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A symphony of suitcases

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A symphony of suitcases

by

Martha I. Greenwald

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Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the

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MASTER OF ARTS

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1994
"You know it's the most peculiar thing about this place, there seems to be something here that stimulates the autobiographical impulse."

--The Petrified Forest
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PART I
THE STORY OF THE DAY

The birds will open your house with their wings,
Frail bones against the hinges, the doorframes
Stunned, and as the eaves unweave, all the roof leaves
Is a parasol of air. We try to predict their routes
Of travel, conjuring wind charts and weather maps—
How far could they fly from these October trees,
Or the countries in your closet, or the ceiling
Moons and planets orbiting only within
Your cupped palms? In this room, dark corners
Explained, the nightlight hovers on the wall
Like a cloud. You settle in my arms, your body
Beginning a mime of my breathing. You wish
For sky, shingles scattering, as we listen for
Feathers, insistent thrushes at the sill.
TURBULENCE, THE TRUCK DRIVER, AND THE WAITRESS

Splash of ginger ale on my jeans, a fierce jolt beneath the jet's belly—grinning, the attendants scutter to their jumpseats and buckle up. Just weather, our captain assures, then to calm us with diversion, switches on the Wide World of Sports Skating Report. Puccini, distant and tinny, bleats through my headset, the video monitors fill: Spread-eagled, revolving, body aloft on her partner's palm, our heroine mimics glee for the cameras. *Pendulum lift in star position*,

the broadcaster murmurs, wedging his commentary between soprano, cello and violins, the aria splintered by his parentheticals—*Side by side double Salchows*, 

*oh her shoulder rotation was off*. But the entire arena rises for the thirty-year-old underdogs with day jobs, whoops at each imperfect camel sit spin and axle jump, loving even the couple's simple cakewalks across the rink, obstinate, continuous cameos etched into ice, which the judges deem skewed—his back recurvate,

her blades pointing Northwest instead of due North. The plane lurches, veers left. Yesterday my father slid down our frozen driveway. Helping him stand,

a heavy balsa man whose density had disappeared in the storm, I lost traction, twice, almost dragging us both back into the snow. The wings shudder. Almonds pop up from across the aisle and land on the cabin floor, silverfish jittery in the beige carpet. Finale triple toe loops. The pair wins the Bronze. Now comes ABC's vaseline-lensed

(stanza break)
montage of their real lives: Our hero dwarfed by his big rig posing at a desert rest stop, cacti, the sunset glow a tocsin on the interstate horizon behind him.

Cut to tight shots of hawks, the vast parking lot, tourists licking vanilla cones in the heat. Inside, our heroine delivers dupes to the cooks, then hurries back, glossy with sweat, to circle the crowded counters, her silver tray packed with burger platters, and perched on one strong arm, held just above the heads of the diners.
Every day a beautiful sentence
You must memorize before bed.
For mystery I will hide them.
Search between the jams at breakfast
Beneath your plate of morning bread,
This is how you will learn my language:
*Sono stata in montagna per due settimane
e tutto quello che ho visto, mi è piacuto.*

Music tonight, our summer festival,
But just now it is so quiet,
*Mi è piacuto, mi è piacuto, repeat this*
And tell where you've traveled.
Keep me company with the television.
Rock Hudson was quite a handsome man,
I enjoy so much watching this movie
Because I had a lover who resembled him,
Especially his eyes, how we collect
And collect pieces of people,
I have been with no one since he left.

Mornings in this city I see women
Lower baskets from their windows
And pull up the world with ropes.
This is what we were for each other,
The daily paper, coffee, the pears,
We were the puller and basket filler,
Tomatoes, basil, the wine.
And best was to close the shutters
And take naps in the late afternoons,
Just before the weather turned to winter,
Oh my friend, upstairs in our room,
Those were the nicest hours.

(stanza break)
Must I curse the baker's shoulders,
A stranger's wrists, this violet light?
Tutto quello che ho visto, mi è piacuto
Everything I saw, I liked.
II. Mrs. MacKenzie

If I had somewhere to go  
I'd leave in a heartbeat,  
The heat here yields me no space.  
Strange of my son to suggest  
Venice as a place for rest,  
Though why would he have known  
My blackest dreams were not the cancer,  
But a nurse bringing me my breasts  
In a big glass jar,  
Two white globes in green solution.

Oh there are some good things—  
Sitting and drinking late in the lobby  
Antonio pours me wine, dips  
A wide-lipped ladle to his cistern  
And serves claret of the night canals.  
He laughs when I say I shall swim,  
Rising from the moss, the stones  
Into arching yellow wellheads.

Earlier, the sky embroidered  
In scores and scores of fireworks,  
I found I did not care to look up.  
As we crowded along the Guidecca,  
I saw gondolas scallop the water's borders  
Like private halves of crescent moons,  
And everyone moving in queer, red light.

By the end, some small war over,  
The heat in the piazza became a beast  
Coaxed to the cooling hotels.  
One by one the cafés darken,  
Lamps closing in a large house,  
How lovely to be inside the umbrellas  
As they fold up against themselves,  
Bright striped bodies of desert birds,  
And rest under one warm wing, waiting.
Syncopations of the curtains and night
A column’s shadowed fluting.
Almost dawn, I listen for you
While the windows explain the light
As three perfect silverpoints.

The only place we touch is here,
A spare room for the concierge.
If the guests would tire earlier,
Returning from the parties
With maps and harlequin masks,
Antonio, if you pressed the last brass keys
To their palms, and bolted the doors,
Then your hands would find my face.

I will learn their cognacs and anisette.
Every cup and every glass you fill,
Until you tell me of Terontola,
Naming your town against my throat,
And I see the train station, the white field
Hear new snow and slow sound,
Metal gliding on metal.

