Blueprints

Sarah Elizabeth Burke
Iowa State University

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Blueprints

by

Sarah Burke

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
Stephen Pett
Matthew Wynn Sivils
Bambi Yost

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2013

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the editors of the following journals, in whose pages these poems first appeared, some in earlier versions:

*Cimarron Review*: “Nest”
*Copper Nickel*: “Oakledge,” “Archaeology”
*Fourteen Hills*: “In Bathroom Mirrors” (as “Waiting”)
*Green Mountains Review*: “Bees”
*Midwestern Gothic*: “Joyride,” “The Joy of Painting”
*Passages North*: “Drive Thru”
*qarrtsiluni*: “Rumor, Ghost” (as “Fox in the Shard”)
*Salamander*: “Fishing with Ghosts”
*Silk Road*: “Prayer in the Badlands”

I am most grateful to my major professor, Debra Marquart, whose keen editorial vision helped to shape and polish this manuscript; to my committee members, Stephen Pett, Matthew Wynn Sivils, and Bambi Yost, for their support and guidance; and to my cohort, Logan Adams, Corrie Byrne, Xavier Cavazos, Sean Evans, John Linstrom, Nate Pillman, Janis Rodgers, Melissa Sevigny, Abby Stonner, and Megan White, for their humor, wisdom, and inspiration.
I. HOME ECONOMICS
BRIEF HISTORY OF BLUEPRINTS

Our plans hatched like insects—
clustered rooms, constellations
of timber and nail. Our plans
blue as a drowned girl, blue
as bones in the fox’s den, peacock
feathers leaving trails in the dust.
Blue as midnight, blue as bruise,
our fathers unrolled them like old maps
of the sea  —*someday a widow’s walk*
someday a staircase—  old maps of the sea
stiff with monsters, ice fields, broken
ribs of ships, the jewels they held.
WHAT SHE KEPT

1. My baby teeth, dried blood ripening at the roots.

2. Cast sawed from my arm in childhood, cotton stained with sweat, hinged as wings.

3. Yarn the color of wheat and bone, knotted on crossed wooden sticks.

4. Wrapped in tissue paper, shards of a vase I broke.

5. White leather shoes small as coffins for hummingbirds.
We drove in at nightfall, crossing a river
whose name I didn’t know, gold light
shining through chinks in the dairy barns.
I mistook the mountains for clouds, the city
for an island in the fields. All our possessions
rattled behind us, the white van we borrowed
from your father, gnawed by rust at the frame.
For days, I barely spoke. You slipped letters
under my pillow while I slept—I know it seems
like the rain will never stop, I know this place
is foreign as the moon to you. Outside, the dogs
howled on their tethers, and fractals of orange
lichen bloomed on the graves. Surrounded
by boxes, windowsills flecked with dead bees,
we boiled water for tea, pigment
seeping from piled leaves, headless flowers.
JOYRIDE

We slice through black soil amputated corn
pig stench ripe at the heart of our country

You say  *It would be so strange to grow up here*
as if childhood were ever less than strange

as if we were cut from different cloth—
lake wind carousel rust market melons

slick with rain Our cities root in synapse
rich clots of memory Our cities whether glass

or fieldrow crisp as cards rise from corpses—
pine forest choked with needle and ice

prairie muck the children we once were
crushing wildflowers folding paper boats

ferrying bicycles down cracked cement
long aisles of peeling houses those children

silent gone as we cruise dirt roads
whispering *Strange  It would be so strange*
HOME ECONOMICS

