History of thread

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History of thread

by

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

MASTER OF ARTS

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Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.

—Marge Piercy, "The Seven of Pentacles"
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Silk

The old tailor read late into the night
about industrialization and

about the new gabardines, but mostly
he read about the life of the silkworm:

wildly consuming Mulberry leaves
as glands inside its body secrete fluid

that hardens when it leaves the mouth
and meets the air. The silkworm produces

long strands like the thin membrane
that holds nail to finger to needle to thread.

Three hundred thousand times in one day,
it pulls small strings through its body,

hemming itself in and out of a shelter
like suits for someone else’s skin.

But what stopped the tailor’s fingers,
was the chapter on the heady-scented

silkworm gut he had used to sew together
jacket sleeves. How, after an acid bath

the silk thread—baled, nestled, waiting
to emerge—was extracted with a needle

from the tender abdomen.
I. INSTINCT
Migration

Each day started with a new hand to hold.
Even when I was snipping birds from colored paper

and pasting wings on rough-cut backs, I was this way.
Making mobiles to hang above our beds became a time

for deciding, fledglings pushing eggs from the nest.
As a token, a bribe maybe—but not quite—

the quietest boy with the dirtiest hair gave me his bluebird,
heavy and thick with glue, a carefully crafted paper beak

opening to the sky. With him, I wanted to paste together
a long row of weeks, months. Instead, I lifted the bird,

jabbed a hole in its feathers and strung it as the mobile’s
long center piece, the weight the rest revolved around.

Then I turned away, back to paper birds with perfect
wings that floated in the breeze of a box-fan.

But over the years, if I find this mobile, I’ll hold it up
and see that the bluest bird is still the gravity.
Robert B. Green Hospital, San Antonio

open only for OB, ER

Flash back thirty years

to a man, dark hair,

immigrant,

pounding on the chest

of a junkie in the side room

of the drunk tank.

A clean Narcan needle
slides under pulseless
pockmarked skin—

livens it,

He’s clawing, pawing

for nurses’ fat arms.

Fuck-ing foreigner

hisses the man
under his near-death
Mexican breath.

the man who’s pissed
he lost his
thirty-five dollar fix.

the man who
wobbles, wobbles,
into the hollow cheeks

of a city still crawling
with leprosy, TB,
dragging lungs
full of knives.
Here, Saint Anthony,
the foreign, the beaten,

the pregnant travel together,
one giving birth
to the next.
Clay

I.

The man at the junk shop tells me how the hands that made this vase used horsehair to lay the designs. When the kiln glows hot and ready the hair burns up, but leaves black carbon roads on the brown clay. Each strand, he says, carries the scent of smoke and dung. Etched over the lines, a cliff swallow alights on the neck of the vase. At the register, it leans, precarious from too much polishing, stones against fired clay. In the exchange of cash, it slips and shatters. Don’t worry, he says, it happens all the time.

II.

In the afternoon, I walk to the gorge and know her descent was not like a bird’s, the flutter of her sleeves above this split of earth. Wind gusts through the hollows, breaking loose the dry flowers that hang from the chipped red rails. I do not know this woman, but I want to untie this string and take her photo with me, let it warm in my pocket, frame it and place it at my bedside, not leave it over this sagebrush and strip of water. Yet I can only move my fingers across this place where she let go and see where her hair became the threads on the pottery below.
Descent

Dark bar. For conversation I say, tell me about the scant strokes on the insides of your hands. The slip of a knife into a palm, not an apple. A clumsy childhood, maybe. These lines are not stories. They are a fleshy mass, alive but no longer pink, grown to cover the earliest memory: the steel toe of her new boyfriend’s boot into your four-year-old face; falling hard into the radiator. Blood tastes like iron. The rattle of dinner dishes under scalding water, her hands opened, full of heat, not moving. She only listens. You have never forgotten the silence of when her footsteps did not come to cradle you from these nights. Now you fill your minutes with music, curving tones into any open space. You curl yourself to me under blankets. You grip my hands and the rough tissue stretches smooth, blossoming into the song she must have hummed that night on the train tracks. They claim
My Mother Calls to Tell Me

That she has butchered an animal. That when she walked the dogs this bitter afternoon, the large gold boy—who was gregarious and in the lead—sniffed out a thick, old deer carcass to eat. The smaller, curly-haired dog, who sits at the table during dinner, trotted to join him with his curious tail wagging.

