System of ghosts

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System of ghosts

by

Lindsay Tigue

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
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*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
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 6th 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 17th 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.
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.


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

the white, sleet ing 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 *EEEE.*

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.
The man I loved
lined card tables end to end
in his Chicago apartment,
draped it with a bedsheat.
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—it’s 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 19th 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.


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 thunderscaredy 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

purslaine 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 20th and 21st centuries. At first, when I read this, I thought: he’d invented centuries themselves.
HOW TO CARE FOR BUFFALO HORN

“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.
THE CENTER OF THE EARTH IS A LITTLE OFF KILTER

is what the newspaper says in regards to Ecuador’s
Middle of the World, the equatorial park
whose monument to midpoint is hundreds of feet
from actual zero. But I like a middle that isn’t
quite. For I’m in Chicago and, at home
in this Midwest, I can’t sleep through the night.
The trains pass and stop right beyond my wall
and I wake flinching, dreaming they might
rush right through the brick and plaster.

But the end of my night turns into beginning
of morning and in half-sleep, my thoughts always
meander. When Rome fell the Middle Ages began
and measurements started to wander. How much
is a gill? A gallon?

   Can you give me half a pounce?

I used to babysit a girl who pressed loose
the coarse skin around my elbow as I read to her
stories before bed. It was as if she could polish
me like stone, like she could knead
toward the center of my arm. She’d bend
my free limb like a doctor. She’d watch my joint
disappear into crater.

In middle school, I gave a presentation
on radiometric dating, the half-life of rocks,
the methods used to age this world. And when I wake
from nightmares about mass extinctions—
bees vanishing in the dark, I hear only the slow buzz
of my lights turning on.

At my parents’ wedding anniversary, my dad
stood up at the table, toasted a glass.
He said, I’ve known you

   more than half this life.

In Ecuador, tourists stand right on a yellow line
marking the not center. Take my picture. And when I notch
off days on my calendar, I think: we invented that, too,
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
crumbles 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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