I mend sweaters older than my marriage,
mint-green leaves of honey locust
brushing the roof, the gutters.
My mother warned me about this life,
her sewing machine hammering
cotton sheets after midnight,
footpedal slammed like a brake.
My grandmother warned me, thimble
shielding thumb from pinpricks—
*Hire a maid, girl. Never be a wife.*
I remember dark grime she scraped
like skin from the bathtub, heavy mop
she wrung like a neck. Keeping house,
make do. I pinch small holes in thinning
fabric, stitch what’s come unraveled.
No one told me there might be pleasure here,
needle cold against my skin, soft thread
knotted and clipped. Mason jars dry
on a dish towel, holding sun like slices
of lemon. No one told me I might find life here,
tying wicks as candles harden, simmering oil,
beeswax, rosemary into salve for our cracked hands.
WE LOOK TO THE BIRDS

Our houses creak like ships,
doors too big for us, distant ceilings
cracked and speckled as shells.
Cocooned in gray sheets, rented walls,
the scent of neighbors’ cooking,
we look to the birds—hatchlings
with bruise-dark eyes, nest cupping
the body, its hunger. Materials
carried in the beak, pressed
into bowls—horsehair and tinsel,
moss and spider silk, flower stems
and lint. Construction site—mailbox
or branch, saltgrass bent in the meadow.
Furniture of twig and thistledown,
fragments of bone, what hatches
from the egg and learns to cry.
THE FARMHOUSE

We expect each hammer and wrench
glittering on its proper hook, our father,
newly single, roasting rabbits under the moon.

Instead, we find the farmhouse in ruins—
raw nails, plastic sheets draped over doorways,
barn cats arching spines against our fingers.

He kneels before the fire shaking a silver pan,
popcorn shells bursting like tiny bombs. Photos
we carried from our mother’s house—

black pools, black mirrors cupping flame.
She’s alone for a night and a morning, sweeping
floors she swept yesterday. This is real,

not a dream—crescendo of splitting husks,
my sisters pulling quilts around their thighs, winter
air seeping through walls. Spring finds me

19, stuffing wildflowers in wine bottles,
saying I’ll never get married. But I do,
and after the words, after the camera’s glow

burns from our eyes, a rickshaw pulls us
by the lakeshore, mosquitos shimmering in heat,
the woods around us fragile, electric, waiting for rain.
LOTTERY

In my father’s truck, we scratch the silver coats with pennies. Shavings rain down, white interiors cleared like window panes. Sometimes the landscape is bleak—duo of cherries missing a third, tic-tac but no toe. Losers fall to the floor, punched tickets. Lucky nights, he lets me grasp the wheel, turning from the liquor store toward Larkmont, engine’s power surging through my hands as the moon pins itself against the clouds, red taillights behind us like the wake of a ship.
IN BATHROOM MIRRORS

We spritz our necks with apple, freesia,
pin our hair against the scalp. Quiet

in the house, we hear the trucks howl
over the turnpike, carrying gasoline,

live horses, frozen fruit. Lives hush out
in the dark, hospital windows bright with birth.

We’ll escape in the summer—black road
tipping west, bare shoulders, boots, moon

to follow through acres of corn. No mother
to lick her thumb and scrub the blush

from our cheeks. No father to clog the drain
with dead hair and cream. As we smudge

our eyelids blue, lit branches
vein the ceiling. Outside, the chain link shines.
WONDERS

After the chemicals, patches

of mutant clover—five,
six, seven leaves fused to each stem.

My sisters pressed them in wax paper,

penned letters to Guinness
World Records—something

wonderful has happened.

Lucky, our mother said,
we are all so lucky. Dinner plates

chimed in sink water as she scrubbed

black grease from the pots,
evening sun lighting spoons to torches.

Long before we knew its name, sex

visited the suburbs, dressed
as a two-headed moth brushing the swing set’s

rusting frame. Are they fighting?

we asked our mother. She said
nothing. Wings the color of newspaper

crashed together, peeled apart.
Wanted— shell the mollusk exudes like sweat, beehive, cool wet spaces of the dam. No more beige paint, wallpaper piled on wallpaper. Zero bedrooms. Zero baths. No breakfast nook or vestibule. Think glove, not box. Vase, not tank. Anthill chambered as a heart, veined as our interiors. Wanted— walls that yield to touch, hold our prints. Think womb, think flashlight burning in a makeshift tent of quilts, house that fits like skin, house that fits like shadow.
WINTER SOLSTICE

He kneels at the oven’s mouth,
baking orange peels deep in the evening.