That the larger mouth, all teeth and bloodied gums, grabbed hold of the delicate head of the littler dog. Her hands darted into the tangle of wet, straining fur. Tearing at each other like goddamn animals. She ran to the house and took the long-handled axe from the garage rafters and could only think to break the frozen animal with hard strokes of metal.

That her fury brought snow in wet, heavy flakes. Tawny fur mixed with it and floated skyward. She sweated under the down jacket, let it fall coolly open. Fended off the dogs to load pieces of the stiff creature into the shiny black kitchen garbage bag with one foot bending out into a perfect leap to form a handle.

That she had to bend at her waist and throw all her weight forward
against the deer’s to haul the heavy
bag up the slope towards home,
both dogs in tow, but shaking blood.
That looking back into the valley
the impressions they left in the snow
seemed so tender: feet, paws, the cold,
flat coil that a body leaves behind.
That hurt is instinctive, she calls to tell me.
“Never Marry a Hog Farmer”

His words spilled out like foul milk from the veins of a broken weed. He’d whispered to her, loud enough for the whole room to hear—this black aphid, this tax man. As the band played cold notes on their clean brass, she, in a sky blue dress perfectly hemmed by her own hands, clutched her soon-to-be husband. She touched the hog-feed roughness and the heat of his ripe gold skin. She felt his fingers curl and coil like burning corn husks. Before he could rise, the tax man tossed her a dime—to call him when she tired of *that* farmer. Her fine sparrow features narrowed. She stood to face him and found inside herself everything wet and terrible, brought it to the surface, bundled it against her furrowed palate.

When she sat down, one glistening thread of saliva lay across her mouth. With his thumb, now soft as the ear of a sow, the farmer wiped her rose lips dry.
A Preoccupation with Missing

The delicate curve of a girl’s hair between forehead and brow burns into her mind. The mother dreams of her, of the life-giving properties of blood and of its absence—how its disappearance elates. But now, what is gone is what consumes. For a woman in Glen Oaks, Georgia, that missing child was once that missing blood. And the blood is now the lost warmth of a bed, blankets tucked neatly into the mattress all night and all day, while birds chirp and squeal, while the blood comes, not like rain or tears, but like a thick sadness or maybe indifference—like it knows, when a child is gone, to begin again.
Blood Ties

His fingers, thick as railroad spikes,
count each boxcar as it passes.

The delicate mesh of his bones bends
and dances. He is trapped on one side

of this metal equator. This wall, laid
down and sprawled out, temporary

and terminal. He’s heard about
the mother who stepped in front

of a train going 55 mph. The force
broke her pelvis, femur, collarbone,

ribs, eye sockets. Each bone
and binding tissue floated under

her skin, linked like tiny train cars.
She lived. He lays his hands

on the danger that trains drag, feels
the way fathers leave sons to bury

their bodies in the grid of tracks.
Each person a repeated link, a thread

of muscle holding itself together,
breaking apart, filling with lactic acid.

He sees one hundred and fifty two
aortas patched chamber to foreign
chamber, a common blood drawing
warm through each straw-like structure.

