

2014

# System of ghosts

Lindsay Tigue  
*Iowa State University*

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**System of ghosts**

by

**Lindsay Tighe**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:  
Debra Marquart, Major Professor  
Mary Swander  
Brianna Burke  
Kimberly Zarecor

Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa  
2014

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the editors of the following journals, where these poems first appeared:

*Barnstorm*: “Linear Foreign Bodies”

*CutBank*: “We are a System of Ghosts II,” “We are a System of Ghosts III,” “We are a System of Ghosts IV”

*Indiana Review*: “Michigan Central Station Has Been Closed Since 1988”

*Passages North*: “Convergent Boundaries”

*Prairie Gold: An Anthology of the American Heartland*: “At Joe and Lonna’s Farm,” “The Center of the Earth is a Little Off Kilter,” “How to Disappear in Michigan,” “Huron”

*Prairie Schooner*: “Bliss”

*Puerto del Sol* (online): “Trajectory of Oranges”

*Rattle*: “New Year”

*All American cities began at the end of something:  
a trail, a landing along a river or lake, a railroad.*

– *American Urban Form: A Representative History*,  
Sam Bass Warner and Andrew H. Whittemore

1.

## MILLIONS

*There were uncounted millions of the beasts—hundreds of millions,  
we forced ourselves to believe.*

– Frank H. Mayer  
*The Buffalo Harvest*

I can't force myself to believe in any old  
almanac, that the best days for fishing  
will come mid March, that fog in January  
brings a wet spring.

Most of my knowledge gets turned, or upset. Even chickens  
aren't completely flightless—they can make it  
over a fence, into the low branches  
of trees. In China, a man built his own dialysis machine, kept  
himself alive for thirteen years.

Wolverines will rescue people from snow banks, dragging them  
by their shirtsleeves to safety.

At the Maekong Railway Food Market in Thailand, tourists marvel  
eight times a day  
at produce stalls set right on the tracks,  
whole shops removed as a train barges through.

Like clockwork, the market reassembles. I always question  
the most rigid convictions. I can't trust a person  
who plays the lottery, believes in planning

for luck. I think someone evil once said, *a single death  
is a tragedy, a million a statistic*. I don't buy into  
the claptrap of despots. I want to say the word *miracle* somehow  
without cringing, believe  
types of goodness exist. Oh. It's too easy  
to trust—

the future arrives; the honeymoon happens.  
The baby is born with ten fingers, ten toes.

## CANOPIC JARS

We crawled into a submarine without speaking  
at the Museum of Science and Industry  
and in the model of a U-boat bunkroom, you  
pointed to torpedoes stacked behind the tiered beds  
where German soldiers slept in shifts.

We walked through an exhibit of bodies,  
human flesh and muscles preserved forever  
with polymers. In the gift shop, they sold keychains  
of little plastic human organs. Those slices  
of muscle we observed without comment,  
our bodies in terrible clarity.

In a Paris museum, we saw the canopic jars  
of Egyptians, their containers of mummified  
viscera: the stomach, intestines, lungs, and liver  
each in a vessel. They left the heart  
right in the body. We saw those alabaster jars,  
the tops shaped like heads of baboon,  
human, jackal, and falcon.

Realizing we would never make it  
was like learning about the globe's shifting  
plates, the way the earth's floor still spreads  
beneath sea. Or when I first heard the voices  
of whales. Their calls through dark caverns of water.

I imagine our hearts left in Ball jars, stored  
in a cabinet for winter. Not our human hearts,  
our heart-shaped hearts. I want to create jars  
for other hearts—ones as big, as impossible  
as those of blue whales. Hearts as large  
as a car could pulse against glass.

Let's collect jars of waves while the ocean  
spreads and spreads. We'll await the popped chorus—  
each and every lid sealing.

## SOLITARY, IMAGINARY

At our new house, empty scrap  
framed weedy earth, but my mother said:  
*a perfect sandbox.*

The sand came from a store, but I still hoped  
to find a shell, the smell of sea,  
some smooth-edged bottle glass sifted  
from dunes.

I'd drag lines in the mineral grain  
with my plastic rake. I'd dream  
summer on Hampton Beach, New Hampshire's  
thin eyelash of coast.

I'd remember burying my limbs,  
how I splashed steps into waves. How I  
called my imaginary plans:  
*I'll chase the water out until it's gone.*

These days, I live alone  
and sit near a computer. All day,  
I stare. And when the electricity goes out  
with its slapped silence,

I act like I'm not thrilled, that I don't love  
to meet neighbors in the street. *Do you  
have power?* I ask. *Do you have light?*

## CITY OF LIGHT

*Everything—houses, churches, bridges, walls—is the same sandy gray so that the city seems like a single construction of inconceivable complexity.*

– Rebecca Solnit

Do you remember the front door  
painted blue? How it even rained,  
but we stayed in the Hotel Perfect.  
At the tower, they wouldn't let us go up  
to the top, only the near-top. And you  
patted the beams, joked about structural  
integrity. *I've never seen a place like this,*  
you said. Do you still remember  
my terrible French? Coming back  
from Versailles, we couldn't wait to peel  
those rain-soaked clothes. I can't be sure—  
all my you-memories become one  
sprawling city. Was it on that trip  
you mimicked the poses of statues  
we saw in the park? On a different trip,  
(that night it snowed), we stopped  
at an Indiana motel, drank a bottle  
of wine naked, dripping on sheets.  
I stayed there again once, alone. Out,  
the window, cars rumbled away.  
It rained and the power went out.  
The building noises silenced  
with drawn-out whirs like breaths.

## LEARNING TO TRAVEL

During a 6<sup>th</sup> grade trip to the aquarium,  
I took photo after photo. The trainer  
threw food to the dolphins. She called  
them by name. I pressed the shutter, almost  
maniacally. I wanted to capture their air.  
All of my photos appeared far away.

