2004

Magic and other explanations

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Iowa State University

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Magic and other explanations

by

Kimberly Lynn Rogers

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Debra Marquart, Major Professor
Zora Zimmerman
Robert Baum

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2004

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Kimberly Lynn Rogers

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

________________________________________________________________________
Major Professor

________________________________________________________________________
For the Major Program
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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Pearl Hogrefe Fellowship at Iowa State for giving me one year to focus solely on my writing; that time has proved invaluable to my growth as a writer. Thank you to the J. William Fulbright Foundation for making it possible for me to spend one year in Zimbabwe.

Thank you to all of the professors who offered support and guidance through the writing of this manuscript: Debra Marquart, Mary Swander, Stephen Pett, Katharine Whitcomb, Todd Davis, Neal Bowers and Sheryl St. Germain.

Thank you to the community of writers at Iowa State University. Your talent and generosity has served as an inspiration to me through the writing of this manuscript. Thank you to those of you who read and offered feedback on versions of these poems, in particular Joseph Capista, Joan Stewart, Molly Rose, Scott Norenberg and Jim Coppoc.

Thank you to my family for encouraging me in my pursuit of writing, even when I could not offer a clear answer to the question, “So what are you going to do with this when you’re done?” Thank you to my cousin, Susie Spellman, for connecting me to other travelers and artists within my family. Thank you to my mom for encouraging my love of writing and art from the very beginning. Thank you to my dad for always making me follow through with what I start.

Thank you to my friends Chazmin Gober, Liz Rice, Margaret Caruso, Jeff Meserve and Matt Frederick. Your intelligence, wit and kindness have shaped both me, and this work.

Thank you to Sipho Ndlela for always believing in me and pushing me to take on new challenges. Without your encouragement and support I am certain this manuscript would not exist.

And finally, thank you to the friends I made in Zimbabwe: Peter Bwanya, my teacher and mentor, Ephat Mujuru, James Mujuru and Rinos Simboti Mukuwurirwa. Your openness, insight and generosity have changed my understanding of the world.

These poems were written for all the people mentioned above, but most of all they are for my sister.
Introduction

I have come across two definitions of poetry that have stayed with me throughout my study of poetry. The two definitions are as simple as ‘truisms’ and similarly complex. They have shaped what I believe a poem should be, and what purpose and function poetry has in this world. The first definition states that poetry must be “Singing Wisdom,” that it must sing and also be wise. The second definition states that poetry must express in words something that is beyond the expression of words. My understanding and internalization of these two definitions of poetry has shaped and continues to inform the way I approach my own writing.

I heard the first definition in an undergraduate poetry-writing course. The semester before I had had a literature professor, Elena Glasberg, who, through the use of deconstructionist literary theory, challenged the class’s notions of what constitutes literary merit. Professor Glasberg continually insisted that through a deconstructionist lens no art was better than any other art. She brought found poems from newspapers, gave obituaries linebreaks and argued that they were as valuable as anything in the canon. The world turned upside down for me. I had spent my time in high school separating the world of art into ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ and knew I wanted what I wrote to eventually make it to the ‘good’ pile; that’s why I had come to college.

A semester later in my first poetry-writing class, when asked by the professor what poetry was, I felt unsure. Could anything be poetry? Was it just the linebreaks that made something poetry, or was there something more? Despite my intellectual uncertainty, I maintained a gut-level belief that it was something more than formal elements which made
some words poetry, and some not. Although I could not have articulated it at the time, I still felt I knew a poem when I saw one, otherwise I would not have been able to write anything. I also maintained the belief that I could recognize a 'good' poem from a 'lesser' poem. I felt intuitively that at the end of a good poem the reader should feel both a lifting, like the heart or the stomach going light, and also a falling, a sinking caused by the simultaneous joy and heaviness of the world. Sheryl St. Germain, the professor of the poetry-writing course, offered us her definition. She stood at the green blackboard and wrote, “Singing Wisdom.” I read it without really taking it in; it seemed to me too romantic, and too succinct.

“A poem must do two things,” Sheryl said, “It must sing and it must be wise.” She continued, “Poetry must be like bread, like sustenance. It must sing and be beautiful, but it must also offer something which nourishes; that is the wisdom.” I became more interested, as this definition seemed to strike more of a chord with my own ideas of the purpose of poetry than the deconstructionist definition I had been given the previous semester. “If something is wise, but does not sing,” Sheryl said, “To me, it is not poetry.” She looked at us to see if we, at eighteen and nineteen, could fully understand what she meant. I’m not sure if any of us did, but she must have believed we could, or would eventually. She said, “If it sings, but offers no wisdom, that is also not poetry.”

Although initially resistant to Professor St. Germain’s two-word encapsulation of something as vast and amorphous as poetry, it stuck. I found myself coming back to this idea of “Singing Wisdom.” It helped to ground me as I wrote my poems and became lost in what I wanted to say, and why I even wanted to say it. It served as a small light that could bring me through the tangle of words. As I wrote and read more poetry, the complexity of what at first
seemed like an oversimplification revealed itself. I found the poems I read, and classified as 'good,' all fulfilled both of Sheryl's requirements. I have since learned that the two, wisdom and singing, need one another. Most words which are wise—truly wise—do sing. And most words which are beautiful enough to sing, are also wise.

I came upon the second definition of poetry much later, and understood its meaning immediately, even gratefully, as when you learn the name of something you have spent a long time struggling to identify. The idea comes in a flash, easily out of someone else's mouth, or out of a book, and you see your muddled ideas clearly. In a literature course on American poetry from 1970 onward, the professor, Neal Bowers, lectured on the difference between the goals of realism and abstract expressionism. He stated the goals of realism as a desire for the artist to most accurately represent the world exactly as it is, and the goals of abstract expressionism to express how the artist feels about the world. He noted the shift in contemporary art, how it no longer tries to represent something we can all see and agree upon, but instead strives to express something about the artist.

Relating this desire to express rather than represent back to contemporary poetry, he said, "Poetry is the attempt to say the unspeakable, using words." I thought of myself pushing against the stanzas and the linebreaks of my own poems, saw myself crammed inside of the poems, spilling over the edges like a Pollock painting. "The trouble with poetry," Bowers said, "is that it means what it says, but it also means something more, something which is always inexpressible." The truth of this simple paradox, that in poetry words have the ability to express what is essentially beyond words, helped me understand how I had viewed poetry
for so many years. Just as a poem must be wise as well as beautiful, a poem must also say more than what is actually on the page.