As he counts, he strains to hear the force
of a human heart beating against the tracks.
Natural History

The short black tongue of a bee curls into nectar that is not like blood but is a thicker sap this small body brought by settlers claims its own ripe stem of buckwheat these sugars are pungent from under the stink of the milkweed comes a sweeter salve and the safflower flows to nourish the most amber nests through winter-dark nights while honey from the whitest flowers leaves a stain that no one can see.
Winter Fruit

I am rooted to him now
only with the pears I buy:
matte brown skin, long necks

and stems. A feathery dry casing
I want to lay smooth. The flesh,
grainy and firm. When we walked

between the trees in the wet hours
of spring he took me to the one
whose branches he allowed to spread

wider than the others', arching almost
to the grass. He had tied a bottle
onto a limb that curled up toward

gray sky. It was somehow beautiful
when I first saw this vessel. Papery
white petals with narrow veins.

A blossom bursting from a thin,
dark artery into an antique bottle,
the kind that once held a sweet musk

or a drugstore potion. A novelty,
it grew safely inside the glass womb.
It must have been a pristine fruit,

too obscene to eat. When he cut it
from the tree, it lasted for weeks
on his shelf before it began to slump
and release its pungent odor. Sugars
caramelized gold across the bottom
leaving only a slender spine propped

like a single chicken bone against
the filmy walls. I can hear the knife
he used to slice the fibers of the branch

shifting in his pocket when we speak.
The orchard, he says, is doing well.
I know these pears are not windfalls.
Visitation

Cattails push up through snow
and night at the edges of frozen lakes.

We are quiet as I drive the glazed roads,
both of us wanting an end or a beginning.

An explosion of movement comes
from the field. Brakes the unexpected slide

our car skims follows the passenger side
black ice hand over hand wheel turning

let off the pedal steer ditch/ drop-off/
culvert. My world thaws, my head rushes

back to summer camp: I pick apart pellets
with dull needles to see what’s been taken

inside: jaws of mice, a pelvis, a smell
that tastes like falling leaves and dirt.

Night after night in my bunk bed, I’d dreamt
of fur balled and spilling from my mouth.

Children gathered below in tiny red chairs,
hoping mine would be a lucky one, full

of golden insect coats and leg bones.
To be rolled, examined, touched;

to be torn. Nighttime gold blinks
from a perch on the stop sign and cold
from the seat next to me. He clicks
the metal latch of his seatbelt and reaches

for the door, ready to inspect the damage.
I face forward, but know when his hand

hesitates and he turns to me, my eyes glossing,
clouding in the dark: *Allison, it was an owl.*

But its wings were like walking. I didn’t realize
what it was, I didn’t realize that it could fly.
II. DEPARTURES
When the Body Bends

Paint molts from the walls of the farmhouse
and scatters into the grass, sore and brown.
Gone for years now is the reek of hogs.
I remember inside, he sang of the land of Tirnanog
in words that would return us to him, the father,
who stood sturdy on rugged land like Oisin.

When he whispered the ancient name Oisin
a deep voice welled from his chest, covered in a brown,
down jacket, from the space that warmed young hogs
when electricity failed and storms thrashed the farmhouse.
As he prepared the thawing water, my father
forbade them to shelter in Tirnanog.

Not knowing that summer Tirnanog
would call, we held knives strong-handed like Oisin
who rode from paradise, but fell. My father
knew the pungent smell inside the farmhouse
the sweltering days he taught us to slaughter hogs,
tendons cut and separated, blood caking brown.

Rows of foxes were strung for pelts, shining red-brown,
to cool outside in the shade of the farmhouse,
feet broken in fields before Tirnanog,
fields where the horse and woman found Oisin.
Over wet soil, his hot neck--bent to tend hogs--
raised to her as he forgot duties of the father.

We have finally returned for our father,
but the fields remain vacant of he and Oisin,
while strangers pick rocks from soil no longer brown.
We step back towards the caving farmhouse
in search of words to mend this Tirnanog,
to return to our life of slitting hogs.

In the house, furniture fills rooms like hogs
rutting the tender earth that my father
sowed, while he hummed the verses of Tirnanog.
I am forbidden to enter, to walk the brown,
rotting boards that supported night-stories of Oisin,
that supported the framework of this farmhouse.