When she picked up my dolphin photos  
from the drugstore, my mother asked me *why*—  
a whole roll of grainy dolphin-leaps, distant  
specks above too-green water. She stacked  
blurry images on my nightstand; I flipped  
through them like flash cards—jump, jump.  
All the arrested arcs, animals in leap.

Tonight, kids bike summer circles through  
the dark outside my apartment window.  
They're making plans. *We can go there*, they say.  
*But it's a long way.*

## THE TRAJECTORY OF ORANGES

All night, in the train car to Valencia, the young couple speaks Italian, propped on elbows in their bunks. Their whispered

joy hovers like a tent. They are a skylight above me. I catch words, snatches of sense. I am teenaged and thrilled

by history. Now, the couple peels oranges—one, then another, another. They citrus-fill the compartment with noise

and snack. They hand slices near the ceiling; they drop rinds like shed chrysalis, like discarded drafts, like we may

all become new before long. I may never think beyond oranges again—their smell sharpens the air. Perhaps

we are like explorers bringing fruit to Iberia, we travelers, like royalty. We are Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Citriculture

is for kings. Or, we speak Middle English, rename this color after crop. There is no longer yellow-red. Let us navigate,

crating seedlings across an ocean from Spain. In Bahia, we'll celebrate the birth of navel oranges. It looks like *umbigo*, we'll say. The button

of my belly. Who ate the first orange? The new hybrid of mandarin and pummelo, in that corner confluence of India, China, Burma,

whatever land was there then. This taste for new food—maybe I carry memories in my tongue. *I am young, too*, I could tell them

*and can I be like you?* I will speak citrus. I will claw at the peels. The train roars across track and I want orange dust near this skin.

## HOW TO ADJUST TO TIME ZONES

Reset your watch and act  
as if you've already arrived  
in your new zone. Try to sleep  
if it is nighttime. Stay awake  
throughout daylight.

When the Union Pacific  
and the Central Pacific  
formed one railroad, more  
than 8,000 towns  
used local time.

Before the railroad,  
people based time  
on the natural  
movement of the sun.

Now, my sister lives  
two hours behind me.  
My brother one hour  
ahead.

In the 1870s, railroads  
created bureaus, sent agents  
east, to Europe. Attracting  
settlers to this land.

Hold your eyelids  
wide open with your fingers. Go  
outdoors as much as possible.  
Natural light will help reset  
your body's clock. Retire to sleep  
at the local bedtime.

## MICHIGAN CENTRAL STATION HAS BEEN CLOSED SINCE 1988

When I go visit you on the edge of an actual mountain in Colorado, we take the cog railway to the top. Toothed rack rail that jerks and chugs. We pay thirty dollars to go up and down and the grade steepens and a baby cries grabbing her ears, but we pass some of the oldest trees on earth—ancient bristlecone pines I know we'll forget. Past timberline, the train inches and I wait to roller coaster up and away from here, but we reach the top and the conductor says, *forty minutes!*, points to a concession stand selling nachos and we hate nachos. *But you love trains*, you say and I tell you I do. That night, we eat at Pizza Junction in an old sleeper car. The food isn't great like we want it to be and I touch the wall's wood paneling and ask you why can't all the stations become train stations again? And you say, while we're at it, let the mountains be mountains.

A week later, I leave you and fly home in the dark to find spilled vinegar in the kitchen and, for a moment, think it is blood. I sit on the floor looking at the stain I'll have to scrub best-I-can from the linoleum and I stare at the guilty cat as he jumps from counter to floor and stumbles his landing and licks his leg. I love to catch an animal pretending.

That night, I don't even tell you I'm home. I leave my packed suitcase on my bed, unlock my bicycle, and ride toward empty tracks, toward the nail salon in the old depot. I look for hills—Midwestern land isn't as flat when I'm pedaling. I wish I could bike all the way to Detroit, to the old abandoned station that looks like the end of time. You once told me that in 1912 it was the tallest rail station in this world, that it was modeled after ancient Roman bathhouses. I stop in front of Happy Nail Spa where a woman sits in the dark sanitizing clippers and I stand over my bike and pick up a discarded pop can, shake dirt on the toe of my shoe and try to remember the last time our faces touched. I watch the sign's fluorescent "N" flicker and buzz and I dream up trains flashing past me and I see all those passengers like ghosts crowding the station. I see people rushing in and out of a place. At all hours of any day.

## FOR THE GHOST YOU MIGHT BECOME

Stand always too close—misplaced  
as you need to be. You must wall  
yourself in an old streaked phone booth,  
run yourself against its wires spilling  
to nowhere. You should roll a wagon  
over gravel with a child inside, her hands  
clasping a pail sloshing water over  
stones. Rake your palm through tree rot.  
Rub its umber matter against your shins.  
Seek silence that fills with pine trunk creak.  
And after you settle in this shifting, lose  
largeness. Lose any sense of it at all.

## BLISS

*A motor vehicle carries us to our graves.*

– Clay McShane, *The Automobile: A Chronology of Its Antecedents, Development, and Impact*

You know, they had traffic  
in ancient Rome and in 1769,  
Nicholas Cugnot built a steam-powered

gun carriage. He ran it into a wall.  
In 1899, in New York City, Arthur Smith  
hit H. H. Bliss, the first American pedestrian

killed by car. I don't like to pilot,  
steer. And I don't want to drive  
you home. Did you know

the word *cab* comes from  
*cabriolet*? My grandmother  
made me sit in the backseat.

*Precious cargo*, she called me,  
rolling slowly over dirt roads.  
Each pothole borne in my bones.

In 1817, streets were still  
meeting places. I want to remember  
the first streetlights, the ideas for green

and red borrowed from passing ships.  
I see us entering the earliest crosswalk,  
the semaphore arm raised. And later—

illuminated at night—those fog-edged  
boxes glowing instruction. We can't even  
trust ourselves to scan both ways.

## ABANDONED PLACES

The house on sinking Holland Island—  
old Victorian, shingles-crumbling,

the isle's last structure falling into  
the Chesapeake Bay.