In poetry, the sounds the words make hold as much importance as the meaning of the words; the long vowel sounds of the word ‘sorrow’ express as much sadness as the definition of the word. Images, sounds and scents created by the poem within the reader’s mind all work to take the poem beyond the actual words on the page. The reading of a poem should be experiential; the reader should feel that he or she has passed through something, not simply been told of it. It is this experience of reading the poem, the sounds of the words and the sensory world created, that allows poetry to realize the paradox, and say in words what is unspeakable. My experience as a writer and reader of poetry has shown that when this happens, the poem is almost always beautiful and it is undoubtedly wise.

It is my hope that the poems within this collection may meet the criteria I’ve laid for myself. I have brought together a range of subjects, from my experiences in Southern Africa to a family member’s drug addiction, in the hope that if I am able to write about these subjects skillfully enough they will be both beautiful and wise; that they will offer the reader something that may act as bread and sustain us in our own struggle to understand our own humanity. It is my hope that these poems are able to express something about the human condition larger than the words themselves; that I am able to communicate what is unspeakable.
Section I.
Poem on My Knees Scrubbing

narrow planks of old maple,
unwaxed hardwood scratched deep
from bed legs and dressers, waterstained
and faded from sunlit honey.

I'm on my knees with a bucket
and a rag, washing down winter
with lukewarm water and oil soap.

After five warm days the snow
came down again in big, wet chunks
and stuck to the streets and trees,
white piled heavy on green buds.

I don't know why today at five
I took all the rugs out to the porch
and shook them in the snow.

Flakes melted on my hands and the rugs,
as I shook dust into drifts. The whole city
swung between freezing and melting—
snowslush and rain, green grass and ice.

And just like that, I'm in the house,
grabbing a rag and filling the bucket,
down on my knees in the bedroom.

My hand guides a wet rag over floorboards,
browning water fills deep scratches black
and the old wood darkens and shines,
glossed like branches in rain until they dry.
The world will always do as it please. Snowstorms still come in April, even after my neighbors filled their yard with thin-petaled pansies.

I'm reminded again by the weather, by the shrill ring of a phone in the night. The dim strength of my love made restless in its uselessness, powerless as dust to buoy another.

I dip the rag into warm, murky water and on my knees, wipe with a dirty cloth every inch of the floor, hoping this motion will hold a world that is spinning.

At midnight the whole house is lit up and smells of pine. I know in two days the ground will thaw and bring itself back into my house piece by piece on the soles of my shoes. Dirt and dust floating in through open windows. I cannot refuse to keep them.
In Full Daylight

The dead have such cold hands and yours, sister, keep crawling out, held up before me, cupped.

Sister, please, the memory of it—you unbathed, barefoot, twitching on the chair in the kitchen.

It's not food you want, or the clothes I will give you. Today in the sunlight, you ask me for money.

Two hundred dollars. Enough, you say, just to get there. You say you will go this time. You promise.

Even the sun makes you cry now. You say you pull to the side of the road sometimes and just crumble.

Who would think junkies were so emotional, you laugh. At the table, gray body unstill, you want to tell me stories about staying up five days straight, about dark rooms and cracked-out niggers who held guns to your head. You tell me, Money, you know how easy it is to get money?

Eyes panicked, twitching at the shoulder, you start coughing, thick dark lumps spat into the toilet.

In the kitchen, in full daylight, you ask me to please just give you the fucking money.

And I do. With both of us knowing, with the sun coming in slant through the curtains,
with our hands touching,
I give you the money

because more than anything else,
I need you to leave right now.
Learning to Live Alone

The branches outside are bare, dark brown, dripping with water. I lie in bed quiet and look through the small sliver of second floor window. The limbs are wet twists, woven like lattice, dark against the soft gray sky. They are shining.

Yesterday was Sunday, and you were here. I looked out the same window as we slept and woke together and slept again. The early spring branches shone, backlit with common rain, tangled into patterns, thin at this height.

This morning I’m thankful for the rain, for the solitude of a house empty in daylight. I’m glad to lie here alone and look at spring starting itself with this rain. The slow peace of waking, alone or together, each morning stretched out before me, shining wet like chance.
What Our Souls Do When We are Drunk and Not Watching

My car must have driven itself last night because it took ten minutes this morning to remember where I'd been. Memory like a strobelight: flash then black, flash, flash, black. The soul acting without me—up dancing fast and alone, speaking unknown words to strangers. Strange how we fade from ourselves and return to see the still-life made on the table with light and glass, hear ourselves tell the woman next to us how much we admire Degas, remember exact names of grade school classmates. The drive home a smear of stoplights and yellow lines. The walk from car to my door unknown. What did I do in here last night without myself? A friend says she always remembers everything until she gets home, then it goes blank. She wakes up on the kitchen floor cold. Front door open all night, her keys hanging down from the lock. Clear morning light shows my car parked straight on the street, my clothes folded on the arm of a chair.
July in Iowa Before a Rainstorm

For days now the sky has wanted to rain, but couldn’t. It is washed out, dull blue,

pale with the leaden effort of trying. The days are charged, spent hot and still,

grass drying yellow from its roots. We expect the rain, can feel the drops

inside the breeze that stirs up in evening. At night we hear the wind shaking sycamore leaves

and swear it is the rain slowly starting. I lived once in a country where for months

no rain would come. Whole rivers dried to sand, sat empty and waited. We are

not used to such absence. We are not used to facing the unbroken blue of our sky every day.
Consider that You Came from Love

half-set light slant like late-August,
heat warming red-clay bricks all day.
We must know something of our past

and I choose the cornfield behind our house,
my mother alone in the kitchen crying,
my father’s truck packed careless, speeding

south, hot as failure all the way to Texas.
I choose what I can never know: her too thin
body filled tightly with me like a tree.

Consider the months that must pass, heavy,
misshapen. I think how many times she thought,
I can’t do this. I think how it was already happening.

In the field near our house I walk slow, low sun long
in the spray of mountain grass tassels—yellow, pale purple—
sky closing quick on the patch of pale light left above me.

Consider the years as they were at the beginning—
think how they passed slow, became worn as the wishes
between them. For years now the night sky rained luck

in old meteors, copper coins bright in still water.
All I can wish for is whatever will come, this field
in late summer, the night sky above me.
Lament

The fall sky drizzles soft, drops so small
they are a thousand beads rolling down
the windowpane, gathering light and water
into each other, collecting in solid streams
that fall heavy as answers down glass.

The night sky, bright at ten, is backlit—
white clouds glowing with pieces of rain.
I step out on the porch and look up.