Yet you do not know me in the hours
When colors cannot hesitate--
Two o’clock, corners were stark,
I walked through the Madonna dell’Orto
Escaping the sun and heat.
From a sacristy where I’d heard only guides,
Their explanations of the architecture,
Came a cadenza of voices so entwined
Spaces went vacant within me,
Vast as the air between the arches.

(stanza break)
We share our hours in a smaller place,
Though you leave before the walls go white
And my hands become hands beneath the linen.
You miss morning sketching the alley
Slowly onto the window panes,
Inscribing in the marble sills
The title of her triptych:
St. Door, St. Garden, St. Boat.
1813

—after Thomas Love Peacock's
Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley

Miles still to Bracknell, as the woman shifted
Three parcels across her mountainous lap,
And in that instant, accordion of skirts lifted,

Petticoats above the knees, Shelley watched
Her calves collapse, molten flesh like a poultice
Leaking through sackcloth, tubers gone to rot,

The carriage air fetid and contagious.
He swaddled his head with scarves, a filter
Created too late; abruptly weak, flushed,

Her affliction had routed through his veins.
Who insisted that travel was a tonic?
Upon arrival at the inn, his intricate skein

Of symptoms unwound and unwound—an itch
Beneath his chin, nematodes burrowing deep
Within the lymph glands, an aching right wrist

Sure prelude to that arm’s unbridled girth.
Soon he dreamt of dead elephants floating
In lakes, then woke feverish, the nightshirt's

Wrinkles stamped onto his chest. Mirror-bound,
He monitored each ruddy crease until it faded,
His neck became porcelain again, and a barren

Day seemed utterly impossible. How to recapture
Those dusks with lathe, pacing, his daughter
Close at his breast, no fear of lesions or fissures,
Singing *Yahmani* into her vanilla hair,  
*Yahmani, Yahmani, Yahmani, Yahmani,*  
A road, horses cantering through summer air,  

His three syllables of secret journey  
Chanted to invoke a child's solid sleep,  
And dreams of the distances between cities.  

And if the ulcers erupted, seeping purple,  
Who would whisper, and lull her, and sing?  
Certain nights even the trees were instigators,  

And the wind. Branch shadows, dark hairs  
Stirring on knuckles, blotches on his hands—  
Weather and illusion would turn to portent  

As the poet, comparing his wrinkles and limbs  
With companions, contorted the evening party  
To hours of prods and pinches. *Show your thumb!*  

*How thick is your ankle? Are we the same?  
Flex your elbow!* His guests always obliged  
Though this warm evidence never calmed him;  

Their perfect correspondences, foot against foot,  
Thigh to thigh, were not enough. Only Peacock  
Could quell his friend's panic, retrieving books,  

Quoting Lucretius through open parlor windows:  
"*Est elephas morbus, qui propter flumina Nili,*"  
Listen, only in Egypt, "*Gignitur Aegypto . . ."*  

That woman in the carriage was fat, nothing more.  
A balm of rationales spoken aloud each night,  
Until one dawn his body returned, proportioned,

(stanza break)
Flesh taut and pores invisible. The sweet skin
Beside Iathe’s left earlobe, *Yahmani*, her scent
Was what he’d missed the most, the whole inn

Still asleep and her cradle brimming with sun.
Outside the landscape was hedgerows and rills.
No pyramids or sphinxes squatted on the horizon.
THE WINTER IN BED

—from a photograph
by Roman Vishniac

Remember last autumn, the last warm day?
Papa brought me to the roof,
Four flights up and on every landing
Something different—an argument,
Radio songs, the smell of baking bread.
When we finally climbed outside
I saw sky and clouds and sky
And laundry waving back and forth,
All across Warsaw, white sheets in the sun.
Papa held me high above his head,
Look, he said, look at all those chimneys,
And I saw chimneys and two boys playing
And a petticoat blown full by the wind.

We came back down and had supper,
Papa carried me to my bed.
But I woke later to see him
Standing in the room with two candles.
He held paints and brushes
And as I watched, blue bouquets
Leaves and ribbons grew on the wall.
Papa painted each petal, singing to himself,
And after the last leaf, stepped back
To admire his night-grown garden.
I pretended to still be asleep
When he kissed my forehead and left.

In the morning I heard him praying.
For hours the only sound was his voice.
My brother brought me tea and bread,
I touched a small blue spot on the crust—
I knew Papa's hands had torn off my portion,
Come, take this to my Anna, he said,
Take this to my Anna.
WORKING THE NARRAGANSETT NIGHT OWL

... On the last Sunday in October, when most communities set clocks back at 2 AM, Amtrak trains, will hold back for one hour to be "on time"—not early—according to local time at subsequent stations ...  
--Amtrak Northeast Timetable

Where the lost hour is lost matters most. Idle on a siding outside Westerly yards, or shelved before the twin mouths of the Charlestown tunnels, passengers will drowse in darkness, waking to extinct locomotives bracketing the tracks and profiles across the aisle— the half-faces suggestions of resemblances— a bully from childhood, or worse, a lover long thought dead.

But if we depart on schedule, our hold-back should be Mystic, midway on the landbridge before the trestle's web, brackish air, river so near the tracks that in fog the waiting train seems to float above its anchor. My first year on the Owl, we'd only passed Providence when my pocketwatch turned to 2:00. We braked to sit at the city's edge, on tracks between tall warehouses, bakeries, and garages abandoned soon after being built. Small fires stained the windows orange— squatters, I supposed, living on the top stories, but I saw only relics of advertisements once painted on the bricks... Be utifu  Co plex n...

pink-lidded jar of cold cream my mother kept on the kitchen sink ... oke Opti o... Father's chawed, smouldering cigar ... 