Before it collapsed in 2010,  
one couple rowed out there.

I click through their photos—  
the house's interior full of dusty

bottles, broken furniture. Their shots  
of gulls in flight. A rusty tub. Their GPS

to guide them. They walked through  
the island's old cemetery, from its days

as village, where watermen lived  
and dredged oysters in the bay.

The land has been sinking  
for thousands of years. The water

rising ever more quickly. In  
2003, hurricane waves rushed

through the kitchen. This place  
of silt and clay knows how

to disappear. In 1995, one man  
bought the island and wanted

to save it himself. The experts said  
he never had a chance. He tried

building breakwaters out of wood.  
He put down hundreds of sandbags,

lined large rocks against the shoreline.  
Before it fell, that house appeared

to sit directly on the waves. The man  
gave up the island after he turned

eighty, underwent chemotherapy.  
The couple's photos online show

his favorite grown-over headstone,  
a girl's grave that reads: *Forget me not*

*is all I ask.*

## ADAPTED

The Blackfoot of the Plains had over a hundred words for the colors of horses, their many varied, running shades. If only we could all be as reliable as the horses we rode in on. I want many words for you. I want something as far as I can throw it. No, farther. You say, I throw like a girl. I do everything that way. I ask, is the flue open and you look up the chimney. I ask, *can you see the sky? Can we have heat?* Before you walk away, try to find it. Fix the dripping radiator. Don't travel too far—walk, or ride out on some journey alone. Our brains too big for our bodies, too big for the cage of our skeleton. Even our bipedal nature changed everything. The bones in our feet rearranged. This whole house smells of body. Damp shower and sheet. I show you my socks that are starting to thin and you say, *here come the toes*. I point to our curtains falling from window. You won't fix it all before you go.

## ELEVATOR

She's forgotten to call  
her mother. Stayed in bed

hours too long. She's left  
the garden's tomatoes

to rot. She's woken up,  
still loving the wrong

man. Of course, she's forgotten  
to eat. Then later, shaking,

she's plied the near-empty  
vending machine with coins. She's taken

whatever she can get. Today, she's gone  
to an office, sat at a desk,

accomplished nothing. Head pounding,  
left eye twitching. She's taken pills

to calm the thrumming skull. Today,  
leaving, a young man has stuck his hand

in the closing door of the elevator.

*I'm sorry*, she's said. As if she was

supposed to know he was coming

*I'm sorry*, she's said. *Do*

*you want to know a secret?*

he says out of nowhere. *Sure.*

He tells her he's pushed the alarm button  
many times. It rings

over and over in her head.  
*Nothing will happen*, he tells her.

*No one will come*. The elevator door opens  
onto a room of desks. Dressed-up  
people raise their heads  
from documents and screens.

Yesterday, at group therapy,  
she was made to repeat:

*I am worthy*. She's had to do  
this every week. She thought it

was stupid until it wasn't.  
Maybe next time after saying it—

*I am worthy*—she will remember the faces  
beyond the elevator, asking, *Who*

*is sounding this alarm?*

2.

## WE ARE A SYSTEM OF GHOSTS

i.

is what a man says in a documentary about his city.  
At least, that's what I remember he says. When I rewind

to find his words, I'm not surprised that I can't. Once,  
before I lived there, my mother brought me to Chicago

and we laughed through downtown like girls.  
We drank wine and ate pasta. A few years later,

we tried to find it again, this best-ever place,  
but we'd forgotten the sidewalk to turn down, or the way

the restaurant's awning threw its door frame in shadow.  
My mother protested: *but these streets are a grid.*

She studied the map pressed flat to her knees. I think of all the maps  
of countries and borders that no longer exist. In France,

I lived near the site of the Ligne Maginot, that line of tankers  
and casements in World War II designed to keep Germany out—

the countryside dotted with armored cloches of alloyed steel.  
The machine-gun turrets retracting into the ground. This vanishing

reminds me of informal cities, the claimed settlements  
that appear along abandoned rail tracks, the spaces people fill

and empty. The woman in the apartment below me has birds  
and they squawk in greeting when they see her, as if to say:

*oh there you are.* I listen as her front door slams each day. Maybe,  
she watches as I wait for the bus, my eyes shut tight to the wind.

ii.

I once saw a photo of someone stranded  
in an Iowa blizzard, a figure covered in flurry—

the white, sleeting lines erasing all edges of body.  
Hopper-solitary in the flatness. A year later,

I couldn't even begin to locate it in a book  
or museum, couldn't remember anything at all except

*snow*. Most days, half the mail I get is for others.  
Or, it isn't even addressed to a name:

*Current Resident*. I pile it all in a shoebox and keep it  
up, away on a shelf. Most days, I want to research

a trip somewhere new. I look up the logistics,  
the to and from: the airport, the taxis, the buses,

and trains. I will always know what to do  
if I get there. I want to go somewhere

that requires goggles to protect my eyes  
against snow blindness, to avoid flash burns

of the cornea. They say it's like an eyeful of sand.  
Do I enjoy the feeling of standing in a field,

full of it, alone? Polar explorers treated  
this exposure with drops of cocaine in their eyes.

I research that, too. Visitors to Antarctica still arrive  
by sea, on a boat from Ushuaia, the southern tip

of Argentina. Thousands of people go each year,  
wanting to witness that which disappears. I see them

trekking over ice. On my daily walks home, it's not  
winter yet and I can only retrieve what's fallen—I collect

buckeyes, pinecones, horseapples, walnuts. I fold  
and store leaves like small paper receipts.

iii.

The moving trucks all came on the same day.  
In Lakewood, California, in 1950, a new suburb began.

I imagine the trucks unloading, their leaving,  
unpacking. People in new structures:

*here we are.* In the 1950s, single-family homes diffused  
on treeless plots near highway. So many residents

could wake up and feel: *nowhere*. In an Iowa coffee shop,  
on the edge of once-prairie, I write long

overdue letters to friends. A little girl approaches,  
sticks her head in my lap. She taps a key on my laptop.

