their teeth.
But I never break a sweat,
and I bow,
and the lions proselytize.

Later, I wrestle them.
They burrow their noses against my ears,
the warm pulse of their massive paws
against my back and neck.

They gum my knuckles,
and when I leave I smell of them:
the sharp tang of old steaks,
and something softer,
something that smells of wet earth.

At home I have a house-cat.
She leaps from windowsill to windowsill.
I catch her glance, she looks away.
I trace her small ribs,
and she scratches my hand.

The Love Letter

My dearest,
when I first went to see
I was curious.
I took off my hat, leaving
a ring of sweat crowning my hair.
Your tent—the “freak show”—
a hush punctuated with gasping
people who wear their alarm
like fine clothing and stand
straight-backed-mimes,
tapping their hollow pockets.
I fell in line beside them
and stared at your shoes.
My gaze, a drifting helium balloon,
hovered to your shadow on the canvas,
a curved replica, nine-feet in the evening sun.
Elbows out, it dared me to meet your eyes
which squinted at the book in your lap.
You were so used to ignoring the crowd
and your quick fingers plucked at
the beard on your chin.
The last thing I noticed,
your bright red nails...

The Clown to the Ringmaster

You swell the center ring with bravado;
your shiny, black, boots in avocado—
a mush of elephant dung and sawdust,
and only I can see the faint disgust.
Your handlebar mustache winces, one side
of a nose far redder than a clown's pride
and joy, squeezed by happy kids.
And what do you do but take petty bids
on prices of family fun; jangle
your fist in pockets of coins, and strangle
the wallets of our still-poor customers—
our dazzled, candy sucking, consumers?
It doesn't matter how many feathers
you strap to your top hat. They would rather
cut straight to the pretty girls on the trapeze,
or watch me juggle pineapples with my knees.

When Dreams Came

Every night out of the window I hear the
stomping elephants and the whine of metal
cages. Emphatic snarls from the lions,
glint of bright white teeth.

Southern Ohio is not ready for this.
Bright colors rage against our sallow farmlands.
Dust, which rarely settled anyway now
chokes air spitefully.

Children throwing down their shovels then walking
imaginary tightropes through the pastures,
dreaming in the glitter and promises there—
bright posters tent-side.

Friday's brass instrument parade was loudest.
Feeling our hearts in our ears, we backed away,
pulling the small children by their scrawny necks—
eyes wide and shining.

I cannot sleep with the sounds of the jungle.
Milk has soured and the cows moan in protest.
Even silencing the rooster who sits there,
deep in the barn's dusk.

The Lost Boy

He rubs his fingers together, still
warm from his mother's hands,
smudged where her lotion met dirt
as her palm lost its grip on his.

He can only see knees:
denim stretched tight and faded,
the floral whirl of a dress,
grass stains and holes where
the strings hang loose.

He is sweating. The air
sits on his small shoulders,
hot and heavy it becomes a swamp
that he wades through.

The stars above are lost
to the electric lights,
multicolored and blurred
they whirl and buzz like
tiny, blinking acrobats.

A shiny man shoves cotton candy
at his face. A wisp of it
sticks to his nose and
the scent of spun sugar
mixes with dirt and dung and bodies.

He finds a quiet corner next
to the main tent and sits against the canvas
feeling the muffled vibrations—thousands
of voices inside, so much like the sound
of the television through a wall at home,
and he hugs his legs.

Frieda Pushnik Models

I can drive this pen forward,
propping it beneath my chin,

pushing it with the stump of my
right arm: see my cursive Q.

In the big show I can tie a shoe
with my lips and teeth,

a skill I'll never need
but you should hear the crowd.

Yes, I go places.
I have seen you from the other side

of a Christmas window display
where you pretend to admire the dress.

I am lovely for a girl—
above average I've heard.

I wasn't surprised when Macy's
asked me to model their winter line.

I showed the makeup artists how I
can wiggle into clothes on my own,

then they placed me on a stool—
its flat plane flush against me.

I survived my mother's appendectomy.
The scalpel grazed my forming brain

splitting the branch from the trunk. Dull
where the stems and leaves would grow.

My mother—my legs.
When the Barnum Circus caught fire

she tucked me under her arm
and I survived that, too.

The Contortionist

My joints are sponges.
When I was little
I would dislocate my own
shoulder, spinning the ball
from the socket and
slip from my father's arms—
he would laugh.