We walk the yard, brown and emptied of hogs,
singing of Tirnanog, seeking not Oisin,
but our father, standing outside a farmhouse.
Teaching the Visual Argument

Photo: one woman stands in front, her arms spread wide and skyward, protestors have piled Monrovian bodies along the coils of barbed wire that lace the U.S. Embassy building. A mass of hands curved in gentle Cs, quiet torsos clad in bright colors. Lengths and lengths of legs. Strips of cloth draped unnaturally low above taut black shoulders. And from the left, a living hand, cropped mid-wrist, points one finger into the frame, into the heap, as if to say: See.

Student 1: I guess it makes me think how lucky we are to live in the United States.

Student 2: The woman in the orange dress must have been so beautiful.
Tu canción desesperada

_for Professor D._

Face it, Johnny D., you don’t _really_ speak Spanish.
Your tongue has never rolled an R, you can’t
tell me that el cinturón ruidoso del mar cine
la costa. In class,
you wanted me
to explore my Shadow
Self, _those dark impulses_
you said you saw
in my stanzas,
but what you really saw
was my mind being molded
into a bowl or a box—
anything you could put
a little bit of yourself into.

Now here you are
running your filthy fingers
through that thinning crop
of hair that circles
your head in pubic curls
from ear to ear
while you have me pinned
between the bookcase
and the middle-aged-man
paunch that bulges
over your belt buckle.
I struggle. You remind me
you’re a writer. _Published._
Oh, sentina de escombros,
in you everything fell
into the wrong places:
your PhD into disrepair,
your tongue, laced
with cheap gin,
into my mouth.
I grind my heel
into your fat sausage
toes. Your daughter—
who was also born in ’81—
grimaces from a shoddy
photo on the wall.
And this
is my ex-wife, you say,
letting me go
so you can lick
the curve of her
framed breasts.

I run for the door,
but you’ve got me
by the hair. Don’t worry—
your hot breath in my ear—
I only fuck people
who want to be fucked.
You and your bottle
stumble and I pound down
the fire escape stairs.
The only thing I’d
come to pick up tonight,
Veinte poemas de amor
y una canción desesperada,
soars down to the parking lot
gravel. *WAIT*, you shout,
but I won't. This is the hour
of departures, oh abandonado.
The Most Famous Lepidopterist in the World

Renowned in his circle of entomologists,
he observed splitting chrysalises and wrinkled
wings stretching to dry smooth and wide.
He used his sweep-net to capture pairs mating,
to study the intricacy of the flap of a wing.
He filled glass jars with formaldehyde
to separate life from living. Careful
not to remove the tiny, colored scales,
he pinned, with terrifying precision, one wing
then the next. Every day, he sat in his office
of shadow boxes—oh, to be preserved
in memory like Baron von Humboldt,

like Karl von Frisch. Until one day, he held
a dripping rag among the world he had encased,
realizing that to breathe this liquid was to live
forever. And there he fell—the most famous
lepidopterist in the world—wings spread,
immortalized like the great, rare Hesperia.
The Plight of the *Juniperus scopulorum*

Take a tree. Choose one that sounds probable for your geographic region. It’s best if the tree has a special feature—like a willow, which can grow a web of thick roots in water, no soil is necessary. That could be an ethereal, hopeful, religious symbol, but a willow is already too much of a poem. Instead, choose a tree that is more obscure. A juniper.