She types a series of O's. *This is a ghost story*, she says.  
*Is it scary?* I want to know. She types *EEEEEE*.

I ask: *is somebody screaming?*

iv.

On the bus, I read about Japan's suicide forest.  
Aokigahara, near the base of Mount Fuji.

People say it's the best place to die.  
They tie rope along trunks, a trail for whomever

comes after. The bodies get cleared out once a year  
by volunteers and officials. Park ranger Azusa Hayano

has talked hundreds of people out of their plans.  
He's rescued so many half-dying already.

Hayano puts a hand on their shoulder.  
He asks them to speak as they sit near the trees.

## CONVERGENT BOUNDARIES

Isostatic sinking is caused by heavy weight,  
as during glaciation, the lowering of crust  
into asthenosphere. I read about this process,  
involved in the creation of atolls, coral necklace  
landmass ringing bluewater lagoon.

I tell you *this* is my new favorite  
geologic event. That I also love  
subduction, when one tectonic plate sinks  
below the other at convergent boundaries,  
causing hot magma to rise to the surface.

When I told you about subduction,  
I slipped, said, seduction. That's what  
this is. But you know that.

In fifth grade, when I first learned  
about the rift of Pangaea, I cried.  
It was too beautiful, the way everything can  
and will separate into continents.

But what about love that is there, my god  
it is there, but can't seem to force  
the shifting of what's already in place,  
the fault-line fissure, continents halving  
into sea. The division of everything—  
records and cups and quilts. You can't see

how the dust might settle. I keep  
wanting my own sinking, your reckless weight  
above me. Your hand on my back. The ring  
of myself that remains.

## HISTORY OF ROOMS

i.

*School projects my mother kept.*

My replica of Ford's Theater.  
 I cut a sponge into a rectangle the size of a tooth  
 and painted tiny red bricks to poster-board walls.  
 I upholstered theater seats—red velvet taped  
 to paint. I left an empty stage,  
 a vacant box of chairs.

A paper-birch wigwam.  
 I glued twigs to a plank of foam. I circled bark  
 around the frame, set a small beaded belt,  
 a tiny clay pot near the door.

A French *boulangerie*.  
 I drew little loaves on display  
 in a curtained window.  
*Pain*, the sign said. *Bread*.  
 Years later, before she moved,  
 my mother cleaned out rooms, threw  
 my paper neighborhood away. The poster  
 walls still smelled of glue. The room's  
 damp dark ballooned my labels. The words  
*Where Lincoln Was Shot*  
 now bleeding and blurred.

ii.

My earliest memory is spatial—  
 the vague layout of a home.  
 I can almost see  
 the way the hallway towered  
 and turned. I was two  
 when we moved, but learning  
 to walk, I swear  
 I palmed the walls.

Other interiors are full  
 of chalk dust, faux-marbled tile,

announcements scrolled on a ticker. *Sign up. Field day. Go Wolves. Blood Drive. Bake Sale.* When I drive past middle school now, they've torn down half. Gone are the rows of green lockers, thick with decades of paint, coated in kelly drips dried on metal doors. And the band room, where I sat, unable to breathe the measures. Gone the stale carpet, soaked in my spit.

iii.

I remember the smell of my drugstore perfume. The smell of the dog after rain-soaked rolling in grass.

And what if I could make a map and a paper-doll me and what if I place this me into paper-doll rooms from long-ago years and what if every room means a smell? Swedish pancake smell here. Irish coffee smell here. Noxema smell. Hairspray smell. Detergent smell upstairs.

iv.

In France, I got close to my blue-tiled floor, where I lived above the cantine. I'd listen to lunchtime—the chatter of students, the din of fork and knife.

v.

The man I loved  
lined card tables end to end  
in his Chicago apartment,  
draped it with a bedsheet.  
He placed a large votive candle on  
his makeshift tablecloth. We had  
iceberg salad, steak in the pasta. We broke  
bread next to the radiator  
breathing winter heat.

## ABANDONED PLACES

So maybe I am a town  
for ghosts. And I know that  
places can fall in love

with those who stay awhile,  
those who sweep the cracking  
stairs, repair the panes

on all the windows. In the Sierras,  
on the border between Nevada  
and California sits Bodie—its decaying

wood and still-stocked stores.  
In my mind, these towns,  
are never empty—their rail

lines coming and going  
through mountains and plains.  
When he left me, I guess

I didn't think about nowhere.  
The dim promise of gold.  
The park ranger in Bodie

gets cursed souvenirs returned  
to him by mail. Contraband—  
an old nail. A shard of glass. *I'm sorry,*

the notes say. *For what I've taken.*  
I don't believe I fall for just  
anyone who shows me kindness.

## LINEAR FOREIGN BODIES

is what the invoice said  
 after my cat's surgery  
 to remove the elastics  
 he'd swallowed and when the vet  
 cut him open she said his intestines  
 were the smelliest she'd ever  
 known and I ask my cat to never  
 eat elastics again but we ask  
 too much of pets and people  
 so much of each other please  
 buy raffle tickets my children's  
 popcorn we need baked goods  
 my registry is available  
 online everything I want  
 is there and I look for strangers  
 I tell them my secrets because  
 even in times like these I  
 can't stop there are noodles to  
 boil places that need me places  
 I go to everyday the other day  
 I became convinced I smelled bad  
 asked my friend do I smell bad please  
 tell me I am certain this aloneness  
 is leaking out like sweat  
 and can you smell it  
 can you tell the way I breathe  
 dress think smile is different when  
 my life changed I was wearing a T-shirt  
 with a loon on it and no bra when I'm really  
 sad missing people I dress up wear  
 earrings and when my cat uncurls  
 stands on the bed stretches and walks  
 away I put my nose to that warmed  
 crater-space his body left

## STRANGE DUCKS

Before Cousin Tim's service,  
 my father scared away ducks.  
 In his funeral suit, he stood  
 on the deck yelling *get out of here,*  
*or leave if you know what's good for you.*  
 From beyond the window, it was as if  
 he danced, sang mutely at the lake.