Here, the crowd stiffens
as I tuck into myself,
folding my limbs together
neat as a piece of paper,
and descend into
my glass cube, closing the lid.

They stand soldier-still
counting my knees and elbows,
searching for the illusion of mirrors.
They disregard my face, the
passive mask I wear.

A little girl comes up and presses
one hot palm against the glass
she meets my eye.
Her mother pulls her rough by the elbow.
She's left that small smudge,
of her self—the curious whorls of each
fingertip, and this is what I focus on

from my human fish bowl
until my breath fogs up the glass
and I begin to untangle:
pulling my foot from behind my ear
my hands from around my torso
and my neck up from under one knee.

I rise to their height, and stretch my
arms to the sky. I am familiar again,
and move on to the next stall
while I crack my knuckles.

Extraneous the Six-Legged Cow

The cow stands in her stall lowing,
tail knowingly pitched to one side.
For four hours the farmer waits,
palming her hide which ripples with effort,
speaking softly to her.

Her hooves are planted
in a discomfort she cannot solve.
She rocks slightly,
and in an instant, gliding, relief
the calf puddles to the ground.

Cow and farmer turn to examine
a twisted pile of limbs mewling.
She begins to clean him.
Her strong tongue
easing him upward,
but he won't stand and stumble.

Something is weighing him down.
The mess of birth cleared away—
the farmer sees the defect:
a bent pair of leg hangs across the calf's back.
The defeated parasitic twin
thrusting out from his spine.

The calf shoulders this unmuscled flesh,
keeping the sacrificed limbs off the ground.
Later, the newspapers will come.
There will be a contest to name him.
He will learn to find his center of gravity,
and never question this necklace of hooves.

Sweetheart

She warns him that her hands are made
of glass but he grabs them anyway

and holds on as they slice his fingers.
He brings his ruined palm to her cheek,

calling her quiet names like
Sweetheart until her chest

hisses like a snake, until her heart uncoils
and strikes out at him

but gets tangled in her ribs
and smacks around her chest for a while.

He hugs her shoulders tightly,
feels her blood dance and her body hesitate

like an unhinged door.
She tells him about the pets she's

shredded with her fingertips,
her failed attempts at gardening,

the other men who held her
like he holds her now,

her goosebumps thorns
that pecked at their skin until the men lost

patience and let her be. She feels him turn
her body and she faces his chest,

his own heart pattering softly as though trying
to teach her this slower rhythm.

She looks up at his face—seeing only
her own eyes mirrored in his—
a single cloud in the sky.

Rosemary

Lets caterpillars
crawl up her arms like so many
fuzzy bracelets—she pinches
and pets them until they break.
When she is too tired to walk
the teachers carry her—
she curls up in their arms.

One finger missing and three
shaped like buttons—her wet
mouth forms words like bubbles,
popping them before they hit the air.
It hurts to look
in her eyes— tired and
colored like an aged bruise.

Happy children rocket past
unaware of why she scares them.

Rosemary smells like a hospital.
tinny with the odor of rubber gloves,
like she is made of a clean aluminum can

and just as fragile. She winces
when they put on her jacket
the breeze lifts her hair,
her scalp the most gentle shade of pink,
and when she falls down
she stays still as a possum.

Until I Learned How to Balance My Hips

Everything about being a woman
clicks efficiently:
a tube of lipstick, eyelash curlers,
even a bra strap when caught in
the crook of a finger, pulled
away from the shoulder then released.

Even my mother's high heels snapped
at the hardwood with authority.

I used to wobble in her heels,
spent hours walking towards
the mirror in my bedroom
with my knees bowing
to the basketball posters on my walls.

The heels were red and shiny
like the covers of my mother's
romance novels that she hid in the couch,
and they forced my blunt feet to point to
where I was going: little arrows.

Now I know how to smooth
the pantyhose over the arches of my instep
and line up my toes at the seam
before slipping my feet
into my own heels.

I cringe, remembering when
she caught me in hers—
the smudged mess of her mascara
dripping directionless down her cheeks,
her shrill voice warning me:
boys can only wear flat shoes.

It

They silent scream
with their mouths wide—
the undersides of their tongues
blue as raw oysters.

It is scarier than the shadows
under their beds or the stray
tree branch that rakes the house.