Love, I don’t know what to do with your absence.
It feels as though I could drown in this mist.

For weeks night was so dark the drive home
from work felt like my car was underwater,
headlights shining out, searching the ocean floor.

But this rain is like day, a solid light pieced
from vapor and moon, like the single drone
made from a thousand raindrops hitting the surface
of a river where I sat at the stern of a canoe, years
before I met you, listening to the unbroken buzz
of so many rainbeads sent out across the river.
I was soaked, unaware in the softness of the rain.

It is so quiet in this house tonight with the rain.
Even in sleep you were never this still.
I wake up sometimes afraid I’ve gone deaf.
Your absence like a gradual loss of senses—
the heart dulling into countless beads that scatter.
My Mother the Weather Queen

Great, she says, My day off and look at it. Rain is coming down slow and thin on the driveway, on the windows, on the green lawn—pacing itself—obvious it will last all day. All week it's been nice, she says. The sky is a towel, grey and heavy, wringing itself slowly over our house. She is in the kitchen, the light on at noon, standing, stirring sugar into coffee. Like it knew I was off today.

She believes this. Believes one washed car can begin a rainstorm. Six seedling tomatoes staked along our fence brought drought to the state. Believes my sister's birth caused the '71 heatwave where she spent the summer in a second story apartment, sweat collecting in the small of her back, beaded on her lip. Believes my birth made the blizzard, 21 inches of snow blowing white like wind across the highway.

Maybe she's right. Maybe the weather is out to get her, out to spoil her days off, her clean car, her trip to my grandmother's. Today she paces the dim house with her dustrag, running it over the hutch and the end tables, moving the pictures and placing them back. Yuck, she says to the cats, look at it out there. Maybe it would be too hard to believe the world did not register our actions at all.
Breaking Down a Boat

I woke up first to the sunlight bright and clear on the walls of my room, sleep broken by a grinding buzz, thuds echoing outside.

All day my neighbor is in the back parking lot with a chainsaw and sledgehammer tearing green and yellow fiberglass into small pieces.

In the sunlight he stands over the bow, hammer raised above his head and brought down. Crack, splintering the boat, opening it where it once slapped the white crest of a wave, buoyant. Through the blinds I watch his arms and legs, watch how his whole body is needed in destruction.

I think of the night I saw the back of his truck full of deer heads, glassy-milk eyes shining, strained neck tendons severed at clean angles. Every eye was open, staring from the place in the field where it paused, heard the snap of branches and leapt, white tail raised, useless against the shot.

It is slow work, destruction. He carries it out all day, breaking the boat into fragments as if unable to stop, and I cannot stop watching him, cannot stop seeing the boat whole, floating alone, yellow and green on sunlit water.
From Upstate New York, Late January

The card arrives late, purple with yellow stars and moons, wishing me a birthday that is out of this world. The note inside says it was twenty-four below in the morning. *I have not been out of my house since New Year’s Day, Too Cold.* I see her in the brown recliner near the second floor window, staring at the headlights of cars, snow still heavy on their hoods and roofs as they make their slow way along the two black lines carved by the plow. I think of my other grandma in Illinois, stuck inside her house for weeks at a time because of the cold or the snow or the pain in her back. She spends the days on the plaid couch she calls *a davenport* with the TV on. The weak light of January comes through the blind slats at seven and is gone again by five. Her sisters come by some mornings before work. They sit in the kitchen with a cup of coffee, complaining about their no-good kids, their jobs, their husbands and she closes the door on the cold draft and the quiet behind them. I think of an old man I knew in a village. He spent everyday in a three-piece suit stretched out under a mango tree reading the bible in his own language. It was his fourth time through the thin pages. Smiling he told me, “I’m ready.”
Arriving

For months people had been saying, *What's that place you're going again?* And you tell them slow, *Ha-rar-ee.* When there's still no flicker, you say, *The capital city of Zimbabwe.* If they're old you say, *It used to be Rhodesia.*


When you want them to envy you, you say: It's bordered to the east by the thin sliver of Mozambique, next to the Indian Ocean. Aquamarine waves break on untouched white sand: they say, *It's summer there now, isn't it?* Yes, you say.

Whenever your mother is around for this talk, she looks down at the ground, says, *I don't want her to go.* She keeps bringing antiseptic creams home from the hospital where she works.

In the basement you fill two huge black suitcases with all the things you think you need—double A batteries, shampoo, a garlic press, fine point pens, tampons, matchbox cars (as gifts for children). You keep going to the store for more things.

When you change planes in London, to your surprise, the plane is full. But not with blacks. Next to you, the Indian family has a wedding to attend, a few others are on holiday. Some are in suits, but the rest—so many—you're not sure.

You look at glossed pictures of the city whose name you later learn, you have pronounced wrong—off slightly from the way it should roll. The plane descends and the neat rows of city are dwarfed by the green and brown land that surrounds it.
Waking Alone to the Rain

Outside my window, car tires in old rain are louder than rain. I wake slow this morning, wake to gray, wake hungover, wake startled by the rush of wet wheels on the street below.

What you said makes sense, murmured words: distance, time. But waking this morning, I wanted you here, I wanted you sleeping, wanted you curled and turned to one side, eyes closed, breathing.

The day ahead lies measured in teacups, the sun setting hours too early. If I could just see the skin of your cheeks flushed against the pillow, touch my lips to your hand and not wake you.

Today there is nothing to do about the rain, or the morning. There is nothing to do about most things, even what we want right now gets shaped later into what we thought we needed.

Maybe, love, if the cold span of our lives were more like birds', not bright parrots squawking in palms, but mallards or geese that know when to move south, know each year where to return.

Maybe then it would make sense, what I wanted this morning, but it always becomes too long, the dark distance across like a nameless country, the length of it flown blind, honking.
Cultivation

You have to start slow,  
nothing but bare,  
black earth.

Kneeling, place seeds  
facedown, cover  
with firm, packed soil.

Evenings, go out and stare  
at the empty ground.  
Water when anxious.

It may be weeks,  
years before anything  
starts to surface.

Even from under earth  
uncurling stems  
grow toward light.
Section

II.
Magic and Other Explanations

_Urombo uroyi; hahuudzwi munhu._
_Poverty is like witchcraft; it is not talked about._

People say those in the north, their _muti_ is strong. They say, be careful, those ones, they live in mountains with peaks made of balanced boulders—large stones perched on top of small. They say there are parts there where the rain has never stopped. They say, those people, they know how to throw the lightning.