Yes, choose a juniper tree. Now look! Run your eyes up the shaft of that trunk (do try to equate this asexual being with human sexuality). Trace with your eyes the rugged, cinnamon-colored bark that, when peeled, reveals something smooth like a wet thigh. Write about the way Juniper roots grow maniacally, drinking up miles of water sources, drying out the earth to grow large and to grow alone. Relate this all to sex, then realize that every day you plant your own trees. You dig your own ditches and use your sieve to sift dirt, to make metaphors from mud.
The River Narmada

Bajri springs, warm and green,
from ancient earth under strong men

while women grind thick seeds
of the Mahua tree into sweet oil,

stew the tender flowers to drink,
crush the fruit to eat, until the canal’s

concrete lining gives way and water
soaks straw walls, pours over beds

and crumpled blankets and kitchen
tables that hold hot cups of strong tea

and the steeped stories of families
wash away and little girls’ hair floats

snake-like around their faces and
when the canal breaches its borders,

no one bothers to count the people
who are swept away like twigs

and the giant Mahua tree is nothing
but tiny fingers waving in the current

and the water comes too fast for crops
to draw it through their thin roots.
Madre

for Amanda Jara

I wake, screaming myself out of the field where he was defeated, crying *Victor*. Victor, in whose hands I placed la guitarra.

He is practicing in the other room, a minor chord. I could burn the guitar, leave a charred heap of metal pins, but I am years too late. The ritmo already comes from his hands, the way the grano comes from the ground when the men arch their strong backs to pull. They start with nothing.

He begged every morning to learn how to play. *Enseneme, por favor.* We sang and I taught him to hold the neck and body, to pluck and press,

sound by sound, until his fingers bled from the metal strings. My arms around his small torso, I showed him how to place the arc of the wood over his laborer’s knees, to put flesh in his voice. His own words kept pace with his hands, playing until it was dark and his fingers grew hard, his nails rubbed almost as short as my own.

This boy, older in the dreams, who tends
the harvest and dances the cueca, white
handkerchief waving, who still gets dust

in his eyes, will sing. But the same men
come every night with their rifles.
They are searching for the silence
of our country. Note by note, they break him.

Mi hijo, fingers curled like strings tuned
too tight, unstrung. His hands hang
like banderas from their snapped wrists.
Chiaroscuro

_for Artemisia Gentileschi and “Judith Beheading Holofernes”_

This guise, this dress sleeve, 
is what makes it different.
Under the shade of her sex
she does as women do,
seducing each brush stroke,
each wash of white, each nest
of dark. Bristles drip browns,
grays, and flesh tones. She slides
the brush to bleed the tiny vessels
of Holofernes’ neck. She twists
the handle of the sword, her arms,
parallel forces, left to strike
when they can, to strike
while the men sleep. Painting,
not to know what it feels like
to be a heroine, but to know
what it feels like to move
a sword through skin.

Nights, she wakes to listen
for Judith’s footsteps, hushed
and always urgent. She hears
nothing, but feels eyes looming
like frescoes as he comes for her.
In the murk of each night,
he paints the canvas with her body.
With violent motions, bowls
of pigment scatter the floor.
In the morning she taps
the white lightness of the sheets
from her brush, dilutes the slick
red with her saliva to capture
the head pinned at the necessary
angle. She stands from the easel.
She is walking now, always walking,
and reaching Bethulia in the dark
night only to find the village empty.
In These Red Hours

His hand, sweaty and heavy, rests
at the nape of my neck. His eyes survey
plates streaked with sauces, crushed
berries, meat trimmings. In these red hours
at the end of the night his gaze falls
to where the table top rises, just below breasts.
For years, this has been our ritual. Dinner party.
Too many loud voices. The perpetual drifting
of his hard eyes. Over the rim of his glass,
he takes her in and she sits there like the goddamn
Birth of Venus as he licks her into his bowl.
Her qualification, she is young. Mine,
he is sworn to this union. Pour the girl
some wine, they carol. And as the bottle drips
the last staining drop into her glass, the swarm
of ruddy faces laughs and cackles, kiss it.
Kiss the bottle. Hesitant, confused, she looks to me.
Kissing the bottom of an empty wine bottle;
maintenance within the year. I say only, Tradition.
The Artist Stops Painting Hollyhocks for Tourists