Everything is bright light
and its eyes are little pins

that roll and seethe in its sockets.
It stomps around on painted toes
and smiles with rage—grins out
insults and cruel spit.

All of the eggs are broken
and scattered across the floor
where pieces of shell
stab at their feet.

With icy fingers, it grabs and claws
at the air in front of their faces
and throws spoons at the wall.

they sink into themselves,
cower like snails do.
Why can't they remember to
stuff secrets up their sleeves?

Muzungu

The Indian Ocean is warm—
I leave my boots on the shore
and walk fully-clothed into the water.

I walk until I am treading heavy,

my arms and legs work the water
like a maestro conducting four symphonies
at once. I sink lower so all I can see
is the top of the still water and
the bottom of the still blue sky.

The sand is littered with coral.
Fragments that smile the same
smile of the bright-mouthed children.

I take a piece with me—
admire it on the way back to camp
where the children run up to me pointing,
shouting, *Muzungu—white person!*
They are so excited.

Rough and weightless, shoved deep in dirty
laundry—it makes it past customs—
the agents with gun-eyes.

The coral lives in a box,
the same box that holds a dried rose,
baby teeth, a deflated Mylar balloon and now
this cratered piece of Kenya.

There is be nowhere to display it:
not next to that photo of the school children,
whose bald-heads grin and shine.
It would look shabby by comparison.
People would ask unanswerable questions.

A Story

Once, someone stepped on a trophy
and the little golden hand

tunneled into their foot.
The wound healed over and the body

delivered the hand months later.
Imagine the birth of that small wave,

wrist and all, from a sleeping heel.
She collapses her swimming trophies.

Unscrews each little
man—poised to dive into nothing.

They heap together
worshipping the carpet—

wooden bases stacked like
building blocks and so many

rusted screws. She has seen
that a closet door will fall

off its hinges if you hit it
hard enough. So, she sits on the door.

The stunned closet gawks
clothing-gagged.

Colors laugh at her
while defeated statues swim
at her feet.

In the School Kitchen

The round-bellied children line up as
I ladle great cups of *uji*
into plastic tumblers
and colorful tin bowls.
Their shirts are starched white,
their feet red with clay,
and their scalps scarred
labyrinths from ringworm.
They drink in gulps
leaving white smears of cornmeal—
a goat-milk mustache
under their noses.

The blood here is poisonous—
as toxic as the water,
and I am taught to boil everything.
A child falls and skins her knees
and I stand limp-armed.
Her burgundy sweater catches her tears
as the wound scabs over.

Their teacher ushers them
to her in Swahili,
working her jaw around
soft vowels; her eyes give away
smiles. She mimics cleaning
her face with a swipe
of the back of her hand.

They don't want my pity.
They want to chase the bubbles
I brought from home.
Their eyes shine as the iridescent film
frees itself from the wand and floats
towards their hands—cupped and ready.
They will go home tonight
and over rice and papaya slices
they will tell their parents about us—
the white people who can blow glass
so fragile it pops when anything touches it.

A Rainy Day

The leaves flip over,
showing the veins of their pale stomachs,
preparing to take the water.

The sparrows flock to leave
and when one can't find its place
the others re-form the V around it.

The earthworms coil on the path
finding false security in the cloud-cover—
pink spirals beside the lawns.

The fair grounds are vibrant.
The reds are redder than an hour ago
and the blues are crisp against the dirt.

The canvas tents crackle in the wind;
the scramble of men and pegs and hammers
in slow air that seems too thick.

The wild cats are hackled high,
backs rolling with electricity,
and the elephants shift side to side—

large, four-legged barrels.
The performers, who tasted the air, hunker
down in the caravan of carriages.

And finally, the rain begins to fall.
A huge and wet stampede
that grounds the dust which
hasn't settled for days.

The Human Cannonball

Home was more dangerous than this.
There, the walls were like steel
jaws, clenching and suffocating us
all to the point of snapping.

The tension, palpable as putty,
was the stagnant air of each room
that never fully ignited or cleared.
All you could do was shut your eyes
to it in the sanctuary of sleep.

So I left that place
for the rose tinted innards of a tent,
for the dark breeze of an applause,
for the perpetual nighttime of my cannon.

When I climb inside the womb of the thing—
the soles of my feet tensed over the springs—
I hear nothing and I see nothing and I count.