In your bedroom at night you are throwing holy water to cracked and faded concrete walls, dipping a branch from a _msasa_ tree into a bucket and tossing drops off the leaves onto the walls. They splatter with a crack as they drench your room. When your mother died you saw her jerk, she grabbed at her throat and fought it. You have been given this water to resist, but the walls of your room don’t reach to the ceiling. Next to your father your stepmother sleeps as warm as a secret.

They say, that woman who lives there, she is a witch. She doesn’t sleep, nor does she grow old. Look, they say, see how she watches your hands, see how the plants in her garden keep dying—the mealie stalks dried and yellow, not even a guava tree growing.

Clouds hung dark to the west, gathered against blue. You wound slowly up Inyangani Mountain, feet tracing a thin path worn by the arched steps of thousands of bare feet. The peak kept eluding you. Those who climbed here first knew a mountain is not hiked straight up. They came for a reason. They knew the summit because the sky always fought it, hiding it in clouds, running cold rain down its slopes. At the top, wind blew fierce, wanting you off. When you looked back the crest was already gone.

People say, Inyangani, no way, I would not go near it. Too many are lost, the mountain is fickle. Look, they say, watch how it hides, even baboons won’t live there. From the top, they say, you can see to the ocean. From the top, you can learn to throw lightning.
From a Payphone

Across seven time zones
I am telling my mother
about the hyacinths, about the sun
bright everyday, about scrubbing
my clothes clean in a tub in the yard.

I know she sits with the light on
in the kitchen. There is her spoon
and a mug, the cats crying for milk,
weaving between her legs at the table,
sun coating her windows blue,
then slowly yellow.

Empty buses shift gears, roll past.
I press my hand raw with washing
over my ear in the darkness.
*The Anderson’s got a new roof.*
*My back tire, the left one, is leaking.*
I strain above fuzz and buses to hear.

I want to tell her about the stares
and shouts, the people forever asking
for money and miracles.

*It’s eighty here everyday,* I say,
*just the way you like it.*

I walk the dirt road back to my house,
quarter moon shining flawless—
bright and far.
After the Flood in Mozambique

All night we traveled towards the coast, the bus so full we rode standing, unable to move, bags crowded, heavy at our feet.

At times the road is dirt, one lane curving for miles off flood ravaged tar—whole stretches of blacktop washed like topsoil into the ocean. We must stop for each car barreling north, pull to the side and wait for their headlights to pass.

Outside the bus the darkness is whole, drawn like curtains, the long arms of the jungle grown up around us.

We are tired of standing. The men are drunk, pissing themselves in warm waves that slide on the floorboards, back and forward. The women sleep standing with bright-eyed babies silent for hours strapped like luggage onto their backs.

No story can contain the way the ocean rose up, salty and humid. You can never be told how the water took the bridges, the trees and the people screaming with it. From the bus we see only small fires, orange, useless as lightning against blackness, fires of men who sit alone all night guarding a single backhoe for a road it will take decades to rebuild. We must accept
that this land is beyond us, so dark and alive,
strwn with old tanks, covered like landmines
with the lives we will never live through.
For the Green Hills

This is what we like he said to bright blue and pink houses,
to people sitting under the shade of thick mango trees.
This is what we like he said of hot sun and green hills,
to black goats and white roosters running around the streets free.

This is what we like he said to rows of old women selling
mealies and onions, oranges, tomatoes and bananas at their stands.
This is what we like he said to loud groups of lean men
gathered at storefronts passing brown bottles between hands.

This is what we like he said to kids kicking a plastic-bag ball
in the streets, to radios and t.v.s that boom from the open doors
of each of the houses. This is what we like he said of the laughter
of anyone and the sharp crying of babies. This is what we like
he said of the heat. After all these years the township
is our home, and now that we can, we will never leave.
Baobab grows wide where nothing grows tall.
Grows trunk-fat, gray elephant, a thousand years thick.

First tree of the world, it prayed for more height
when it learned of the palm, begged sweet fruits
like the fig, wanted blossoms of flame.
Was plucked by the devil to silence its cries,

thrown back into the ground, left to grow
upside down. With roots for its branches

and branches for roots, baobab grew deep, spreading
leaves under the earth. When the rains came

months later the leaves sucked each raindrop
from the soil like air. The trunk filled with water,

and each year it grew wide. No leaves crowned
the roots that dried in the sun, no fruit on the stems,

no blossoms on branches. Rain after rain, it grew
broad. Alone through dry months when savannah

grass died, in sand when the dirt was burned dry,
full of the drops of a thousand rainfalls, baobab drank

the cool water of its trunk and began to grow tall.
The Years it Might Take to Understand

for Jeff in Mozambique

You live in a town named for snakes and dysentery. Manyoka.
The word is the same for both.

It is months before you learn this, months more before you find them white, writhing in your softened stool.

You begin to see how names hold meaning here. The water you drink is named for rain. Mvura. Cold drops that break from the sky after months of parched silence. From red earth you pump clear water, carry it home to boil.

You've come here to help, to teach science to rows of brown faces, to break life into the smallest particle.

But it is not what you thought, not the place or the students. Green hills grow up both sides of the only tarred road and each night the students disappear into the dip of the hills, pale smoke plumes rising like streetlights from the hearth of their homes.

Evenings you go back to your house and wait out the darkness. It is months before you stop flicking your finger over the useless plastic of light switch, almost a year before your hand stops turning the empty spigot. Your house is a shell
of the old days, dense and decaying,
the rooms full each night of white ghosts
sobbing in sad, sad Portuguese.

The people of the town call your house *mushonga*.
Medicine. Poison. The word is the same for both.
Nocturne

_Harare, Zimbabwe_

Each night speaks through the throb of a drum.
Three-four time beat into circles
by the blistered underside of mourning hands—
beat rich, beat sorrow, beat hollow—
the steady rhythm needed to dance
three nights to tire and put this grief to rest.

Rattles shake fast in empty night, dancers hop
one foot to another, a circle of bodies gathered
to move loss. Women singing, "_Amaiwei, amaiwei_"
above drum, raise cupped palms to lips, ululate—
a whistle rising shrill, a pierced plea for the dead
that calls, "_Please, _" and cries for spirits to go home.

From my bed I can hear this whole country wailing.
The dark city echoes the hushed beat of sorrow,
bass rhythm hitting steel-glass walls, ache bounced
back and sent up hot like a flare. Who here has ever
slept peaceful? Who here has not heard how the nights
boom and reveal the sheer size of the dead?
Thieves

I. They came from the space
between streetlights. I was alone.

Three boys asking for coins
and I refused them. They fought me
to the ground with fists, not knives.
I clutched my bag to my chest,
fell on my back screaming.
I screamed and clung until
it was not worth it. They ran
empty-handed, back into the night.