The artist is busy when we come in—
she makes this clear. Her back to us,
she arranges flowers in a Mason jar.
I pick through postcards with watery
paintings reproduced, just to watch her:
a knife in one hand, both holding
and cutting the stems like tiny umbilical
cords. Tulips are the only flowers
that grow after this, shifting towards
light until the sap drowns them
and they fall open. My mother asks her
about a painting she bought here,
this time last year. I think I know
the one—it hangs down the hall
to what used to be my bedroom,
in the house I refused to let her sell—
washes of leaf green, blotches
of weepy pink, wilting inside the frame.
It reminds her of her grandmother, she says,
who showed her how to make blossom dolls,
who I know lived a violent life,
whose name I carry like heavy sod.
The artist focuses on the jar. Turns it away,
centers it. Then reaches for her canvas.
I want to scold her like a child: *Tulips poison everything except other tulips.*
Fin de siecle

I kneel uncomfortably
in front of rows of books,
pull some out, examine
covers, absorb lines and
stanzas behind a cardboard
cutout of Harry Potter.
In passing, a boy, eighteen,
baseball cap, acne, drooping
eyes scoffs at the sign
for the section: Poetry.
He snatches up a book
to sample the awkward,
wet words. He laughs
out a few lines to his
friend, who is making
his way to the distant
magazine rack to look at,
but not buy, glossy copies
of Motorin' and Maxim.
Still jeering, he slaps
the cover closed and slams
the book to the shelf.
Chooses a new one
and reads the first lines
aloud. The Salley Gardens
slow him and after she bid me
take love easy, as the leaves
grow on the tree, his
shoulders sag. He reads
now softly to himself.
III. RITUAL
Vanitas in Black and White

Light hums behind an x-ray,
a doctor illuminates a woman.
With firm fingertips, calloused
from pins that have slipped past
thimbles, she leans forward to touch
the film that displays her core.

For years, she had learned to cover
bodies. She wove threads in tiny Xs
and in long, punctuated lines to trace
the edges of tweed, of wool. She pierced
the soft linings of suits and sewed
new satin edges on tiny blankets,
the needle pausing between pursed
lips. Every scrap was bound into
warmth. So many children, hemmed

into trousers that skimmed the heels
of shiny shoes down cobbled roads.
But now, against translucent black

glow a single needle in her gray pocket
of stomach. Her own body lays bare.
Older, each stitch grows less swift

than the last. The threads become blurry
and distant, but now it is easy to see
how the needle holds the light: nestled
deep beneath the same skin that cupped
    the middle child, the son who came too early.
    Who had grown in the darkness just below

the x-ray. Of all of the fibers she fastened,
    this one could not hold. As the doctor leaves
    her hand falls over the gentle slope of flesh

that contains this thin reminder.
    Her shoulders shake and her lungs heave
    for all of the stitches that have unraveled.
Upon Buying His First House,
    Complete with Woodshop

Wood shavings fall from his knife
like his past, a list of math classes
that didn’t calculate the long hours
he could stand over a pile of scrap
and transform it. That didn’t analyze
the way a table saw cuts through,
leaving only dust and a deep gouge.
Now, under the force of the clamps
dozens of long strips of cedar
are trained to curve upward, inward.
In the half-light of the garage,
the slender boards glow sepia.
Perfect edges slide together under
his hands into perfect corners.
He fills the gaps of the skeletal hull.
He traces the length of the gunnels
and from bow to stern, he sands
the vessel’s rough sides smooth.
Even without measurements,
he can feel how the water will bend
to make a hollow space for this canoe.
Outside, as night comes on, the roots
of the hydrangea he planted in spring
carve a deep map into the rich sea of soil.
Ritual

He climbs into the hollow
old Scout, a shiny .22 caliber
Smith and Wesson rattling
on the cold metal floorboards.
Turns the key hard and drives
until the forked trees force him out,
to walk along the dry creek bed.
In the near dark of 4am, he retraces
his careful steps, gun in hand.
The basin of the creek cradles
the thick steel trap. The clamp
holds the thin, strong leg
of a red fox who struggles now
to escape the approaching sound.
Some trappers didn’t check traps
for days after they’d set them.