So many nights we’ve worked
in silence, salting the water, scraping

knife against wood, oil and onion
wed over blue gas flame. Long nights,

fragrance of citrus stolen from orchards
far from this kitchen, this rift

in the mountains. Here we make
our winter gifts: candles, jars of apple butter,

ginger pears. We chop dried peels
for potpourri, sift in clove and spruce needles.

At dawn we’ll stand in black slush, wait
for separate buses, the ride to work we hate.

On separate breaks, we’ll skin the oranges
to release bright waves of scent, plunge

our thumbs into fruit’s dark center, splitting
crescents down the seam, biting hard.
BRIEF HISTORY OF MOVING

We follow the herds, blaze of berries
sparking through the hills. Our wagons
creak through the desert, oxen dragging pewter spoons,
our father’s ashes, mounds

of bridal silk. We follow our hunger, swing of compass,
clutch of stars. We wrap our grandmother’s china in newspaper,
anchor mattresses to trucks and howl
down freeways, hitch our thumbs to the river of headlights,
fishing for rides. Toothbrushes slipped in pockets, we let airplanes
swallow us like whales, carry us over
sheets of land and water, gold runway lights, towers
full of people who know our points of departure, our present
coordinates, but not why we left,

why we came. We follow the dream of something better—
iron-fenced mansion choking with ivy, driftwood cottage
twined with heather and salt. We follow
lovers through knots of paper and vows, follow
our mothers, pulse of moon-battered tides. Follow
faint trails left behind by deer, those ghosts
of the forest who know just where to press the lockets
of their hooves, the places where hunters never tread,

where the fruit is sweetest.
THE WILDER

You let townies buy you rum
at the Blue Spruce Inn, let the boy
wearing only a bathrobe for Halloween

fold you into terrycloth, tie the belt,
and shuffle you upstairs, a single
creature tripping and laughing. You
could say pussy like any other word,
like Tuesday, like tubesocks. You had a story
they would like—homeschooled, making up

for lost time— O they would, and they did.
Time stretched across twinkling porches
and empty plastic cups, cornfields

and factory smoke, dark forests
stuffed with deer. I thought the world
was full of women crossing train tracks

at 4 a.m., hair mussed, stilettos in hand,
women who’d say, Relax, it’s just sex;
women who could talk angles,

physics, penetration over vanilla chai
and perfectly circular eggs at the only
place in town that never slept.
THE JOY OF PAINTING

Now you have to make some almighty decisions. Never easy as you make it look, Bob, slicing rolls of paint,

beating color into the brush—burnt umber, cadmium yellow, thalo blue. You drag your knife against the mountain,

spreading snow like a minor god, balancing light and dark against the emerald treeline. I need a life coach, Bob.

Dust gathers. Dishes rise. I’ve been collecting fusty, impossible words like wafers under my tongue—panicle, tussock, rosinweed.

Your brush hesitates over the canvas, tips of evergreens not yet born. Maybe you can live right here. Move mountains,

bend rivers. You speak from beyond the grave—This canvas is your world to make. I’ve tried, swirling liturgies of crayon,


Could you paint a smokestack or a strip club, neon pink smudging the coal town’s poisoned river, just once? I can’t hide

in your winter forest. I live in the real world, the one my parents made, and my grandparents, all the way back to the first

black stone chipped into a blade, the first seed planted on purpose, the first engine spark that set the Cuyahoga burning.
II. GHOST FABRIC
EVIDENCE

What stays—

hints that fossilize or freeze,  
what refuses to unravel. Hammered  
flint and butchered bone. Footprints  
through fields of ash. Ivory tusk  
held under quilts of corn.