At the front of my car, a man began to moan. A low wailing as if mourning his wife and child. I shook him until he quieted

(stanza break)
but from seats by the washroom came shrill moans of mockery. *Animals!* someone shouted. Later, when we jerked forward,

at the same moment we'd arrived, I heard another horrible moan. This is why I worship exactitude: pulling out of Back Bay

the second the gantry lights signal green, anticipating arrivals of stations solely by the car realignment and lapses of noise

as the engineer slows to round a sharp curve. Now at 1:50, a charred, damp smell enters the coaches and disperses--

the Westerly woolen mills are gone, precisely on schedule--We'll make the Mystic hold-back. Two quick track switches,

the reading lamps flicker twice, then a rare trade—the ring of a slow brake on smooth rails slurs to sail tack clanging

on masts. All the crew steps down. We stand in the ballast, kicking stones, the locomotive a low drone high above us,

the sky scrimshawed with clippers and whalers, thatched roofs, steeples, stars. Flasks and cigarettes appear but we don't talk.

We never do here. From this distance restorations are irrelevant. We remember *bulwark, hawser, jib*—words we only truly learn

as children but retrieve waiting on the outskirts of a tourist seaport, then again, returning from work in a morning storm, barely awake,

to find my daughter eating breakfast and cleaning the flute my wife has not touched since high school. "Father's Job" for Show & Tell,

my wife explains as she fastens their neon slickers and they leave. Alone in the house I lay on the couch listening to weather warnings,

trying to fall asleep, counting intervals between lightning strike and thunder: fifteen seconds—three miles, ten seconds—two, and soon

(stanza break)
I stand before a symphony of suitcases, conducting, without a baton, the trunks, satchels, and pullmans, suspended around the room.

Look how the suitbags and duffels bow and trill with ease...
A valise plays first-chair, knowing no destination other than our den.
When I don't feel in the mood for painting
I go to the movies for a week or more.
I go on a regular movie binge!
—Hopper to Richard Lahey Papers

BAR-B-Q    BAR-B-Q    BAR-B-Q

the only creed the mesa may ever know—
giant fossil trees dreaming eons of sweet smoked meat
and biscuits, petrol, chocolates, cigars,
and an order of cream of corn soup,
the Daily Special centered in a deep white bowl,
yellow paler than early morning sun
on apartment walls. But the diner--
filled with Duke Mantee and his desperado gang,
drunk Gramps Maple, and Boze,
the fattish half-back turned pumpboy--
it's too cluttered. A claustrophobia of confessions,
gunshots, and fervid broadcasters
warning travellers against taking desert
routes, though they will miss dusk, pomegranate
splattered in the painted hills, lingering
until a train passes, and a passenger
looks up from her book because the compartment
suddenly flushed like ripening fruit.

Bananas and waxy apples, toothpicks,
matches—rearranged and dusted by the blonde waitress
who reads Villon beneath the pumps

(stanza break)
and imagines Paris, a job in a café
beside the quais, leaving the late kitchen to return
to a building, dim stairway and banister,

steps collapsing into an accordion,
then her room, one window watching the courtyard,
bottle of wine and half a loaf of bread.

True, that's a continent and an ocean away—
she's still a hostage in Arizona, and a philosophical hobo
has ordered a burger, ennui, and her heart.

Everyone swigs shots of rye and waits.
Duke's dame double-crossed him and the squad cars
tinny sirens sound close in the wind.

At the long counter, the gang loads rifles
full with extra rounds. This joint is too easy to locate
at night--lit sprawl of triangles, cubes,

and tumbleweed perched at the edge
of flatlands—maps, beer, coca-cola, and neon pulsing
the only creed the mesa may ever know

BAR-B-Q    BAR-B-Q    BAR-B-Q
Consider the luck of Mr. Catalano,
Bald barber of Moraga Street, single-chair
Shop empty at noon, his polished piano
Beckoning. He sits beneath the autographed
Photo of Ella singing silent scat,
Five fast arpeggios, her orchid laughs,
And the combs shift in their azure solution
To listen.

Fog strolls forty blocks up, damp Pacific
Winds. In a dance hall hung above a dark beach
Memory’s quartet constructs the brilliant gig
Centered on a gold satin dress, that French teacher
Reaching over the shoulder of her lover to blow kisses
At Catalano while he soloed, her unfurling sash
The mute accompaniment to his embellished
Final bars.

White hair clippings settle on the floor,
Blown by a sudden muscular storm. Catalano closes
The keyboard and turns to watch a dense downpour
Stain the avenues, hues of pale stucco houses
Deepening as they steep in rain; the neighborhood
Changed from pastel to iridescent in half an hour.
Two boys exiting the pet store next door stop
Under his awning, bags of goldfish illuminated
In the barber pole’s swirling neon glow.
They touch the tiny bodies through clear plastic,
Amazed by the gills, electric in red water,
Delicate scales against their fingers, a cryptic
Pulsing chill.
PART II
LISTENING TO THE CAR RADIO AT NIGHT

Tutankhamen's tomb is bare. The blue jewelled faces
Stolen from their pedestals, as the boy-king's body
Hovered in the bony air. Dick Tracy listens to Dryden Small
Describe the ruined antechamber; two dead guards,
Their skulls shattered by statues, and scrawled on the walls
In blood, Death to those who enter these rooms.