After thirty-six seconds with my legs
bent, I feel myself push through
the mouth—an open “o” of surprise—
with my arms straight at my sides
I burst into the dim light and flip over
myself again and again in the light air.
A net catches me as though I am nothing.

Supine

The last thing I felt was the curl
of my spine as I hit the dirt floor.
Each vertebrae
clicking as they broke apart—
gentle as a china cup and as
devastating as the bricks of a
building tumbling to the ground.

My shocked fists still gripped the
strand of lights I'd been hanging,
unwilling to release them, still searching
for the nail. My feet still bent and
trying to find balance on the
scaffolding of the tent.

In those quiet seconds with my right ear
to the dry ground I could hear
the horses hoofing through straw,
the twang of elastic trapeze ropes
and closer—the scurry of ants
rebuilding their damaged halls.

Baby Ruth Thinks Back

The men find me sexy. They holler
and hold up their hands as if to
place them anywhere on my thick skin,
and sometimes they laugh and point,
but still their eyes implore.

At seven-hundred pounds, I have
a steel-reinforced stage
and my tent is lined with new grass,
not the sawdust of the elephant pens.

When the Italian restaurant went under,
my husband sold balloons in Indiana.
He came to my show every day
and helped tie the little bow in my hair.
Sometimes, when I was too weak-kneed
he would help me across the stage.

I have never used a cane,
and after he died the doctors
recommended surgery.

In the middle of the night I open my eyes,
and I feel that my body has disappeared.
I am all eyeballs in a giant, empty space,
but then I smooth my hands
across my hips and breasts,
down my dimpled arms
and I feel the weight of myself
bearing down on the mattress springs—
and I am a sheer force.
Unmovable.
The rock onto which the smaller folks
can buoy themselves.

The Circus Sleeps

The slow shush-shush shuffling
of sleeping elephants
rolling side to side in their pens,
dreaming as their clay feet
make whispers of the straw.

The big cats pace in their cages
flashing their eyes and grinning
at shadows—all of those teeth—
shining half-moon sentries.

It is the same in every town.
Sleep, the great equalizer.

When it's warm
the cicadas purr—
little white-noise-machines
stirring the air.

When it's cold
the wind takes over,
makes a flute of itself
and serenades the dry branches.

Night is medicinal.
The strong man lets his muscles
rest against each other in a truce.
The human canon ball is grounded,
the sword swallower mouths soft air,
and the smallest clown
stretches out, opens his spine
to the half-inch he lost
from a day of marching.

Stargazing

The night of the meteor shower
we wore summer like a blanket in the grass.
Mosquito wary, we watched the sky,
picked marshmallow from our fingers
and listened to *Lola* on repeat.

fresh in our adult bodies, the three of us
hugging our college weight—
the freedom to eat ice cream for dinner.
She said, *in St. Louis they fry ravioli.*
In Fredericksburg I ate icing with a spoon.

Above us stars chased the sky.
We traced their tails—the trails they left.
He lit more Citronella torches—
it was easier to talk in the dark.

That night we tried cigars;
thin ones that tasted like Kahlua,
only they didn't, and we pretended to like them.
That night we talked about beer—
we didn't like that yet either.

Everything around us sounded the same
between the song's endless rotation.
We stayed late hoping for some grand signal—
the dazzling finale of a fireworks display,
but the stars simply stopped falling.

She Tarnishes the Silver

Thumbing through the flatware
like a shiny deck of cards,
holding the creamer to her ear
to hear far-away-pastures,
rubbing the teapot
to feel the heat of her own palms.
When the tea service is done,
a greenish gray that reflects only
her whirling fingerprints,
she sets to work polishing it:
bowl of warm water,
the dull poisonous smell of Tarnex
and so many soft cloths.
She washes and tends each crevice
as though she is bathing a child.
Using her pinkie, she scrubs the pouting
lip of the teapot's spout.
She murmurs encouragements
to the sugar tongs,
tickles the feet of the serving tray.
She cleans until her silver gleams,
until she can see herself on every surface.

The Wife of a Cranberry Farmer

Through the cranberry bog
in waist-high slick rubber,
my fingertips trail and tip
the bobbing fruit.
He planted in April, a month
marked by screaming alarms
that pulled us to the shore to water
off morning frost.

 And now it's October.
My feet sink into peat
soft as sponges and I wade
through this flood we created
to lasso the berries.