What goes—

everything else. Feather and string  
that tailed the arrow’s tip. Hair,  
brains, burial flowers. Smoke and ember,  
moon on the snow. Tents of sealskin  
and timber, breath that warmed them.
ARCHEOLOGY

Future occupants will never know
we rinsed our mulberries in the kitchen sink,

tilted the colander under cold water,
shifted globes of fruit from side to side.

How we pressed our ears to the baseboard,
voices echoing in vents between our rooms,

how we sang to the blind moles
scratching in the dark. We leave no glyph,

no map. Evidence exhumed—shoeboxes
holding dead parakeets, unfinished blueprints,

rusted lengths of chain—the ones who come
next will never understand what the pieces mean,

who this family was, never fathom the quiet
of our last night in the house—city owls, branches

tapping glass, how the frozen spell of icicles
hung from gutters, breaking, breathing.
PENDLE HILL

Cottage frame buried under grass, stones
held together by gravity four-hundred years—
crumbled lintels, tin bath and perfect hearth,
framework of a bed. The town says a witch

lived here, one room sealed, bones of a cat
bricked in. Before the water company
peeled back the hillside like a sheet, before

trapped dust lifted and glowed, the rooms
were buried and dark for so many winters,
soil and snow crushing the crossbeam, foxglove
and cornflower rising from the chimney each spring.
THE FRITZL CASE

—Amstetten, Austria

The first night, Elisabeth scratched the ceiling
until her fingernails unhinged, the door

she helped her father carry down the stairs,
locked while she breathed ether. She dreamed

of mountains, paced the floor until she knew
the steps by heart. Fluorescent light became

the cold white peaks, the dawn. As the world
shrank to the room’s dimensions, she sang

old carols to fall asleep—still, still, still,
one can hear the falling snow. She birthed

his seven children in the dark, a dead one
brought upstairs to be burned, three “found”

in the yard as infants, raised in the light. Two
families, one above, one below, learning to read

and write, digging out the soil with their hands. 
Elisabeth’s false letters came from Branau,

Keatan—Do not search for me. I want to come home. 
It is not possible yet. His kingdom, soundproof,

hidden hallway of eight locked doors, tunneled
behind his workshop desk. He said he designed

machines in the cellar, for work, and he was not
to be disturbed—it became quite normal, this second

life in the basement of my house. Two families
mirrored where ceiling meets floor. Sun children—

Lisa, Monika, Alexander. Moon children—
Kerstin, Stefan, Felix. He rode elephants in Thailand,
brought the children flowers, books, Christmas trees, would say years later, *I am not the beast you think I am.*

When tenants heard the sounds at night—voices, radio crackling—he’d say, *It’s nothing. Just the furnace. Just the gas.*
REMNANTS

in the railyard forest  we spooked
two deer from the birches

scattered the crows  branches
snapping underfoot  we talked

of the prairie  ghost fabric
spread under floorboards

and fields  oceans of silk and stalk
sterile pollen  silenced genes
FISHING WITH GHOSTS

It begins in rapids, ends in rapids—
water finding voice through friction,
scraping granite, scraping earth.

The river gnaws the dead, whittles
the bones. Heaped with reeds,
a skeleton tree hovers over its twin,

already gone, already a rippling ghost.
I see my uncle deep in the mountains,
threading my fishing hook with bits of corn,

whole, un tarn is hed, just three years
before it happened. We close the eyes
of the dead, we close their eyes, we let them

go—dear aunt cold in her wedding dress,
her daughter’s red hair falling brightly
into the coffin. We turn away.