II. That I have been lucky is clear
by the strong leather of my shoes,
the soft skin on my hands, the pale
shade of my face and arms burning
here in the sun. Luck is in my voice—
flat and nasal—saying one word over
and over on the street when I walk.
Saying wealth, good food, saying jobs,
saying bitch, saying *foreigner*,
saying I am someone who can leave.

III. The streets were crowded at mid-day,
too full even to see. Behind me
a man worked open the zipper
of the bag on my back as we walked.
He matched my footsteps, slid the teeth
apart, and reached inside. No one tried
to stop him. At the stoplight, I turned, saw him drop back into the legs
of the crowd—hands closed around
my camera, my bag left hanging open.

IV. People say the thieves in Zimbabwe
are no good. If you want to see thieves,
they say, you must go to Johannesburg.
There they take the clothes from
your body in broad daylight, you won’t
even feel it. They say the thieves here
are still learning. They tell me only
a few years ago we did not have
such things. We are no good, they
say, because we must do it to live.

V. Walking at night where we should not
have been you say, pull your hat down,
please cover your face. Ndino nemhanza
yakanaka, you say to me, kind and afraid.

*Good fortune attracts misdeeds*, and mine,
is too bright in this town. We steal past
dark houses. Alone, you could walk these
streets easily. Misfortune respects beggars
you say; stay away from the streetlamps,
put your head down, please cover your face.

VI. In line at the counter a man drops
a silver coin on the ground near
my feet. I bend down to retrieve
the coin and return it. The trick
is familiar to everyone but me.
Behind the cash register, the woman

says nothing as the man slides his hand
to the open pocket of my jacket.

I stand, coin in palm, with the eyes of
the others telling me I have fortune to spare.
Waiting

We arrived in *Maxixe* in the middle of night. I felt the sea inside the air as we stepped off the bus. There was nothing to do but wait.

At sunrise we would take a boat across the lagoon to *Inhambane* and spend a week at the coast. We waited for morning at a table outside a hotel I thought was shut down. The hotel was silent with absence. The electricity was out; the toilets used plastic buckets of dark water to flush.

The night was cool and would not end. I put my head down on my bag and slept while you drank filtered coffee brought by a white-clothed waiter who appeared from nowhere. When the sun rose the town filled with people. We crossed the lagoon in a boat so crowded it was barely afloat.

Now, a week later, we are just trying to get home. When a bus pulls in at the rank, we run with the crowd, press ourselves against the doors with the others and offer money the drivers refuse. We spend the hours between buses at the side of the road in the sun, waving at each car that passes. The others have gone home.

When one woman left she told us, *Today there is nothing. Me, I will try again tomorrow.* She picked her bags from the ground and walked east without looking back.

The sun dips low, coats the town with orange light and shadow. A chill blows in with the sea air and we keep waving our arms at cars that do not slow.

After all these months here we should know it does not matter what day we get home. People here are used to waiting. We spend
whole weeks on our porch watching the only
tarred road, waiting for people who never arrive.
We try to learn to stop planning, to stop waiting.

When the sky is dark we give up and walk
back to the hotel. We open two beers, tell
the waiter we're looking for a ride north.

A month from now we will get on a plane
and step off in midwest February. Each month
here the news from home becomes farther.

I cannot write back anymore. *Today I sat outside
and looked at the sky. Today after six months
of drought the rains came. The drops broke like glass*

*on dry red earth*. We drink all night at the table.
Tomorrow we will try again, but now, in the cool
night, the stars are brighter than streetlamps above us.
The Hard Truth About Cultural Exchange

Bike-ass. All of us had it. Nine miles every morning to university on ten-speed Mountain Rangers bought a Zimbabwean version of Sam's Club. Nine miles again in evening, uphill this time, past women at umbrella-covered tables selling hard candies, single cigarettes, tomatoes stacked in red pyramids. Sleeping children strapped like luggage on their backs. We rode past men in unbuttoned overalls embroidered with thick company initials, N R Z, P V T. Past houses we saw only as 10 foot brick walls lined with broken glass. There were sixteen of us. White mostly, in our twenties. We did not speak the language. Our bikes were all breaking from potholes.

There's Jeremy in the barbershop asking for scissors. Scissors? the woman asks, her voice a hollow cavern. The place goes dead. Scissors. She puts down her clippers. Opens all the drawers, pulls out a silver pair, blades rusted closed.

And Jennifer always crying when the kids come dirty, disfigured, asking for money. Madam, they cry, and turn to her, Madam hungry. At seven, they could read guilt like a stop sign. She would give them every green American dollar she had, take them to the bakery and put brown-crusted white loaves in their hands, but cry still because she knew it would never do any good.

What did they expect of us? What did we expect of ourselves? We could leave, would leave, but before then there was this matter of months, this matter of resignation, the matter of sore asses and broken bikes. The whole country so small, framed with spare trees that flatten like pavement, every lightpost topped with the president's grim face.
I.

I still add eight hours
each time I look at a clock,
and think of the city there, dark
when the light is here—
the streets all deserted except Takawira,
where people sit all night
huddled near blanketed fruit stands
waiting for a bus to come,
getting up to wave at the headlights
of a car that does not slow.

You told me witches ride
the backs of hyenas through the fields
of your country at night—
nejere famba namaro—
the hyena moving quickly
through dried grasses, across parched
red dirt, the perched witch
making evil under a moonless sky.

One night in Hwange,
I saw a hyena slink past
my headlights into dark fields,
it's back humped, asymmetrical,
empty.
II.

In the street last night,  
the moon hung huge,  
full and orange above the pavement.  
For a few hours it was so heavy  
it was almost tangible, so full  
it dripped onto the blacktop,  
clumps of cream cars ran over,  
the moon's glowing surface lodged  
between the treads of their tires.  
Hours later the moon sat silver,  
small, untouchable above the trees.
III.

When it’s morning there, hyenas
run through the darkness here,
driven by the cracking whip
of a witch I will never see.
When the moon here hangs
low between telephone poles,
you walk the streets of your city,
red dust blowing onto black legs—
a thin sliver of the moon
transparent in the day sky.
Mbira

The first song came from inside of a rock. The song was sweet and tinny and flowed from the rock like water. People gathered to hear. They said the song was like rivergrass, the way it sways and waves in streams.

People said the song was like raindrops, like the music made as each drop strikes the surface of the river. People said the song was like heaven, like mermaids, like the sound that came from inside their own heart.