Thousands of them,
more, maybe, clot the water—
an oblivious scarlet stain.
Lost and aimless they
seem too lazy in this once-field,
no more concerned with the nets
than how they came to be
separated from their vines
which tangle at my ankles,
tie themselves into useless knots
and sink underfoot.

It is calving season.
The next farm over has fields
of low-bellied cows.
Ripe and proud they stride
through pastures. One already
delivered is chased close by
a lanky-legged calf trying to gum
at her udders.

He strains a handful of cranberries in his fist.
Even wet, they click like marbles.
He eats one raw,
puts it right between his teeth.
He doesn't grimace or tear for
the sour sting on the back of his tongue,
the red stain that will mark his cheek—

a spot that will be tart for hours.

After The Baby

Last night the vines seemed
umbilical. She dreamed
that the leaves became hands,
hundreds of hands that
buried the house one fistful
at a time—
patting and trapping it
into the soft backyard.

In the morning she determined to
rip them down.
she grabbed the ivy
on the side of the house
and pulled,
watched as it unstuck itself
from the bricks—pitiful, it
unfurled from around the rain gutters
and reappeared from inside the chimney—
a fine earthy dust falling
on her shoulders—
the spaces between her fingers
raw and bleeding.

When the house was bare
she set to work pulling the roots
from the ground.
A harder job,
this time pulling upward.
She savored the give and tear
as the earth let go—
the naked spindles
shivered in the sun, clinging
to clods of dirt.

Sweaty in her victory,
she carried loose bundles
far away from the house and stacked
them against a tree.

Bones

The great cathedral stones
clack like fresh skeletons

and grip her shoes—worn smooth
and sturdy—down the nave.

She feels dwarfed under the great rock
arches; vaults frozen in pirouettes.

Because of the clouds, the stained glass
paints the walls a bottomless blue

and cold air sits still—
she is the breeze moving through.

The great eye of the rose window
lingers on her back.

She passes the docents
purple and round who throw their

voices in hushed sighs,
while marble saints mime in alcoves,

lifting their eyes to the sky.
At the alter she traces the organ pipes

with one finger to the air, she counts
the brass tubes and imagines

the great quake if her elbow hit
the keys—the blasts of those many notes.

In the corner there are lit candles,
each one a jumping prayer.

She stares into a flame contemplating
matches, tea-lights, and memories.

There is nothing soft here.
Everything is granite and bone.

Inside the tombs ancient skulls
are whispering secrets

but they've lost their tongues.
Outside, winged gargoyles leer—
letting the rain from their jaws.

The Hoarder in Summer

The shellacked skitter of a cockroach
echoes off the walls of a Styrofoam cup.

In some corner a television wails
with love declarations from soap-opera actresses.

I sit with my back to all of this
and everything around me is sweating—

ink bleeds from years of stacked newspapers.
Bits of brown glass fog over and cry,

cupping their tears in the curved edges.
The body odor of old food grunts through the kitchen

and on every wall painted animals pant in their frames.
I put my hands together matching my fingertips.

In this position I pull my fingers
in-out-in-out

until it feels like there is a pane of glass
separating my palms,

smooth and unyielding—
anything more solid than air.

Taking Up Space

1.

I lost my language to pain
when I got a massage in Mexico.
In a room with beige tiles and steam
so thick the walls wept,

my muscles twisted as she poked
her way down the sides of my spine.
Surely, I would never stand again.

The masseuse spoke very little English
and said, “there, there,”
as her small hands tried to reach
through me to straighten the sheet.

My vision narrowed to a grid of grout—
my body a warm pile of dough, as again,
the soft slip of lotion became the dig
of an elbow, the hard press of fingertips.

At the end of the hour she pointed to
a robe ghosting in the breeze
and left the room saying, “there, there.”

2.

I worry the handles of a plastic bag
and fall into step with my friend,
let her set the pace and
navigate the corners of stores
cascading in front of us.

Metal racks of clothes hang stiff
on plastic hangers. The shoulders poke
out at us on sharp angles.
I pinch my own fleshy arm.

Aggressive shoppers shove past
with rasp of fabric on skin.
My lungs work the recycled air—
two wet balloons, pink with purpose.

My friend says, “this looks like you,”
and she holds up an empty shirt.
My thick heart squeezes like a fist.

Vanity

She feels prettier when her pupils are dilated
so she keeps the lights low,
the curtains drawn,
 and at night,
 she walks.