We close our eyes. We hear the water’s pulse
everywhere, hear the water even in our dreams,
carving the moon to a crescent, a slice, a rib.
RISK COMMUNICATION

The Environmental Protection Agency mandates that warnings be erected [at Yucca Mountain] which will warn away potential intruders for the next 10,000 years. —Alan Bellows

How to speak to a world without our language—
glowing blue cacti, piles of human remains,
field of concrete thorns absent of beauty.
Symbols shift—radiation’s trefoil read as flower,
angel, bird. How to mark this place, warn
to leave it empty. How to build monuments, scars
capable of speech. We were left horses, aurochs,
handprints burned into caves, and fell to our knees.

We leave etchings of skeletons, fistfuls of waste,
drums already leaking in the depths. How to show
the sickness—This is not a place of honor. What is here
is dangerous, still present, in your time as it was in ours.

How to frighten without inviting exploration—
The danger is to the body, and it can kill. How to keep
our secret, to stop our children’s children’s children
from carrying lamps and shovels into the mountain,
to repel them without knowing what they treasure,
what they fear, their words for yes and no.
RAPTURE

It could happen on a day like this, wet loam yielding underfoot, orange poppies shaking off the storm. Rapture: a task the father never got around to finishing. In the meantime, we live in the unraveling, grateful for a potluck of strangers, our landlord’s mismatched china, his mother’s best champagne. Our talk swells against the night, against the wind. We lift our glasses to the end of the world.
BLACK DAHLIA

I.

I say her name—Elizabeth Short—Elizabeth sliced at the waist, rinsed clean, mouth slashed at the cheeks in Glasgow smile. This cannot be made beautiful. Over and over—

pale hand in the ditch, black bag in the woods, in the leaves, duct tape sealing the lips, and why have I spent this January morning, thick and golden enough to drink lemonade outside, clawing the earth covering these dead, casket wounds healing over with flowers?

II.

How could I forget you, Amy Mihaljevic—that winter when snow erased your name from the posters, that winter you left to buy a gift for your mother, resurfaced in the field months later, gold fibers on your body, seedlings sprouting from your clothes, riding boots and turquoise earrings shaped like horses, taken as souvenirs?

III.

That winter I stood beneath the climbing dome for minutes or hours, metal bars freezing my hands, how could I forget waiting for my mother running late, the man
who paused in the gutter, how could I forget
his voice as he called Sarah, offered
to walk me home? I still can’t remember
the color of the sky, can’t remember his face,
his eyes as my mother’s car thundered up the hill,
the sound of his feet breaking ice as he turned away.
Cattle graveyard—
bones clink together, sinew
picked clean by rain, beetle,
bird, fragments of spine
and pelvis, jaws still gripping
teeth. As we build a single
creature from the scattered
parts of many, we are told
how the Sioux used buffalo
bones for awls, for knives,
for dinner plates. I remember
the flutes carved in ancient
China from hollow skeletons
of cranes, a cave bear’s
femur drilled with holes
in Old Slovenia, marrow
scraped loose for song.
In Germany, in India—
airy scales, fugues of phosphorus
and lime. Bones for ceremony,
music, burial—human bones
smeared with red ochre
in the grave, skeletons
spiced, ringed with shards
of tortoiseshell and pottery,
flower heads dissolved in soil.
GOOD FRIDAY, FOG

descended on the town. My friends
stood by the riverbank with me, watching
headlights drift over the bridge, two by two,
the night my grandfather died. Already
the signs had begun. Driving home
from the hospice, my mother witnessed
a cyclone of paper, thousands of white sheets
blown in purple dusk beside the road. I saw
nothing but electric light and gauzy river,
my friends striking matches in the dark.
OSMIA AVOSETTA

Two days biting petals from the stalk—
fragments of fuchsia, lemon, turquoise.

Two days fastening bits of flower with mud,
forge shells, single cells for single eggs.

How like a tomb, the chamber stuffed
with nectar and pollen, food for safe

passage, one world to the next. Sealed
in humid nest, burial leads to birth—

safe from flood and drought, the larva
hatches and feasts in the dark, no eyes
to see the petals layered like wings.
In spun cocoon, winter makes a bee,

broken cradle left behind for pins,
white tags, lit case on the scientist’s desk.
NEST

I.