They left their crops in the fields, their cows in the kraal. They sat near the rock and waited for the sound. Sometimes it did not come for weeks. They sat looking at the silent stone. Other times it played for days without rest.

When the rock sang the song that was water, the people stood and they danced. They danced and sang all night until they were tired. Light soft in the east, they lied down by the rock to sleep, and when they woke it was quiet.

Months passed and word of the singing stone spread to the villages nearby. Many came miles, barefoot through thorn, up hills, and across rivers because they were told the song of the stone could bring them cool rain.

The land in the village of the singing stone was green. There was grass for the cattle, rain for beans, and maize and sweet potatoes. Trees grew tall and hung heavy with fruit, and water flowed clear in the river all year.

One day, when there were few people around, a voice spoke from inside of the rock. The voice was low, like the sound of the inside of the earth. The voice said, Vana, it is now your turn to play the songs for me. Do not worry, I will teach you.
The deep voice from inside of the rock told the people they must take iron rods and forge them in the flame of a furnace. They must strike the iron when it glows red hot and shape each rod into a key.

Over the flame of their furnace, the men pounded iron rods with a rock. Black smoke and clanging rose unbroken from the village, and each rod was shaped in the fire so when struck, each one sounded in a different note.

From inside of the rock the voice listened to the sound made by each one of the keys, and when the tone was wrong he sent from the stone an echo of sound which the people matched to the ringing of each of their keys.

When the keys were completed and they lay near the stone, the voice told the people to place the keys in three rows from low sound to high and fasten them tight with a bridge across a smoothed plank of mukwa wood.

When this too they had done the voice said there was one last thing, they must burn a hole on the bottom of one side. With the red end of an iron rod they burned the hole through, and the voice told them, *Now you must play.*

A man who had done much of the forging took the instrument in his hands and began to strike at the keys with the tips of his thumbs. The others came close to see and hear, but the sound that came from the keys was just noise.

For hours the people passed the instrument from one to another, and they each tried to play the songs they had heard that sounded like water. The voice in the rock told them to leave the keys at the stone and return home.
Frustrated, they walked back to their houses, ate dinner without talking and went quickly to bed. During his sleep, one man dreamt of a song. He saw his thumbs on the keys, and heard each sweet note played in the night air.

He woke before sunrise and went to the stone. Placing his small finger through the newly burned hole, he held the instrument cupped in both hands as he'd seen in his dream. He ran his thumbs light over each of the keys.

Sitting on the stone, he closed his eyes as he played and let the notes from his dream come into his thumbs. The song was the soft sound of rain as it drips from tree branches. Lost, he played unaware of the world for hours.

He didn’t notice how the sun rose and was warm on his face. The notes from his dream kept coming, key after key, and he didn’t feel it when his thumbs blistered and bled. He didn’t even see the crowd gathered to hear.

He played in a trance and the song circled and grew. He mixed low notes with high and came back to the low. He sang while he played, and the words told this tale, the story of mbira, and how it first came from inside of a rock.
Section

III.
Trainwreck

I.
Trainwreck

I am tired of hearing
how lucky we are
that you lived.

In the waiting room,
after they’ve been to see you,
see your face asymmetrical,
see the left side darker,
black and midnight blue
against gray-green skin,
they all say it was the brush—
that brush had grown up along the tracks,
and you couldn’t see train.

With you in ICU,
in bed with tubes—
moving blood in, urine out,
the beep of painkiller every six minutes,
I watch the staples, metal tracks
that grow across both eyebrows
and up into your hair.

That first night
they had you so full of morphine
I felt it in your legs and hands—
skin puffed with sedative tingled
as I touched you, as though
my own limbs had fallen asleep.

But at home,
where I can’t hear your voice sloppy
with Vicodin and loud with pain,
I remember everything you’ve ruined—

Christmases and mom
thin, nervous in bed at night
always waiting for another call
from you or the police.
You did it all deliberately,
every man you've dated
since seventeen
drinks and hits—
you left the ones that didn’t.

I believe them when they come
from your room shaking their heads,
such a pretty girl, talking about the brush.
I believe you didn’t see this train,
but it doesn’t matter
because you saw all the others,
and waited for them on the tracks.
II.
I Like to Believe the Cars of the Train that Hit You Were Full of Horses—

two or four to a car,
and when engine met truck
it was enough to jerk the cars backwards—
throw flank and hoof together.
You and the train lay still, spent
as the horses reared up,
thrashed enough against metal walls
to bust steel box open—
manes and tails red-brown, white, and black
streaming from every car
a full mile down the track.
III.
Blessings

*for Jamie, born 1997*

You are the child that should not have been born, but were.

Three days old. The body you grew in thrown through glass, into the back of a pickup truck. Struck like lightning, like disaster, flung from the driver’s seat into the truckbed by the impossible meeting of automobile and locomotive.

We are told all things happen for a reason, told quietly, in consolation, about greater plans, reasons that reveal themselves decades later when we trace the course of our lives back to a single moment, back to a sunlit day when we got in a car and headed south, back to a day when we got on a plane heading west, back to a day where now we are sure the choice we made was wrong.

After four days of sewing what could be fixed, after taking the rest out, after four days of morphine and codeine, the doctors thought to look for you and found you there, a week old, still growing inside the broken body you were given.

Through hot summer you grew and grew, pressing your resolve against your mother’s broken hip. There was talk of brain damage, talk that an accident and a baby would surely make her turn her life around. There was talk of you being a miracle.
IV.
Accident Sight

The headlights of our cars shine circles
like searchlights on a train,
boxcar after boxcar, torso-stilled
between gates and flashing red lights.

I take Pearl Street around,
follow the still body of the train,
look for where the track curves away
and I can take the crossroad home.

Just before the curve I see the engine
black steel massive and silent.
Its light shines still and straight
like a searchlight, lights a path
down the track in the darkness.
Still attached to the grill is an old Plymouth
crumpled and empty—
pale-green foil and cracked glass.

What didn’t yield shattered.

Sister, I never saw your truck joined
with the engine of the train,
only detached at the junkyard,
crumpled and beaten.

Tonight, while you’re at home
still waiting for pins to come out,
scars to lighten,
I circle again and again
past this car and train.
With my windows open to the cold,
I listen for the whistle and churn,
but hear only crickets—
I slow down to see what it looks like
when metal and metal meet.
There is a traintrack of days you follow
like a steel black steam engine
backwards.

Each day is a tie, wooden, rotting
under the weight of boxcars
and the hazardous cargo they carry.
Each day is a tie held still by gray rocks.