On the side of a rock she admires a flower.
It blooms from the damp moss.
The leaves bow at its side,
but it stands tall
defies gravity—the misty night
air that tries to pull it down,
make it grow top heavy.

The petals are lipped in purple—
gradients that fade to white.
She notices how thick they are,
pulpy with health.
There is nothing in the center,
only a deep funnel,
a hole that feeds directly into the stem
and she wonders about the inner workings;
the mystery inherent to darkness.

Every night she returns to watch
it flower. She wants to tend it.
She wants to offer it things:
soft water, minerals, her own soft kisses.
She wants to take it home with her,
unstick each careful root and let them
replant in her open hands,
but she knows it would cling to the rock,
resist her, and break her heart.

Gradually, she touches it.
The texture feathers her wrist.
With three fingers she plucks off a single petal,
weighs and measures it in her palm.
No one watches her lay it on her tongue,
then tongue it to her teeth—where it is a smooth wafer.
She bites just once. The last thing
she will ever know is that it is
bitter, so bitter.

Insomnia

I rinse my mind with wine,
back to bed,
swaddled and limp

I try to focus on breathing—
on the white noise of fans
thundering around my head

somewhere I hear a train
scream and the sheets
begin to needle my skin

my blankets are made of pins
and my body burns
I throw them off

A neighbor closes his door

I shiver, right the sheets,
the sick numbers taunt me
in neon green, my eyes

are still open, are dry
as a creek bed
where I palm the smoothest stone
I can find and wonder if running
water over my hand
would have the same effect—
would smooth down my knuckles
make my hands nothing
more than soft pillows.

Yesterday's Tomato

She bought one tomato
as wide as an open hand,

bulging like it was close to popping
and carried it through

the market like a prize,
warming it with her palms,

and smoothing away stray soil.
She counted out eighty-two cents.

At home she placed it
on the windowsill where the sun

cut through the blinds. With a pencil
she traced its silhouette

on the white-wall-opposite.
All day the shadows

rose and shrank. The graphite smeared
and stained as she sketched—

a study in circles.
The pinkie on her right hand turned

black with effort.
In the now-dark kitchen she rolled

the tomato over her arms,
warming them with leftover sunlight.

She ran it under the tap,
cut it into neat slices,
and ate in the company of its likeness.

The Cat Lady

They walk by in pairs
on the sidewalk
and turn their heads
away holding their noses.

What they don't know
is that she bought the cats
to tether herself.

Before that
her heart was a balloon
and that was why she kept
her hands on her chest—

holding herself down
with all of her strength.
In the morning she'd wake up
with scratches

and bloodied palms,
when her hands conspired
with her heart to free it.
When she was no longer

strong enough alone
she started collecting them.
All of those eyes and lungs and hearts
challenged her own—

dared it into stillness.
They tempered helium
and kept her
from simply floating away.

Myopia

They've left no life in these birds, not a trace
of fresh air in their feathers—stiff as pencils.

Here in this city where the lions are made of stone.
I've been to other cities where this wasn't the case;

where people were yellow-eyed as if their bodies
clutched to past illness, clung to what was real.

Pulled to each exhibit by an invisible
hand it's hard to look at these birds. I can't pretend

that they are alive, that the glass separating us
won't be cold to the touch.

Is the exhibit beautiful? The architecture is so plain
I don't notice the floor or the ceiling—I might as well

be floating. Clay could be wax could be flesh.
Somewhere butterfly hearts are beating.

A gorilla bares its teeth but its fists
are stuck to its chest. When I take pictures,

I am a ghost in my own photos where the flash hits
the glass—sometimes it is hard to tell

who is on display. I can't photograph the birds.
Their legs hang like forks over nothing.

The Audition

Hundreds of shrewd-eyed crows
watch us from the trees, adjusting
their heads side-to-side.
He is the forgotten one without a home.

Like an infant making tight fists at the world,
the child who covers the backs of his knees.

His parents left him at the park
where the wind tickled the back of his neck pink.

He found a box top and an
old pen—it took hours to spread the ink—
the letters big and bold.
Now he juggles a cardboard sign for me.

My windshield splits open like a yawn
and his glance burns my forehead.

Light pours from above, so I turn,
trace the hook of my nose—
so much like a beak.

They cluck their tongues but I don't speak crow
and my hair is nothing like feathers.