Magnifying glass in hand, Tracy cases the burial room
And blurts, "Aha! The man with the violet face!
Clearly his work, why look at the frieze on this wall,
Dryden, these hieroglyphs are freshly painted. Everybody,
Get your decoder rings! We'll stay here tonight to guard
The sacred sarcophagus." Tracy spreads his coat near a small

Sandstone sphinx and takes a cat nap, while Dryden Small,
Too rattled to close his eyes, roams the musty rooms.
He pockets a scarab amulet, hoping its powers will guard
Them from angry gods, but then, in the torchlight, the gold face
Of the funerary mask groans. Dryden shakes Tracy's body.
"Wake up, there's an invisible hand writing on the wall,

Dick, wake up." Dryden reads the message appearing on the wall:
22, 9, 5 . . . Static from another city . . . 12, 2. His voice grew smaller,
Then incomprehensible. My mother tuned the station, her body
Bridging the front seat to bring me clues from the secret rooms.
That night at the motel, I wouldn't sleep. I lay on a cot facing
The windows, needing to decipher who killed the guards,

Who seized the treasures. In the wind, palm trees guarding
The parking lot sketched pliant shadows on our walls,
Ziggurats floated above my father's sleeping face,
Flaring or sinking when his chest moved. Contained in a small
Pyramid of light, my mother sat between the beds and bathroom.
I could see her traveling silver cocktail set, the black body

(stanza break)
Of the case cracked open at her feet, the full-bodied
Bottle of whiskey on the end table. My mother, safeguarded
In an armchair, uncoiled her braided headress in the room's
Phosphorescent tiers. I studied all undulations on the walls,
To guarantee my parents' breathing. I feared their small
Syncopations of sleep, sudden sounds from a face,

The body's abrupt twitching, feet thumping against the wall.
I repeated these gestures, the unseen guardian of a small
Motel room, searching the darkness for a violet face.
ARIEL AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL SPRING MIXER,  
SAN FRANCISCO JCC

"I drink the air before me, and return  
Or ere your pulse twice beat."
---The Tempest

Dribbling air, the boy with stilty legs darts between the slow dancers.  
High-tops squeaking on the polished wood, he fakes a pass  
toward the pretzel bowl, pivots, then vaults to the basket  
shrieking Monster Jam! as his perfect slam dunk of nothing  
smashes through the hoop. The net, stuffed with blue balloons,  
quivers but releases no reward—so he rips  
two streamers from the festooned doors and skips crazily out  
to the courtyard, a yellow crepe comet trailing from his fists.  
Ariel tracks the gold route of his Warriors cap zig-zagging  
around the chaperones, his tall arms grazing the doorframe,  
a heroic exit. She imagines sweat beads on the back of his neck,  
those three inches of flesh studied daily from her desk  
behind him in earth science; the pink half-moon mole,  
arcs of freckles punctating his shoulders, hairline,  
his collarbone. She starts to follow him but the D.J. cranks  
Deee-Lite and Ariel’s best, best friend yanks her back  
to center court. Shadowing each other precisely, their routine  
surprises the floor, all the winter afternoons of garage rehearsals  
reaping cheers and whispers from the crowded gym.  
Ariel is clearly the better moonwalker, everyone says so,  
she glides backward from bleacher to sideline to bleacher  
without logic, as if an earthquake skews the room.  
Always her favorite move, it feels like waking in darkness  
from dreams, sure that her bureau is breathing and that she is lost

(stanza break)
somewhere at the center of a story ... like tonight, suddenly alone
in the foggy courtyard ... everything glows--the pink hydrangeas,
the murky sanctuary and empty turquoise reflecting pool,
even the hallway where boys sprout from the payphone, dialing pranks,
licking apple Jolly Ranchers until their tongues turn electric
and they compete, comparing whose is the brightest green.

She implores him—appear—but the wet wind turns too cold,
and so, unnerved, she returns inside. Strobes now orbit the gym,
air soured by sweat and borrowed scents of mothers' perfumes.
Finally, distinct as if discovered through binoculars, she finds him
jumping and jumping beneath the home basket, trying
to dislodge balloons with only the vibrations of his own body.

Ariel wishes she could confess about last week, the day
she blanked on the earth science quiz: Directed to draw
a constellation, instead she transcribed the configuration of freckles
on the back of his neck, connected the dots, and labeled it ‘Orion’.
When the teacher returned the tests she proclaimed Ariel’s the best
diagram in the class, and gave her an A+ and two gold stars.
Black cases swing from their mittens.
Inside—purple velvet, and nestled in the plush,
the dismantled clarinets.

By the time the children reach home
the cases will be furred with snow,
small animals with silver bones and cork joints,
ready for the week's hibernation.
THANKSGIVING PROJECT, 1972

Strapped in the passenger seat, two baskets of apples.
I remember reds and greens trembling as Route 44
Jabbed between the frosted farmland, stables

And cornfields which bordered Delicious Orchards.
My best friend’s father drove, his right hand burrowed
In a sack of cinnamon cider doughnuts, chords

Of warm cake and hickory wood overshadowing
The upholstery’s antiseptic reek; air so sweet
I almost forgot he was a doctor."Girls, that scarecrow
Is wearing a Nixon mask! We have to stop here!"
He laughed and steered the car through the gate.
The assignment: Collect enough unharvested ears

And fruit for our fourth grade class to decorate
The halls with colonial dolls—cornhusk torsos,
Dried apple heads, cranberry eyes—a celebration,

Middletown’s heritage. We filled three crates before
The pensive gaze of the president, straw fingers
Posed in a V of peace. Yellowjackets rose

From the fallen stalks, and clung weakly to my sneakers,
A dim buzz about the feet. History hides in the ground,
Our teacher advised. We searched. Maybe Molly Pitcher

Bravely carried water here, comforted the wounded
And lost her brooch. Those shiny spots by the fence . . .
Arrowheads? Bullets shot in the Battle of Monmouth?

But Amy and I found no artifacts and left, intensely
Disenchanted. Only the sunset was revolutionary,
Candy red, kindling the horizon, and immense.