He stands away—a few extra yards
of frosted grass between them,
so she would be less afraid—
as he loads narrow bullets
into the chambers. He shoots her
and with a stick, pries the trap
open. She lays heavy over one arm
and from the other hand, the jaws
of the trap hang quietly
from their chain. On the crisp grass
he opens her, slides the glossy
fur from her cooling body
and onto the long wire frame
to stretch the pelt tight.
In the early morning dark,
he had not seen the black scars
that her winter-dense fur
was just beginning to cover.
The Conservationist

He starts fires. He calls them *controlled burns*. His jeep rumbles over our early morning quiet. Two balled sleeping bags jerk, in fits and starts, in the back. The land we cross is dark.

When I turn to him, in the kind light of dawn he reminds me to look out the window. We are tracking deer. To see where they live, to see what herds they are traveling in today.

He shoves the jeep into park and leaps out the door towards fresh mud. He uses his thumb and pinky to measure a track. *Elk*, he says, hopping back in, *and her fawn.*

He knows that to get close to an animal you must keep something in between as you approach. Last night, he held me only until he thought I’d fallen asleep.

He knows how we could stay alive for weeks out here eating berries, bark, and insects. He knows how brittle a twig, or say, a bird, is when the fire is gone and all that’s left is black.

When I ask how fast the fires burn, and what about the birds and their nests of wet-headed babies with bodies curled fetus-like around one another, he doesn’t look at me.

He says, *see how much better it is to sacrifice a little life for a little more security.*
He stops the car and we look at how nature makes certainty for herself. The smooth, white scar of a lightening strike on a ponderosa pine, the bark left gaping.
Late Summer Yield

The water has already begun to boil
    when I remember that the salt
    I’d sprinkled in would shrivel
every kernel. I can see him
    out the kitchen window
    through the updraft of steam
as I pour the water down the drain.
    On a rusty lawn chair in the sunniest
    patch of grass, elbows on his knees,
he shucks corn with hands that trace
    the dent and blossom of my hips at night.
    A brown grocery bag, half full, leans
against his right leg. A stark, white
    bowl sits on his left to hold each
    undressed cob. I put fresh water
in the pot, no salt, and hurry to the door.
    I weave the laces of my shoes, string
    through grommet, string through
grommet, tie them. Slip his green
    fall jacket on, squeezing the brass
    snaps together as I open the door.
By the time I cross the soft span
    of yard, come to help him, husks lie
    scattered at his feet. He has pulled
each thread of corn silk from its kernel,
leaving the cobs clean, bare, ready.
   I'd wanted to sit in the warm gold sun with him, peel off the casings,
   leaf by leaf, and run my fingers along the lines of tiny yellow teeth.

I stand in front of him, breathing hard,
   inhaling the sharp scent of green and without a word he hands me

the bowl full of raw corn.
The Curragh

So many fires have been cut from this land, compressed by thousand-year-old trees.

I trace its edges with my feet until I find bogmen, cutting away years of petrified wood and soil and sphagnum. In a circle, they work with uneasy strokes that crumble the ground.

I watch as a form emerges from the brown moss—intact from bow to stern, the shape of a boat. They carve out the insides without setting foot on the stretched-hide hull that hangs like a basket. No one touches it, no one speaks. They cross themselves.