At Tim's house, stacked cut wood  
 ran the length of the porch.  
 At the funeral, I wanted fewer songs  
 about angel's wings because I don't  
 believe in angels. Least of all their wings.

The week before I'd wondered why  
 don't I know more? The Romans  
 built aqueducts to carry water  
 from the source. Why can't I  
 hang curtains that won't fall down?

Tim was handy. He built his own roof.  
 His wife described him finishing in the dark.  
 How he waited for passing cars. How he  
 worked in their flashes of vanishing light.

At the church, above the priest,  
 Jesus' arms display painted drips.  
 Every week, people look up  
 at this bleeding and isn't that funny?  
 Not funny ha-ha. And is it not crazy  
 to fly in a plane, starting in Michigan  
 and ending in Iowa? I tell my friend: *I feel*  
*so strange.*

I feel light, too, and when, my friend  
 retrieves me from the airport in Iowa  
 he says: *Isn't it weird*  
*that we mention the dead?*

*Isn't it odd how we call them  
by name?*

## DOT-DOT-DOT

The word is Greek for *omission* or *falling short*  
and, at my copyediting job, I had to find and replace  
those triple-dot glyphs with three little periods spaced

farther apart. As my boss explained it: *ellipses need  
to breathe*. One period is so final, marking an end.  
But three? . . . The ellipsis can indicate our everyday

trailing off into silence. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writers  
used them to omit proper nouns: *where* was I born?  
*What street* did I just turn down? *Who*

am I following? I always look for the charged air  
in a room. In those old Westerns, after confrontations,  
I like to watch the saloon door swinging. We know

a chase is happening somewhere. How will it all  
shake out? Sometimes I know, as when passing the cage-rattle  
of chicken trucks driving down highway 35. The birds' fates

so very sealed. But isn't it crazy to think of the blue  
snaking lines of veins through our skin, the ellipsis  
in waiting for results, treatment, news. The hospital-pace,

job interview, and every single application. The votes  
must be tallied. When you kiss someone and draw in  
your desire, it's a huge breath sent back toward the body.

I am bad at estimation. The questions of elementary school  
asking me: *How many Sweet Tarts are in this jar?*  
I have no idea: a million? Three hundred? Twenty-four?

One year, my roommate won a year's supply of Godiva chocolate  
this way, those bars arriving monthly like clockwork. While traveling,  
I estimate distance, try to map out my invisible routes, the bodies of water

I cross with each landing. This year, in Iowa, drought dried up the streams  
and I look for the dead, stippled bodies of fish in the riverbeds.  
When will it end? Just count the days until rain.

## TO DISAPPEAR IN MICHIGAN

*The cougar has been considered officially extinct in Michigan since 1906, although the animal has been spotted there with amazing frequency over the years.*

– National Wildlife Federation, 2003

In Kalkaska County at midnight, some creature lurks  
and crawls. The quiet farm waits in the pause  
before growl. The silence pools into land—  
  
out toward holes where glaciers notched the fresh sea.  
In that water, where we killed all grayling and cisco fish—  
Blackfin, Longjaw, Deepwater, Shortnose—where we still  
  
look for glimmers of schools; images, blurry,  
swimming from hooks. But in Kalkaska, a beast  
believed gone, bloodies a family dog behind a barn. We lose  
  
chickens one by one, examining teeth marks on their necks.  
New days mark new death. And in the early fog, we  
discover claw-streaked tracks of pain scraped in a mule.  
  
Some cat's shadow fleets through woods. There are ways  
this story must go. And when we learn the missing hometown  
girl—fourteen—was found in California, we cannot believe  
  
somewhere she breathes. That she fought  
to vanish. That she wished to run  
away. We only want her back—wouldn't you  
  
miss these inland waters, these waves persisting  
in their creep toward shore? The image of a cat caught  
slipping out of woods—we don't have to see it. We know  
  
how it looks. We think we know what breathes. What's  
breathing? We can see exhaled air at night. We know  
what happens behind barns, inside bedrooms, under a sea.

If she does return, she will be just another face,  
a hazy fact recalled from school. And we'll sleep  
dreaming our own dark shapes to fear.

## ADVICE FOR THE END

I am told this world  
is over. It's time  
for something new. I am told  
to pack my things. Do not  
forget umbrellas, lamps.  
I must bring a change  
of clothes. Who  
knows what kinds of plants  
will grow, what types of  
light awaits me? Who can say  
what weather carved  
what land? I am asked, what  
will I miss? Oh, lots  
of things. I try  
to think of uncommon items:  
the buoys that floated near the moss-  
covered dock in Lake Huron  
where we vacationed last June.  
His two heel-worn socks puddled  
next to my bed.

## AUTOMAT

Look at her eyes first.  
You can't see them. Two

shadows beneath her hat.  
See the reflected rows

of lights marching to nothing.  
This woman sits in a sealed-off

cell of her city. The radiator  
too small for this place.

There is—the empty plate,  
the food she just finished.

Her clothes are formal,  
warm. A hat that hides her,

bright bare legs beneath a skirt.  
She could be going. The outside

is lightless, blank, without even  
her reflection. She looks down

at her cup. Everything  
is inward. How perfect

she only wears one glove.

## NEW YEAR

The man who photographed  
the very first plane to hit  
air was using a camera  
for the very first time.

The Wright brothers never  
married. Wilbur once said  
he *did not have time for both  
a wife and an airplane.*

I could put a husband,  
a wife, or daughter in this poem.  
You might think someone  
was waiting for me to come  
back home.

I spent the first day  
of this new year  
in Antigua, Guatemala,  
queasy. Firecrackers exploded  
near my feet, paper lanterns  
rose toward sky.