(stanza break)
Hard to look at—all that color in the brittle air.
We stood on our knees riding backwards, cracked
Rear window webbed with light. So I saw the dairy

Recede seconds before the car reversed and pointed back,
Braking at the pasture. The doctor climbed up onto
The fieldstone. He began to sing low ecstatic

Calls to the cows. Crooning a slow vibrato,
He mooed till the guernseys clustered near, bellowing
Answers at him, long dissonant rounds which echoed

Somewhere beyond the bulks of barns and silos.
It was so cold in the car. We shivered and waited
As he mooed and moonlight blanched the willows.

Finally the doctor’s voice grew hollow. He hesitated
Then stumbled down the stones. Listen how the herd
Recalls him—huddled by the wall, their calls agitate

Horses in distant fields. Even as we leave the sound surges.
The cows loom behind us like foghorns. They won’t stop.
Gears shift, our heads jerk, the car hurtles

Forward and pitches an apple straight back into my lap.

* * *

Though my friend’s house was dark, we both rushed upstairs,
Anxious to assess our booty and bring her mother
The siamese twin apple we’d brought from the orchard.

The steps squeaked and smelled of salt. We heard water
Dripping into water. In the hall, light sliced beneath
The one door we walked toward. “Mom,” Amy hollered,
Jiggling the locked brass handle. The doctor’s abrupt breath,
Sleet on the nape of my neck as he shoved us away
Into Amy’s bedroom. Everything dangled like marionettes—

Frog figurines on her bureau, the Stones’ skinny legs splayed
In sequin jumpsuits, wild haloed hair—and then the bolt
Surrendered to a hand furled on blue tile, the toilet base

Smeared with blood, I heard the doctor's choked
Retching and his daughter careening down the stairs.
I followed, but the air seemed opaque with smoke,

Each unlit room a conundrum of refrigerators, rocking chairs,
And burglars who hid behind the couch and raised their heads
To spy. They trailed me closely, brandishing silverware,

Having escaped from the midnight corners of my own bed.
The floorboards creaked, they mirrored my footsteps.
At last—something green, lit by floodlamps, fir trees ahead,

The backyard sailboat, and Amy picking needles off its tarp.
I had found my way out to her. Red strobes and sirens
Approached, I thought of our crayon color spectrum charts,

Then of her mother, upstairs, afloat on cold porcelain,
And was ashamed. What I had seen was a hand, a forearm
Yet her whole body dilated within me. I envisioned

Her fingers alive and paring fruit. Hand and forearm,
All I had seen before the doctor pulled the door closed;
But as I was rescued from the backyard, he warned

Not to tell anyone. That winter, with its incessant snow,
Lasted a year, dense drifts kept us indoors, playing hearts
In the corners while the schoolyard roared with plows.

(stanza break)
After her awaited return to class, Amy and I grew apart. She moved her desk beside the teacher, and withdrew From our group, adopted immediately by the more popular Girls who taunted and pinched in gym. The class knew Details about her mother, though I knew I hadn't told them. At rest time, I would peer up over the crook of my elbow To watch Amy napping, blond head folded into her arms. I never believed anyone slept during those 15 minutes, Still it was the only time I could look without her turning Away from me—afternoon squalls suffusing our workbooks With snowlight, the ancient faces of the apple dolls Staring out, grown more wizened from the weather, Their bodies diminishing, propped against that cold sill.
A situation summational as a title:
One week before Christmas, you walk downtown
to sing the *Messiah* with two thousand strangers.
Taxis fishtail across Tremont Street, the afternoon slush
gain treacherous, unsalted, snow darkened by exhaust.
Reflected sidelong in storefronts, your face surfaces
in one window pocked green and red, disappears,
resurfaces one-eyed, huge, amid mannequins
anxious for January’s new poses. Inside the hall,
a muddle of strollers, packages, and heavy coats,
boot ice melting, pools of dirty water down the aisles.
Despite an orchestra in the pit and a tuxedoed conductor,
the music whispers its trick to the singers who are singers,
who all night must carry the crowd through the least known
sections of the oratorio, their recitatives, however beautiful,
echoing oddly against the gilt rococo ceiling scrolls.
But when the Hallelujah chorus begins, those unable
to sight-read stop rustling their scores and rise,
all two thousand finally join in and obscure the others.
Theatre floor trembling, velvet seat nudging
at the back of your knees, the thick air enervated
defines crescendo. Be quiet now and listen.
You payed ten dollars for this. You are hoarse
from having sung for hours.
BEGINNING BALLROOM 101b: FOXTROT TO RUMBA

Sophomore spring semester began with a blizzard, the campus
Inebriated with ice, mazes of salt mounds, and bright
Steamy windows checkering the dorm facades
Like illuminated crossword puzzles. A plow

Carved the rimed air, becoming the center of all sound
As we crossed its fresh trench at South Street, side-stepping
Down the slippery hills to the women's gym
For the first night of ballroom dance.

The building was overheated, yet the old air sweetened
With a sudden mist of Shalimar when our teacher entered,
Strutting across the glossy parquet floor
In a swingy flounced circle skirt

And red sleeveless blouse, lush with embroidered roses.
Call me Baaahbraaah, she started, her thick Boston accent
A bridge over each syllable,
I taught my six grandchildren,

To dance, so I promise you'll all be Freds and Gingers by June.
Tonight's lessons, Barbara exclaimed, will be Foxtrot, and Lindy,
Named, of course, for Lindbergh
After his trans-Atlantic hop over to France.