For weeks, I walk there to see the men cut peat from around it, their slanes dragging me to the place where the boat is becoming an island. Peat unraveling, layer by layer, like the rings of a tree, to reveal its age, to reveal this small, harboring boat. I hear echoes of the boatman, legs wet to the knee, hand on the bow, dragging it into water for the final time, muscles rolling hard into the breakers. Now the boat is so deeply
embedded that no one knows where it belongs.
When the workmen leave to stoke their stoves

with this pungent earth, I climb the steep slope.
Step softly into the hull of the boat, lie down
to see how it follows the curve of my back.
The warm scent of turf rises in waves
from the unburned ground that has saved
this reflection of sky, stored the fragile walls

of this vessel, which will keep my body warm
as the wind shifts and the boat learns again to sway.
Placing the Leaves

Maybe it's something about the way
you were cupping the apron of the table,
those decorative inches that hang
from the round, scalloped surface.

Mahogany, when this table was made,
was used to cure fever. Our knees bend,
then raise to crack it open, you move
like you do to pull someone towards
your hips to kiss them. We spread
apart two half circles, opening
that space, laying one leaf in between.
There's no metal to wind in. It's an art,
with these hand-sawed edges, all about
cutting what you can to make it fit.

Someone, dead now, drilled these holes
that I pack with matchsticks
where the plugs have worn thin.
The two support dowels are missing,
long ago left in a barn or basement,
rolled under a bed that has fallen
out of use, behind a door boarded shut.
They say a frail woman in a high, boned
collar and pointed-toe shoes, dragged
this table from a smoldering, clapboard

farmhouse while her husband was still
inside. It’s amazing that it has lasted

so long. Maybe it’s the way you heave
the half-moons back together into an oval,

that make it lay not quite even.
At dinner I know that the underpinnings

are missing. That when it creaks,
it’s because the matches are igniting.
History of Thread

I sit, quiet and alone, to thread the slender needle. To begin to sew together soft fabrics that will wrap my torso in a heat, warming only from the outside. The tail of thread follows the needle and tangles like hair through unsteady fingers. The eye watches, disappears, leaves me to my own devices. Each stitch turns into history. I can see what I have done. He told me once in whose hands this all began. Two fibers, rolled again and again between the bony fingertips of four hands creating one thread longer than each alone, strong enough to hold together a bundle of fish pulled glowing and breathing from the ocean, bound by a single repeated movement to lace the first webbed net to sustain man and his hunger like the fishes' own fine network of vessels which brings oxygen to lungs craving the close, dense weave of air in a Navajo blanket that grows larger, brighter,
dimmer, smaller as the first
loom of sky and earth is worked
with cords of lightening, white
shells and sunlight to fill
children’s hands with memories
of stitches into flesh, new
punctures that tried to close
deep old wounds. I am reminded
to join these pieces into something
like armor. Syrian girls, he’d said,
learn from their mothers to sew
moonstones into the hems

of garments, to call into existence
long rows of umbilical cords,
a generation to shroud and bury
the mothers’ wombs, to carry
baskets woven into vessels
for shining water, while men
learn to make new wounds,
as a father slides his leather
belt out of loops that drop
from the waist of his workpants
while his son waits for the sting
of hide against hide, long lashes
to stretch over the sinew
of his body, between his thin
shoulders and the ligaments

that hold together pieces
of his newfound pain. The boy
sharpens knives and prepares
to kill his own cows
while his future wife practices
how to pass ribbons through
the crosses of braided hair
for her wedding day, how to tie
each knot out of sight
so no one will know where
it is broken. I pull each stitch
through tight. This cannot
unravel now because the night
is dark enough and as I cover vast
distances, trace the journey

of this needle, I see that there is
no turning back. There is only
the decision to continue or to cut
this gentle fiber like the Fates
who cut clean through a newborn
length of thread—with the precision
of an axe meeting the trunk
of an old oak, roots grown thick
beneath a skin of moss—chopping
again and again, until nothing
remains but fossil imprints of hard
nights spent hand in hand, rolling,
spinning, waiting, wanting to wrap
threads onto each other’s spools,
trying at each turn to tie off
the loom, to bind what we can
using only what we have been given.