At the end of the day,  
I walked through  
Antigua alone, saw a horde  
of people in black. A funeral  
march. The mourners held  
photos, and flowers, crosses,  
and signs. Slowly, they walked  
through the streets.

## THE BODY TRAVELS

My last day of middle school: all  
 shaving cream—throwing, spraying,  
 scraping from eyes. We arrived  
 at Depot Park, cans of Barbasol  
 stowed in backpacks and shirts.  
 Chasing each other, the slides and swings  
 became coated in goop, our hair drying  
 in stiff sections, glazed  
 like still-wet papier-mâché.  
 The next day, the whole class  
 went to roller coasters. To the park  
 whose slogan promised feet flipped  
 in the air. A friend explained  
 why I skipped most rides: *She doesn't like  
 the feeling*. I worried this was true. I swore  
 to enjoy the racked incline  
 toward hill, the inversion,  
 my sneakers scissoring sky.

I keep a photo from that day  
 of myself and a classmate.  
 I barely knew him. We  
 wandered, took an old-fashioned photo  
 set in a silly Wild West saloon. I wear  
 a feather boa, hold a plastic pistol  
 in my hand. He grips a canvas bag  
 stuffed with cotton. Fake dollars  
 line the floor. *Look serious*,  
 the photographer said. Two years later,  
 this boy crashed, his body  
 dead and mangled through windshield.  
 But that day, he was told, *Look  
 like a thief*. He holds  
 a dollar-sign bag to his chest.

That day, this boy  
 and I rode an old wooden coaster

and we didn't even yell  
at the drop.

I once read about a woman  
who could no longer feel  
her stomach flip. She wanted it back—  
that lightness,  
that air-jolt on rides,

or driving cars  
so quick over hills.

## ABANDONED PLACES

It's not like I can decide  
to feel differently but here  
goes. Today, I stop at a gas  
station. I remove my iced tea  
from the cooler and notice  
a voice. A man stocking  
shelves from the other side.  
*Maybe I'm too close*  
*to love you*, he sings. Maybe so.  
Today, I get emails from  
my doctor's office. *How*  
*is your mood today?* They  
ask me to rate my feelings  
on a scale. I email back  
a number. In Chernobyl,  
wolves have returned, roaming  
the unpeopled streets. My friend  
tells me this as if she knows  
it's what I need to hear.

## DROP

Drop what you're doing this instant. Drop that melon, that mop. Let's get out of here and fast. There's rust in the oven, newspapers stacked on a stoop. There is too much everywhere. Let's purge this house of knickknacks, receipts. I don't want to remember the missing. Most of all, let me lose those stone-frozen eyes—how the man I loved looked saying: *I never really wanted you.* Too bad. Maybe I'm already heading West, cutting my car through night flatness, looking for ghost stampedes, handfuls of beasts.

3.

## E-HOW

How does a network connect?  
How will a train cross the country?  
How can I know *here* what you know *there*?  
Why must we know? What  
do we know? Where does a train go  
when it disappears in a mountain?  
What is it like inside mountains?  
Who answers my questions?  
If I have a cough, a fever, and itchy elbows,  
what does this mean?  
What do I have if I have fifty-two dollars  
in quarters, two Canadian pennies,  
an overdue library book?  
After the invention of telephones,  
what was it like to speak with familiar  
voices so many miles away?  
When I type into the url bar,  
why do I always forget where I'm going?  
How does it work tin-can operator? What  
is on the other end of these keys?  
Why can't all exits be formal—  
a train pulling away, a person  
left at the station, an arm  
frozen mid-wave?

## SAD, TRAGIC, OR HEARTBREAKING

In Iowa, I live in grand, old, crumbling style,  
in a house with large windows, carved molding.

In my second-floor room, my bed rests  
against the glass of a window taller than me and sometimes,

I stand and look out from the top, my forehead against pane.  
From here, I can see the night frost swirl and settle, can track

the sun over slightly distant trees. From here, I can see  
the police station, a church, the grocery store, a bank,

a flapping American flag—all the municipal signposts of town.  
This morning, I watch the roof, and flag, and trees after a man has left

my bed. I settle back down; I check the weather, watch a video  
showing dolphin slaughter. A pop-up asks me to choose

if this is this sad, tragic, or heartbreaking. I close the screen.  
When I went to the aquarium last summer, I didn't see the dolphins.

But I did walk around the exhibits alone. I was asked to touch  
a lake sturgeon. I don't believe the lake sturgeon wanted that—

the line of kids reaching for the fish as it swam  
tight circles in its open tank, the aquarium employee

pleading, *Wash your hands*. I read the exhibit descriptions instead  
and I wrote down on my map that the ancient lungfish

has barely changed in eons and epochs, years and years. The trees  
I can see from my window sometimes look like mountains

in the early morning, or like a forest that stretches,  
rather than transforms into row upon row of corn. As a kid,

the patch of trees behind my house seemed endless.  
A place to completely get lost. Lately, I listen to podcasts

at the gym. In 1847 the Choctaw Indians sent \$710 to help  
the starving Irish people. Just sixteen years after the Trail of Tears.

I cry on an elliptical when I learn that. I decide to choose—  
it's heartbreaking. In the rows of symmetrical machines, I pick

hopeful, beyond sadness, beyond tragic, decide: this is me reaching.  
Me leaning right into the out, out there.

## FRONTIER AIRLINES

The end of this plane's wing  
displays the image of a deer. The woman

next to me closes the shade  
while passing above the Grand Canyon.

I think to tell her, *I want*  
and *I want* and *I want*. No,

I repeat, *I love* and *I love*  
and *I love*. In my hotel room,

there is artwork of pen scrawls  
that look like a star. Next to it,

it says, *Navajo Blanket*. I never  
know what to make of any

one thing. I flew across the West  
alone and made sure my bag

was properly sized. I gathered  
liquids in plastic bags.