Directed to the "tall" group, I lined up to study the Fred steps,
While you, four inches shorter, would learn the Gingers.
The phonograph needle dropped
On In the Mood, joyous syncopated

Riffs jouncing the gym as Barbara bid us—Move, swing, sway back, bop,
Loose knees, elbows, rapt in the music, I lost myself as the saxophones
Rose and roosted in the rafters.
Dig step, dig step, rock step, she cried,
Sharp claps a metronome set to 4/4 beat, she circled the awkward
Circle of couples, tinkering with shy hands and hesitant feet.
_Closer! Your partner’s breath_
_Should be a breeze on your cheek_,

Now watch them, she said, pushing us toward the axis of the dancers,
_Model posture, precise footwork!_ My palm solid at the small
Of your back, I led us through perfect
Magic twirls, grapevines, and continuous

Underarm turns, each fluent spiral the long desired abandonment
Of my body. I whirled, spun to bands still playing in my parents’ memories,
Stunned that my cumbrous limbs
Could become elated examples of elegance.

Class over, we improvised triple swivels on the snowy parking lot,
Then slid down the streets to your boyfriend’s house.
_Teach him the Fred steps_, you begged,
And so, giddy, flushed, I placed his hand

On my waist and began—I transposed my footsteps carefully,
Afraid if I erred he’d guess no man had held me like this before.
I loved his aftershave, an acrid
Late summer basil, his rough sweater

Sleeves brushing my face as we did double dish rags until we were dizzy,
Until the soft reeds of _Moonlight Serenade_ crooned like liners
In a foggy harbor, and he took you
In his arms. From the torn velveteen sofa,

I saw your reflections foxtrot through each room of the dark apartment,
A triptych of secrets captured by the parlor’s bay window glass,
His lips navigating your neck
As you swooned down to a deep corté dip,

Curving toward the kitchen floor, and then the song changed again,
_A tango, parallel promenades from the stairway to his bedroom door._
I woke on the sofa at dawn and disappeared,
Sore from contorted sleep, the Cambridge skyline

(stanza break)
Verdigris between the bare trees as I hurried back to campus.
I had dreamt of myself, arced by his arms, of warmth beneath quilts
In a cold winter room. All that day,
Remembering the scent of basil,

Legs braided with mine, I practiced--foxtrotting past library stacks,
Cross pivots across the quad, slow-slow quick-quick, my boots tapped
Boxstep in the dim art history lecture hall
While the Renaissance bloomed on the wall.

When the golden Tuscan foothills dissolved, outside I found
Diminished snow drifts, icicles banishing themselves from eaves
In a steady staccato. I wandered
Into this afternoon thaw, deaf,

Before the abrupt trumpet of a prop plane squalled overhead,
Twin banners trailing to announce off-season hotel rates on the Cape
I wanted the pilot to wave at me, notice
The figure looking up, and, for a moment

I believed he might, dipping so low the banners' shadows drew
Grace notes on the snow, but fast rimshots split the air, propeller
Resonant, and the nose glinted and rose,
Banking eastward to travel toward the Atlantic.
JULY FOURTH, ATLANTIC CITY

The garnet mirror facets then splays our faces—
Wafer heart and bulging diamond—the escalator
Hands us down into the casino, two necks
With twelve eyes floating in the harlequin baskets
Of our heads, we arrive at the center of the floor.

We trade our quarters for an odd procession
Of fruit—lemon, plum, lemon, and lime,
Orange, lime—worthless. Our almosts,
The balanced patterns and syncopated colors,
Yield nothing more than their symmetry.

Out on the boardwalk, the concrete columns
Of the colonnade slice the afternoon. We enter
Each fragment separately: Fronds of light
Asleep in the striped canvas beach canopies,
Sudden gulls, measures of surf, then of music,

As the Salvation Army swing band crams the wide
White air with tourists dancing. Notes jounce
From the saxophone bells to the planks beneath
Our feet, out to the pier and holiday banners,
Stopping at the cot of a woman whose body

Is only her harp, mouth, and shoulders.
We listen but do not add to her money bowl.
Yards away I still hear her electrified voice
Dedicating hymns to New Jersey's dead sailors.
Today, no ships underline the horizon,

What sails are small signs hanging above
An Italian restaurant, slow blue mosaics
Whose tile canals twist us toward the bus depot.
We board, your skin blues in the reading lamp,
And what sails is small, a vessel made buoyant

(stanza break)
Because this morning palms woke within palms,
Absorbing a glance of sun as it blanched,
Walked from the wall to our arms, and we
Became the day's veneer, trees enfoldling
The parkway, a narrow iron footbridge.
MINIATURE GOLF AT 10:00 P.M.

Hole eleven is an island, par three. Trick hollows hidden by the astroturf, you plan your putts with such geometry the ball skirts between the looming ferns, rolling right into the shell-tiled cup, one under par. You wait on the drawbridge. Flying past the floodlamps, my ball drops into the quiet moat. On the window ledge at the motel, two half-full tumblers salt and chill in the cold ocean air. Earlier, while you slept, dusk pushed under the blinds, weaving them into the blue remnants of the day. I understood your blue shoulderblades, and why the light wouldn't stay, even if persuaded.
PART III
STORY CITY

We wander the crafts booths mumbling the song
of the disappointed newcomers—moody, inconsolable,
sick of locals insisting we could love anyplace, if only
we would try. Velkommen to the annual Summer Festival
of Scandinavian Heritage, weekend of funnel cakes, kringle,
and clog dance lessons on the green. Viking floats, lefse,
salted cod on this corner, lingonberry jam on the next.

But two thousand miles west,
months before the move,
this town was our salvation,
twenty miles north of new jobs.

Imagine—we told friends—
a place actually called Story City!
And so, we packed crates,
consoling ourselves with its creation.

We named the main street Denouement Avenue, bordered
by little stores with strange, meticulous window displays
(the shopkeepers' way to teach the weight of detail). Conflict?
Tornadoes and foreclosures. No wonder the tellers get migraines
and cash bad checks—everyone's surname is Protagonist.
And nights at home, their families are melancholy or ecstatic,
the result of childhoods spent on the cusp of epiphany.