When we cross the fence,
cattle freeze like still black bells.
The pregnant witch their embryos
to calves, milk rushing in the grass.

The empty wait to be butchered.
For now, the cows tilt their heads
to the rasping field, deep mouths
eating gold September hills.

II.

Across the miles, my sister dips
her feet into Lake Erie, red sky
glittering like gutted fish. The story
just beginning in her body halted,
a black wing spans her shoulder—
*something rose and then receded*—ink

still pricked with little stars of blood.
She sifts crushed shell and dirty
sand, lets each fistful drop.

III.

I scrape the chambers of a cow skull,
remnants of nest falling in pieces,
unbraided by wind. We scatter
the young in flanks of limestone

ridge where rattlesnakes hide, crested
wheatgrass bending at the waist.
We walk above the skeletons, hips
aching, sage at the bottom of our breath.
We search for stripped chimneys—manor
and bungalow, cabins named for presidents,
deserted or torched in the sixties.
Cliffs thick with pitch pine and wild roses
are not enough. We want the ruins,
brick hearths split by branch and thorn,
stone eye of this octagonal foundation
never blinking. Someone lived here,
stirring embers, releasing columns of smoke.
How long these monuments will stand,
what will come of iron vents where we crouch
in winter, the valves of our house
coughing dust in cold nights, we can’t know.
We kneel at this fireplace purring with hornets,
black throat piled with silk and cottonwood seed,
no match to strike in these woods, nothing to burn.
CRASH

I.

That winter, we learned to be doomers,
passing a joint on the cracked stoop

as snowflakes hissed on our coats, blanketed
rooftops like ash. If they shined,

we didn’t notice. I swept white powder
over the flush of my cheeks, stayed up late

preparing for the end, cried over everything—
sidewalk pennies, green plastic produce bags

rolled like snail shells, toddlers pressing their ears
to the ground, listening for trains in the fog.

II.

Seasons of rain, seasons of ice. Old men
on the bus said, Smile, sweetheart, and I saw

crops torched on the stalk, glaciers unraveled
like yarn and said, No, thank you. On the cinema’s

blank canvas, wolves pawed through skyscrapers
eaten by moss and flowers. Zombies

floated through cities, boats of blood
and cataract and voice. We were waiting

for the world to test us, waiting to crawl
from the wreck leaner, tougher, wiser.

III.

We waited among salt trucks and church bells,
radio parts and barrels of chicken feed, huts
of twig and quilt and 2x4 hidden in the woods.
   You asked me if, when the time came, I could skin

a rabbit or a deer, walk for days and camp in the soot,
   in the snow. I never knew, never had to find out.

IV.

For the time being, roof and egg and cardamom tea.
   For the time being, laptop and wireless, mattress

rumpled on the floor, glow of Carl Sagan’s ship
   blown like seed among the galaxies, gold-rust

palette of his clothes, just like our fathers
   used to wear. His gentle voice lulled us to sleep,

to other worlds where the air was sweeter—
   shores of the cosmic ocean, billions and billions of stars.
DORMANT

frozen in mud  wildflower

seeds lie swollen beneath hoof-
torn prairie  wait for the weight

of bison to crush each kernel into bloom
III. SONGS FOR HEALING
PRAYER IN THE BADLANDS

when we stop to take the night’s dimensions,
sky laid bare as split fruit
seeded with stars—

when we trace the vast geometry
from point to point, naming
the shapes we know—

tail of scorpio,
cassiopeia’s throne—

when we tilt
back our heads, pinwheeling with whiskey
and impossible scale—

we feel the rifts
that will never be healed, the deepest
parts of the river never named
GROTTO OF THE REDEMPTION
—West Bend, Iowa