The woman at the gate sounded  
like cigarettes, hadn't flown

in twenty years. *Going to see*  
*a grandbaby*. I stacked boarding

passes in a folder as if someday  
I would care, remember. I forgot

to return the key cards.  
In the hotel gym, people lifted

their legs to the music. I could be  
somewhere. When I move through

sky, maybe it's best  
to ignore thoughts of speed.

At the end of the flight,  
a man flings open overhead

bins. *Sir*, the attendants say. *Sir*.  
This aircraft is moving.

## AT JOE AND'S FARM

Lonna shares her first impressions  
of Iowa. How she wanted

to get under earth, how strange  
to stand so tall on land, how very

far her eyes could see, how naked  
she could feel without a hill

for shelter. *This place is impossible*  
*stretch.* This year I turn twenty-eight and watch

alone from my porch as the nighttime heat  
lightning flashes through sky to soundtracks

of passing freight. My actual thunder-  
scaredy cat nuzzles his gray face

on my calf, reminds me of the man  
who doesn't love me back. This summer,

Lonna's husband Joe navigates  
the creek by canoe. We pass

a rookery of herons. He points at birds  
who appear to guard their leaves. *Here,*

*it doesn't seem like Iowa,* he says. Later, I sit  
on the back of his flatbed, tearing

through plowed wildgrass. Branches  
scrape across my back, sticks

get tangled in my hair. One day, we comb  
the creek bank for shells and stones.

*Isn't it marvelous,* Joe says, *what a glacier*  
*can do?* In late summer, I drive out

to the farm most afternoons, once  
the midday sun's begun to cool. I pull

purslane from dirt alongside Lonna. We pluck  
tomatoes from the vine. I watch

the chickens scatter for their weeds. Before  
long, Lonna places warm eggs

into my palm. Some evenings,  
we make jam, husking the ground

cherries, boiling and filling the jars. Throughout  
the cold, quick spring and the wet, hot summer.

my mind wanders in hurt. I drive

the flatness. I stand outside at night. How quiet  
these epochs of unfreezing.

## HOW TO MEASURE THE WEIGHT OF SNOW

You will need:

- a ruler
- a shovel
- a bucket
- a scale.

You will need snow.

In the winter of 1866,  
 the Chinese railroaders  
 for the Central Pacific  
 built tunnels under snow  
 to keep laying track.  
 Entire crews trapped  
 under tons, left  
 until spring melt found them.  
 Picks and shovels in their hands.

I used to wait for a school bus  
 on top of a plow drift  
 taller than me, slush-grayed  
 and calcified.

I used to wonder how much  
 snow weighed, lying inside  
 hand-packed igloos in my yard.

Measure your bucket.  
 Measure the top surface  
 of snow where it's flat.  
 Carve out a square foot  
 from the earth.  
 Place snow in your bucket  
 and weigh  
 before melting.

After the snow-load roof collapse  
 of the Carolina Waterfowl Rescue,  
 birds were injured, frozen solid.

I listen to the silent buildup  
 of snow on my peaked roof  
 until I can't hear it anymore.

Only the slow scraping  
of a shovel clears the way outside.

As the birds melted, they tried  
to open their mouths, their eyes.

## NEIGHBORS

Somewhere, in this building, a baby is crying.  
*Can you hear that?* I ask you. I wake you at night.  
One time, I heard that sound in the woods  
behind my parent's house. You said, maybe a fox,  
maybe a rabbit in distress. *Did it sound like a woman  
screaming?* you asked. My cat's cries sound human.  
Six hours he wailed after I picked him up, brought him  
home in the car to Chicago. Some people  
dislike cats, babies. I think I might love  
someone kind. I don't know the neighbors.  
Somewhere, in this building, a woman is screaming.  
My cat perks his ear toward the sound. *Can you hear that?*  
I ask you. I wake you at night.

## MINOR PLANETS

The Cererian surface is a mixture of water-ice, carbonates, and clays. Discovered in 1801 and classified as a planet for fifty years, Ceres is a rock-ice body almost 600 miles across—the largest asteroid in the inner solar system.

Mike and I were going to call our future son after both our grandfathers. Drunk at his best friend's wedding, he wrote: *Walter* on a chalkboard from across a crowded room. I can follow the trail-signs of names to another world entirely.

Giuseppe Piazzi discovered Ceres on New Year's Day over two hundred years ago. The element cerium was named after the then-planet, which was named after the Roman goddess of agriculture, of harvest, of motherly love. The word *cereal* comes from this deity of grains.

My own grandfather went by Wally, was named for his father. In 1922, it was the fifteenth most popular name for newborn boys. With Mike, I believed in the major and large. That this could be everything.

On November 6, 1999 at the Lime Creek Observatory in Nebraska, Robert Linderholm named a new main-belt minor planet after Louis Franklin Lederer, a man described as *an American businessman and inventor of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries*. At first, when I read this, I thought: he'd invented centuries themselves.

## HOW TO CARE FOR BUFFALO HORNS

*“And all we had to do was take these hides from their wearers.  
It was a harvest. We were the harvesters.”*

– Frank H. Mayer  
*The Buffalo Harvest*

You will need:

a soft cloth  
linseed oil  
car wax  
an air canister.

You will need buffalo horns.

Buffalo were shot  
for sport, men hanging  
out train car windows.

A Kiowa woman remembered  
a pile of bones as tall as a man  
and a mile long, ready  
to ship to eastern markets.

They say the buffalo used  
to block the tracks  
a thousand strong. That once  
an impatient conductor  
fired at a herd. They stampeded,  
derailed his train.

So, wipe the horns of dust  
and debris. Apply linseed oil.  
Let it soak. Apply car wax  
with your fingertips  
in a circular motion.  
Finish by dusting  
with compressed air.

## HURON

In Au Gres, kids still run  
along the rocky shore of the limestone  
point through mud-splash  
and they throw sticks at a speedboat.  
The sticks fall short,  
way out from the hull.