This morning, when the Illinois Central
train whistles woke us,
blonde boys were already blazing
the side streets in rusted-out sedans,

and tossing crushed beer cans at trees.
Restless, quarreling, we cursed them,
grabbed maps, and finally drove
here to find our Story City.

(stanza break)
Now lightning like rick-rack trims the town's hem, yet we still can't guzzle phosphates or clog dance. Even the instructor's red skirt becomes our discontent, embroidered, inert in the heat though beautiful. Learn to love anyplace? If true, all entrances should be marked Beginning, and all exits The End. And then this town would self-destruct, because every man on the street finds every woman to be the momentary, singular object of their desire.
KOL NIDRE, IOWA

The last hot night of autumn. Cornfields on the cusp 
of harvest shiftless, dry and ticking, crickets stippling 
the surface of our prayers. The newborn in front of me 
spirals into sleep, soaking her father's tweed with drool.

Lips resting on her crown, thumbs stroking her ears, 
he sings vaguely so that she will not waken or cry.

New to the barren tenacity of these plains and skies, 
I am reverent only in my suspicions that anything familiar

is a ruse, even here, where four variations of Grandma Lil 
mourn in the adjacent pew . . . Sapphire hair, soft arms circled

by peppermint lozenge pearls, and her dress, the polka-dot 
flimsy shift she wore every season, shooting underground

from Queens to her job in The Empire State Building. 
I spent a day there once, racing firetrucks between her feet,

Lil's dimpled knees touched my head while she typed 
and the big desk shook. At coffee break she rolled back

her chair and called Look! Pigeons cluttered on the sill, 
white with years of droppings. Lil waved to a skyscraper

across 34th Street. A woman grinned and waved back. 
Don't listen to anybody, Lil said, New York is the best

city in the world. Later at her apartment, the oily brisket 
and carrots set to stew then scorch black, Lil carried a platter

from the kitchen heaped full of her Hungarian salad. 
She placed it, as always, at center table, and bent to dust

(stanza break)
paprika: across the cucumbers—each slice impossibly thin,  
spring green, and more translucent than cricket wings.

The vinegar and onions sharpened the air of those rooms;  
the kitchen’s simmering heat retreating into ceiling cracks,

as red dusk fell and the walls flushed . . . Lil stands slowly,  
and reaches to tighten pins anchoring the brown wool cloche  
to her hair. Inside this synagogue, tiny, and perched  
on the edge of a darkened farm, the congregation has risen  
to say Kaddish. I watch the pear-shaped liver spot  
on her left hand tremble. (Sometimes she stroked my cheeks  
and murmured Velvet, just like velvet, but her fingertips  
often smelled of fish and I would pull away.) Lil thumbs  
through the book, then begins to pray. I rise to join her  
startled by the sounds that swarm in my mouth.
SUNDAY AFTERNOON PALINDROME

They buy frozen orange juice, bread, eggs, then leave
Counting their change. Small brown sack balanced
Against her hip, she lags yards behind his shadow.
Keys and coins peal deep in his trenchcoat pockets,
Khaki cloth resurrected on this day of ransacked trees.
He lopes to the car, coat tails snapping and talking back
At the wind—almost aloft, the lift of canvas wings . . .
Winter mornings, her students giddy from forecasts of snow,
She would show their favorite movies, Pioneers of Flight,
Path to Kitty Hawk: Animated bird-men leaping off blind
Cliffs and campaniles, courageous monks left blind,
Maimed, because their feathered limbs failed to echo flight.
How the children cheered as the credits rolled into snow,
Anticipating the projector's gift of reversal, splintered wings
Instantly whole could soar the crumpled adventurers back
To departure, their apparatus upswept from ravines and trees . . .
Last night the clocks turned back, cramming winter's pockets
Full with light. This is her dreaded season, long shadows
In the den by noon tipping the house off-balance,
Her garden dim and inverted, the gutters clotting with leaves.
ABOUT THE COMP INSTRUCTOR AND THE BEES

She was preaching that one must avoid the passive voice
when her best student whispered Bees, and pointed to dozens,
swiggling down from craters in the pressed-board ceiling tiles,

deep surging drone, a B sci-fi flick of giant insects invading
empty lunar landscapes. Listen, these bees were very angry--
it was a chilly October morning, and she'd guessed their game

was almost up. Before dismissing class, she observed
a swarm click in the coils of the perfumed tri-delt's perm,
saw the allergic boy who wrote every essay about baseball

flee to the hall—fearing for his life was not a requirement
for freshman comp. Bored to death, maybe, but not dead.
Let's be honest, transference aside, she did not fear her students

might be stung. Since August, bees had convened on the sills,
mumbled in corners during groupwork, until they ventured up
and died, trapped in the florescent fixtures. All fall this collection

grew, rustling cargo in the long white hulls adrift on the ceiling.
Despite having taught nothing, she announced Let's end here,
I'm afraid you'll be hurt, and the students bought her sincerity.

The night Armstrong would walk on the moon, her father,
mother, brother, and she sat stranded at the crest of a hill,
in a yellow and black rental van packed with moving crates,
bikes, and a lawnmower. All four tires lanced by nails,
lightning seering the sky, they waited for the storm to stop.
And when it did, her father went to call everyone they knew,
everyone, from a lit colonial on the hill. A Downs boy
rose in his bedroom window and stared out at the van.
The father trudged back to his family defeated. No one

(stanza break)
would help them, even the mother's best friend refused
their rescue, suspecting yet another practical joke concocted
by this father who was famous for them; because this night

of everyone, locked in their cool homes, waiting to see
one man take his walk, somehow seemed rank for a good gag.
Abandoning the van, the family hiked two dark downhill miles
to their house, the only finished structure on the cul-de-sac.
The unnamed street was mud, neighboring lots a puzzlement
of foundations and frames. The next morning, our instructor,

who was then six years old, discovered a saltwater brook
beside their house was tiled with bits and chunks of fossils.
One certain nightmare visited her frequently all that summer:

Zooming around the top story of the new house, she orbited
above unfamiliar furniture, fast, then rocketed downstairs,
fast, crash landing, open-mouthed, into a violent hive of bees.
FOR SALE BY OWNER

This is the house that no one will buy:
Cape Cod saltbox slapped up at the prairie's edge,
moored to a subdivision of faux fieldstone chateaus
and red roof haciendas, the last lot before backyard sod
splices back to farmland. Four bedrooms, two baths,
oak trim, bevelled glass, nearly new yet abandoned
by every realty agency in town. Even the hard-sell
platinum blonde was stymied—triple garage spotless,
all her secret tips for domestic adornment obeyed.
Daylight basement, master suite... but on taut

October weekends many drove up I-35 only to return
to Des Moines disquieted. Sundeck, solarium,
lopsided garbage bag jack o'lanterns, plastic skeletons
aloft in the new sumacs. Attic dormers, marble foyer...
and in February this house featured three small sons

sculpting snow presidents to flank the driveway.
Huge Washingtons and Lincolns, proficient depictions,
until a thaw swept by, melting the monuments
into Easter Island men in tricorne and toppers
whose tunnel eyes guarded the property for months.

Spacious walk-in closets, breakfast nook, pantry...
but last spring this was the house playing bad Bach,
late May afternoons when the middle daughter repeated
painstaking bars of Joy of Man's Desiring, determined
to master embouchure so her high E's could be on key.

Prospective buyers rolled up in minivans, heard the flute
and thought--Christmas! At dusk thunderclouds unfurled
into wide bolts of batik staining the windows saffron,
so they fled, convinced this house was wrong. Summer!
Owner must sacrifice! But where are the prospectives tonight?

(stanza break)
The mother scatters green beach glass in her flower beds as inside her youngest son is a mute silhouette against the cornfields touching their backyard. Shirtless, his torso arched back in a smooth parabola, he holds an orangeade jug high above his mouth and deeply drinks.

Just now, driving home, the platinum blonde realtor realizes she is passing the house no one would buy. It was the view, she decides, that extinct grain elevator a few acres east, bleached parallelograms empty in the evening sun, an inscrutable volume problem in a child’s math book.
GREEN STILL LIFE

—Exodus 16:13-14

Tourmaline—the scrubby willow leaf
mined from its tree by hail,
captured at the base of your neck
amid scant blond hairs varnished wet.
So bright and small,
it must have bloomed a moment ago.

Stalled mid parking lot, we can't drive anywhere,
the windshield a frayed veil of rain and ice,
coincidence guised as a downpour.
Parodying itself, the storm ends tritely—
sunbeams between charcoal thunderheads,
frozen forsythia petals blaze amber . . .

Wavering in the window's condensing steam—
violet address book in a poorly lit hallway,
my grandmother's Laurelton kitchen,
the Passover painting hung above her walnut endtable,
God a garish shaft of sun materializing into the tablets,
twin mountainsides flooded jade and gold.

Her special trick: angling spoons
she refracted the chandelier crystal light onto Moses' beard,
transforming the cheap impasto to rock candy.
How would this leaf taste kissed from your skin?
Salty, an accidental mouthful of ocean,
metallic, gritty with sand?

We leave now, speeding down Story Road
to the prairie—cottonwood spores
skitter across the hood, bites of honey cake
sweetening winds blown east by the storm.
The air strengthens, lifts the leaf from your neck,
sends it toward the twitching soy fields.
THE LUCILLE BALL ROSE

A striking hybrid tea rose with sweet fragrance and lavish seasonal show of blooms. Distinguished by glorious color (a perfect match to Lucy's hair).

—Jackson & Perkins catalog

"Oh lady, you gotta be crazy," the cabbie had laughed, when she asked for 623 East 68th Street, "no such place!"

But she pleaded, and so he drove the pale tourist crosstown to the island's eastern edge. "Just let me out here," she said, unable to admit she was searching for the Mertz's brownstone.

The cabbie hesitated—something about her baby blue wool coat

and the clear way she spoke—though he roared off anyway, leaving her with the river clunking up against the breakwater, bottles, cigarettes, and seaweed, New York garbage at noon

on the first day of spring in 1962. That night in the hotel room her husband entertained insurance colleagues from Wisconsin. Each convention brought the same men and overcooked food.

Why mingle if the doors to their double suite could be closed, and she could lay across the beds, and dream a lost episode? Ricky, Fred, and her husband upstairs watching the fights,

while Lucy, Ethel, and she played canasta and ate chocolates. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have friends, living just downstairs, who quarrel yet wear matching pajamas? A question she posed

every rerun afternoon spent sitting in the den, her son asleep, while Lucy talked Martian on the top deck of the Empire State, jitterbugged, stomped grapes. Nothing could be more vivid

(stanza break)
than the colors of that half-hour—red heart, yellow bassinet, famous ash-grey hair perceived as steamy henna, or apricot, or a pink, embarrassed flush of delight. Her garden knows,

having seen through the windows on the flickering television, the collar of Lucy’s emerald maternity top framing her smile. The garden is trying to match the green depth of that velvet,

stealing chlorophyll from the lawn and trees until everything is black and grey and white, except the roses, who tell jokes and entertain the other flowers at night. Petunias get advice

to dress incognito as Tropicana showgirls. And the lavender sets sail for Europe on an ocean liner next week. When it rains, and pebbles beat on bongos, the fireflies concoct an elaborate

scheme—unlit, it's easy for them to plot, hide, and whisper. Perfectly disguised, never having known such happiness, they scribble a plan in bright ink on the wet screen of soil.