They always go back rigid
straight to the horizon
to the place at the crossing
where your truck arrived
at the same time as the train.

After that nothing ever happened again.

After that everything happened
in a straight line from one vanishing point.

There is a traintrack of days we all follow,
you, mom, dad, and me.
Each day is a tie warmed by the sun,
leaking tar, dripping and shining.
Each day is a tie locked in by straight steel rails.
Section

IV.
Sometimes a Woman

gets in a car and drives two miles south to the next bar. Sometimes she leaves a turquoise house empty, light coming through west windows onto nothing. Sometimes a woman leaves a house on a Thursday at noon, leaves spoons in a drawer, framed pictures along the hallway, leaves the kid and the dog waiting like boxes in the bedroom.

Sometimes a woman leaves with bags, black plastic stuffed round and tied yellow. Sometimes she leaves without shoes.

Sometimes a woman comes back with bright bruises, comes back hungry, fingers burnt like old matchsticks.

Sometimes she comes back after a year, pulls her lips down to the gumline, and says, *This is from one year of sucking on crackpipes.* Sometimes a woman comes back on a Tuesday, eyes red, comes back barefoot and asks for her daughter. Sometimes a woman comes back in the night, hands shaking, comes back humble, finds nothing and is sorry.

Sometimes a woman walks to the corner, remembers her wallet and turns back. Sometimes the woman just walks, front door open in December.
Guided Tour, Elgin

I drive you the few blocks to the gas station
to buy some smokes and you point out the houses—that one there and the one across from it,

you say, and point to a white two-story,
paint-peeled and quiet, blue light from the t.v.
on drawn curtains. That one too, you say

to a yellow cape-cod with trimmed shrubs,
a child’s bike left on its side near the driveway.
*One time*, you say, quiet like a kid telling secrets,

*I stayed there three days without sleeping.*
*A thousand dollars like that*, you say and it’s hard
not to hear hunger. This town is a memory burned

into you by the flame of a cheap lighter, riddled
with risk that sits quiet, ready like knuckles
rapping the worn wood of old doors. I will forget

exact houses, will remember there were more
than I thought. I will remember from the outside
it is always impossible to guess. But for you,

the whole town is a map, each block charted
with Xs, dotted lines that lead from one dark room
to the next. Each day in this town is a choice,

plotted two ways, drawn like a prayer in pencil,
the houses on both sides of the street set, singing like traps.
Mouthing

How can you not speak
what is already there?
Not speak the verbs and nouns
written on the backs of your teeth,
printed plain on the groove of your tongue?
How, when across from you
I am always wrestling words around feelings
that are not yet classified,
feelings that are like days driving
through fields full of plants I can only touch
and smell and try to describe.
To just say yes or no, or I’m leaving—
whisper it into the still walls of our room
and let the plaster slowly leak
each night after you are gone,
syllables, breathing and open.
The Call

Take my sister for example, the oldest
with deep green eyes and a voice hard,
but full sometimes of what I hear as change

but never is. She can fool me every time.
Nights I sit upright, crane my ear
to the kitchen and listen for ringing. Trill,

Some people will come to no good.
This is something that registers low
in the gut, like being conned,

a guy in town lying to my face
about hard luck, money for a bus
and a job in town. I stand there thinking
sucker to myself as I dig for coins.

Late Sunday when the call comes shrill
I almost don’t answer. What is there to say
anymore? My mom’s voice thick with bad news:

a failed drug test, broken probation,
my sister back in jail, and still we talk,
Mom and I, our heads shaking in confusion
like it’s a surprise after all these years,

like we still believe this thin offering
of hope, worn as nickels, given unasked
again and again will ever do anything to help.
Beggars

Patricia writes to ask for money,
one hundred and fifty dollars.

Please *sha*, she says, please *my friend*,
we are dying here with this old man.

*Sebuku handiende, tinoshaya.*
The old man who will not go—

that’s what we call him now, Mugabe,
our president for life. But *sha* it’s us here

who are dying. There’s no food
left in the stores. We wait hours in line

for one loaf of bread, and when it runs
out we are sent away with nothing.

Send cash, please *sha*, if you can,
because banks here are no longer working.

*Sha*, she says, you should see us here
by the gardens now. You would cry.

We sit all day with our curios piled
on the tables and ground like garbage.

Who would want a limestone hippo now?
We go days, weeks with no one buying.

This is not a country to visit anymore.
Yesterday *sha*, I sat on a stool near my stand

and took all the necklaces I’d made apart.
I cut the strings and poured the beads back

into a bowl. I mixed cold balls of malachite,
dark tubes of hematite, and orange lucky bean

seeds with my hands, just to have
something to do. I restrung them all *sha*,


bead by bead into new patterns—black, black, white, then two blacks again until the middle

where I hung down the polished green heart.
Please sha, if you can find me some buyers

I will make them nice things—necklaces or bracelets,
I will string them from any stones that they like.
Rock Bottom

First the cable and phone, then electricity, and in the last few months they shut off the heat. You fading like sundown, off the grid.

I never want to be told what you did in there those cold, black months when you covered all the windows of the house with blankets.

I never want to know the way the days passed for you then, one solid night, unmarked by the rise and set of the sun, you focused on a flame.

When you lost the house you piled what was left in a mound in dad's garage—a pyramid of black garbage bags, mattresses and water-stained boxes.

People told us this was it, maybe you had finally hit bottom. I imagined you there, underwater, breathing bubbles on the black oceanfloor, silent.

I knew you were capable of so much more, I knew you could dig yourself under the floor, dig all the way to the hot core of the earth.

What did you care about houses anymore? So what, you said, you left your things and your kid with us and walked out the door.

Sometimes the bottom is hard to find, the floor keeps opening like a trap door, the bottom lined with fine dirt, not rocks.

Once, after a few weeks clean, you told me what you missed most was not the high, but how the rest of the world drops away.

The bills came—electric, mortgage, gas—Fuck-it. I just threw them in the trash. All you need is more. That's it. That's all.
Like swimming, the desire to go under, to put your whole body and your head down deep, to see how long you can stay there.
So the Wind Won’t Blow it Away

How easily it comes back

the night
the porch
the thin paper in my hands.

The town empty

shutdown
I’m on the stoop looking at nothing
a few cars with gaps
silences between them. The stars

in the usual places. The cigarette between my fingers
burning down hot like embers.

I could go years without this, but it would always be there

the porch
the night
how easily my hands remember
how easily my lungs breathe in and out.