Walrus bone and prehistoric  
human remains were found near  
this water. Once-plentiful sturgeon  
tomahawked in lake shallows.

The settlers once found  
large hard maples tapped  
by Ojibwa for hundreds of years.

This was lumbering country  
and for house-raising, people  
came from miles around.  
The fiddlers and callers  
got people to dance.

They sent logs of old growth  
down the river. The men  
hunted bear for their stew.

The first switchboard in town  
was made of bottles, old bones,  
little scraps of iron.

## HOW TO FLOAT OBJECTS IN WATER

It's all about the key condition—  
 the weight of volume displaced  
 equal to the weight of objects. What  
 have you tried to leave behind  
 in this water? Floating on your back,  
 have you listened  
 to sounds in the lake or the sea?  
 They say humans can

hear higher frequencies in water.  
 Submerged, we hear with our bones.  
 Beluga whales have been recorded  
 imitating human speech. I've heard calls  
 like songs of urgent instruction.

How much do words really weigh?  
 People's talk feels lighter  
 than air. Messages get  
 so easily lost. What if we

built delays right into  
 our phones? What if we had to wait  
 for voices at the end of the line?

In August, a man took his dying dog  
 and floated him in Lake Superior  
 to ease his arthritic joints, the photo  
 of their swim shared  
 online by countless strangers.

In July 1875, Alexander Graham Bell  
 used a gallows phone to transmit  
 only voicelike sounds. What if this  
 is all we have? Sounds that seem  
 like words until we weigh them.

## WHITE-NOSE SYNDROME

i.

Love, I tell you how in two decades  
 all the common bats may die out,  
 their muzzles, wings, ears marked  
 with white fungus, how they sicken  
 in their dark, cool caves.  
 You tell me there are other animals.  
 But what about entire colonies of bats—  
 97 percent gone in one winter  
 and three percent stirring,  
 quietly alive?

ii.

Love, I tell you about living  
 in France. And can you remember  
 my frustration, unable  
 to converse? The way people spoke to me  
 as if to a child. I tell you about dinner,  
 when a friend's three-year-old son jumped  
 at the table, holding his fork like a spear.  
*Ma peau va craquer?* he asked, suddenly  
 worried his skin might split as his body grows.  
*It will grow, too,* his mother assured. *Ça va*  
*grandir, aussi.*

iii.

Do you remember, near the end,  
 going to the apple orchard?  
 I wanted to pick apples with you  
 and eat them straight from the tree.  
 Love, it was almost a date. We stomped  
 on rotting fruit in the grass.

## PROGRESS WITHOUT END

—*Pullman company motto*

Pullman interiors—salons  
for luxury, overland travelers.  
Gourmet food, leather chairs,  
chandeliers. In Chicago, Pullman  
means neighborhood, railcar,  
industry. Pullman, Illinois  
was a model corporate town.  
Spotters were hired to report  
those who strayed from company  
policy. George Pullman worried  
angry laborers would vandalize  
his grave after death.

In Guatemala, the *pullman*  
was the bus full of boys  
with machetes, women  
selling mango. In Guatemala,  
decades-old schoolbuses  
live on, in garish paint,  
loud music.

On my bus, before school,  
I used to wait outside  
in the early-morning dark,  
for the doors to open,  
for days to begin.  
I wonder where my ghost bus  
ended up—careening  
through mountains, spitting diesel. Full  
of bodies around each twisting bend.

A website calls itself  
*The Pullman Project*, catalogs  
the life of Pullman-made  
service cars, from the first  
called Jamestown in 1907  
to the last in 1958. The last  
named Dreamland. A database  
of cars ending up as restaurants,  
exhibits, as scrap.



just waiting for reasons to measure.

## ALMS FOR THE BIRDS

What is ceremony? It's day in,  
day out. It's the feeding  
in the morning. It's breath  
still leaving you. What is sky  
burial? It's ritual. Funerary  
Tibetan practice—leave the loved  
one on a mountain. Piece  
by piece, let vultures take  
a death away. Sometimes I want  
time to pass. This is the watch  
I wear each day. This is tea  
I drink in the evening. There  
is the neighbor, the mother,  
the friend. Point out strange,  
familiar signs. How is it—  
the days demand more,  
demand less? I'll pause  
here. What is it like to want loss  
picked clean?

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT

*All I knew was that there were millions of wild animals loose on the plains and I needed money.*

– Frank H. Mayer  
*The Buffalo Harvest*

Across the country, a girl disappears,  
her parents desperately  
speaking to cameras. Somewhere a man walks out  
of his home, never to return. In a remote region  
of Siberia, a family hunts  
animals by chasing them until the prey  
crumples with exhaustion. In a campus museum  
exhibit, a mangy cat head  
sits preserved in a jar. Sometimes all we know  
is what we seem to need. In my office,  
we implement new software to manage  
our customers. *I don't have inventory privileges,*  
one colleague complains. Meanwhile,  
in Brazil, a garbage picker finds an infant  
in the trash. As a child, the glow-in-the-dark stars  
on my ceiling were at least reminders of actual sky.  
While visiting home, I overhear my father,  
on a business call, say to a subordinate,  
*What are you trying to solve?* A man I once tried  
to date said he started new companies  
only to pass the time. On a pilgrimage  
you must look for something. One time a friend  
saw a man run his bloody hands along metal bars  
on the subway. One time I overheard a teenager  
say to his girlfriend, *Show me your jugular.* There are portents  
everywhere. At work, we've stopped meeting in person.  
We chat from our cubes, all our phones set to speaker.  
Walking the carpeted hallways offers a professional

chorus of voices. In college, my dance teacher  
would show rare black-and-white footage of dancers,  
the movement clouded. She would hop about the room,  
demonstrating signature style,  
movement vocabulary. Sometimes I dream  
I am back in France searching for someone  
faceless, unknown. I walk down cobblestone stairs.  
When I wake, all I remember is need.

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