Last night on the porch

I watched nothing. I put a cigarette
to my lips and lit it. It was that easy.

This morning I woke to the wind
slamming the door shut
bam sucking it back open

papers blown to the floor and I would not get up to stop it.

This is how the wind works
unseen
like want like all of the things we have done
and stopped all the people
we have loved tight like fists loved hard
in low whistles loved fierce and stopped
all the bits of what we want blow unseen
disguised as the morning wind
only the papers flying like leaves to the floor
only the shake and strike the peony outside
    beaten to the ground pink petals scattered
the newly opened oak old and full
    waving languid like water.

(Title taken from Richard Brautigan's novel, So the Wind Won't Blow it All Away)
Spring Thoughts

She thinks of how the past pulls at the present, holds fast to her limbs, stretches her arms and legs from her body at odd angles, quartered like a compass in all directions, sockets strained by the tug of old choices.

Her head is so crowded these days with the pieces of old hands and faces. She thinks of their use—what they could place even now in the cup of their palm and carry safely across a spring-flooded creek raging with downed tree limbs. She thinks what they could still hold in the light of their tongue and say from the banks across three years or a lifetime.

She wants someone to tell her what to do with all of these pieces—the bits of the finished fixed on the swollen bank that keep crawling out to dry in the sun.

How anyone ever knows when what an open hand brings or a face says in the sparkle of an afternoon is enough.

The yellowed countryside is cross-hatched with creekbeds, distended from spring thaw and pooling still water onto dead cornfields. It is hard for her sometimes to believe that anyone could ever fish from this land something to hold up to the light and say, This is all I will ever need.
Contemplation at the End of Summer

A rubber mallet striking one silver key.
D. A xylophone in an empty auditorium.

That is how he touched her, shaking.
His hand warm, careful on her back,

ringing like a hymn into rows of vacant seats.
D, down her spine in a quiet bedroom,

sun slanted bright June, the morning over.
Now tell me, what happens if he is a painter,

if a brush replaces rubber mallet,
if her body no longer sounds in tones,

but draws itself from his hands, burgundy
and green on the blankets, rough shapes

printed in patterns of their movement.
Hands sure and quick,

he touches her like a landscape,
places trees with a single upstroke.

Don’t let this fool you. The woman
always watches these men and their hands.

Watches with lids half-closed in fever,
and she asks herself alone on paper:

What happens to the sound and the color
what happens to her body without it.
Leonid Sonnet for Chaz on Her Wedding

Last night the dark sky threw sparks on the lawn.
I watched from the cold hood of a car
as above me the sky flashed with quick streaks:

the stars lit themselves on fire
and jumped, ablaze, into the ebony night.

From this distance they fell soundless
across the sky. I wished the bright streaks
would signal with crackle, like lighting a fuse,
the slow whistle of descending arc, then: boom.

When I looked away there was nothing
to reveal their gorgeous leap.

Afternoons when I call, your voice is calm,
the past quiet, the future crouched waiting
raining stars that burst, invisible against the day sky.
Too Late

I.

Todd writes about arriving years ago at a crossing just as the last four boxcars slid past.

The backside lights where a caboose should be were red circles heading west.

After Kate died he said he knew that was it; he would never be able to do it.

Here the rain has not stopped for days; small drops ceaseless on panes, a solid sheet rolling over the box of this house.

The leaves dropped still green last week after a hard frost, and now with the rain the whole town sits uncovered, wet as thin branches.

I have never wanted to die, even days when it seemed maybe I should have.

But Todd, he spent years thinking of his '67 Mustang, top-down over a cliff, the old green F-150 into the front of a diesel engine.

II.

Five years ago Kate set a bottle on the floor in her room. She sat down next to it and swallowed each aspirin like green leaves, one by one.

Swimming black like fog in and out, she touched her fingers to the phone, called her sister and told her she'd made a mistake.

Todd called on a Tuesday to tell this story to me. He said, Bad news buddy, real bad news.

For years Kate’s sister dreamed of Kate’s call, heard her voice muddy and panicked, hungry for life.

She dreamed of everything she did and did not do. She dreamed of her own legs as they pushed on pavement. She dreamed of arriving at Kate’s door too late.
III.

With yesterday’s rain still gathered in pools on the blacktop, cold drops fill what is already full. 

I write Todd back, tell him how the town feels like it has already drowned, like we live underwater, our houses and streets lining the floor of the ocean. I tell him how in July, when we needed it, there was not a drop. Imagine, I say, if it were you that went first.

Imagine how you would want the others to live. In a few more weeks, I write, this rain will be snow; I tell him, because we have to, somehow we will endure.
You Needed It Like

a). a person dangling from a helicopter, limp
   at the long thin end of a rope, the mountain
   below you smoke-covered, on fire

b). an empty glass at the edge of a table,
   sun hit in the afternoon, begging the light
   to please, love, please bring it some water

c). a jet black crow in an intersection pecking
   the torn foil of a food wrapper, darting down
   with spread wings in the spaces between cars

d). a racehorse. a parasite. a battalion of blind bats
   rising from a tree or a cave, swooping soundless
   toward the places in night where holy, they feed

e). the way the dark rooms of your house need a chance
   at the daylight, at new air fresh from the stains
   of your lungs always exhaling their fatal exhaust
Today, I walk home with my head turned down
from the wind, week-old snow frozen in itself,
chapped and dirty. I remember to look up, look
out at the streets and houses, look at the sky, pale blue
but bright against branches. Then I forget and drop down
again to feet and slush sidewalk. I’m sick of the cold, sick
of February, done with the sparse beauty of bare branches.
Mom called yesterday to tell me the judge let my sister
off house arrest. She called to remind me that its 3 months
next week that my sister’s been sober, called to tell me
the classes my sister goes to at night seem to be helping.
I feel glad, but afraid. There’s so much danger in hope.

I think three months out of three years. The tall trunks
of young pin oaks in the forest near my house grow straight
and thin up to the light. Monday’s snow knocked half of them
at angles, weak side weighted with snow until they snapped.
They lie at odd diagonals bent sharp, make zig-zags against
the thick straight trunks of old oaks. This is just part of it.

I know rivers need to flood; fields and forests are meant to burn.
I know each year snow and strong winds crack last year’s saplings,
and send them to the floor. I know spring always comes,

but it’s so hard sometimes to remember. A friend from the tropics
said his first year here he thought it was over, he thought,
why don’t people cut these dead trees down? People said wait

until spring, they told him green leaves come back to dead trunks,
but he was sure they were wrong. How can you trust a row
of daffodils in a snow-covered yard?