Air cools in the built caves,
stones releasing breath

of salt and sea on Italian statues—
infant Jesus, Adam and Eve,

Moses clutching twin slabs
against his ribs. In gardens

of moonstone, seaglass,
stalactite plucked like fruit

from distant caverns, arches
and cupolas studded with stars,

I imagine the weight of trains
bearing these stones in 1912,

veins of jewel ripped from earth,
scrubbed clean until the priest’s hands

cracked and bled, each splinter
of rock—white shell, raw amethyst,

petrified wood—collaged
with sand in nine linked shrines,

rising without blueprints
from a sea floor older than prayer.
REASONS FOR BUILDING

1. To create protected habitats, i.e. homes.

   Hide, conceal. (See also: camouflage, crypts, mimicry). Avoid detection.
   Regulate temperature, gain shelter from the elements. Shield the young from predators.

2. To catch prey, to forage, i.e. traps.

   Lure insects, mammals, fish. Spin webs in the grass, in the branches.
   Bait. Capture. Store food for winter.

3. To communicate between members of the species, i.e. display.

   Show intelligence, wealth, an eye for beauty. Warn others of danger.
   Attract a mate with trinkets, with intricate weaving.
DRIVE THRU

Voice crackling, 
the silver box repeats

my father’s words:  
\textit{minus olives—minus pico—}  

Slow orbit of cars. Taillights 
wash our faces. In red glow

he lets me count the money, 
scratch the ribbed edges

doing coins. When we circle 
around to the sliding glass, a girl

leans into the night. Her fingers 
brush my father’s, lowering

our lidded cups, white paper bags 
already stained with oil.

We seal our windows, let the radio 
fill our ears, and as the truck

sails over the bridge, black river 
churning in moonlight,

my mother’s meal, 
like a sleeping animal, warms my lap.
SPONTANEOUS GENERATION

Once upon a time, geese sprang up from barnacles. Snakes and crocodiles rose from river mud. Meat left in open air gave birth to flies. No sex required, no bloody afterbirth. Men wrote recipes for scorpions—basil, placed between two bricks and left in sunlight. For mice—grains of wheat wrapped in soiled cloth and left for twenty-one days. The scorpions appeared, and the mice. Animals kept coming, shaped as sticks, stars, shaggy hills. They came with horns, twin mouths, glowing hoods inflating like lungs in the sea. They came weighing tons or micrograms, pawing and scratching the earth, howling in packs or blinking in tree hollows, and no one could say for certain how they got there.
RUMOR, GHOST

“We explained to him that if foxes were meant to be 72 stories off the ground, they would have evolved wings.” –Ted Burden, BBC

Brief spark of orange fur in the half-built spire.
The crane driver thought impossible, mirage. 945 feet above the London streets, old-fashioned ladder scaling the rafters, needle’s tip swaying with his weight.

Who knows what compelled the fox to climb—phantom scent of food or sex, moonlight glinting on the stairs? Just a cub, six months old, living on scraps the workers left behind, he flickered and vanished for weeks, rumor, ghost. They named him Romeo, trapped him in a steel crate strung with chickens.

Released, he glanced back at the tower looming over the Thames, touched paws to concrete, loped away.
OCTOBER

blood moon over cornfields
taut as cartilage seeds ticking in pods

red leaves blown like sparks and the city—
black roofs and bistro tables tiny spoons

chiming glass dishes cream melts
on our tongues cinnamon lingers

on our breath our talk is wild—
desire the hunt what it means to be male

and female our talk is a wilderness
of synapse and saliva tangle of air

and trembling bones inside our ears
all around lilt and echo of speech

footstep and moonswell traffic and strangers
all around the looming listening night
BEES

On a dare, we plunge our hands into the cool aluminum mailbox, trapped bees clustering our skin,

brushing the bones of our wrists. To keep so close to the sting, to hold still as bees’ antennae probe our fingers,

chills each nerve from neck to hip. Lost in the dark, they’ve forgotten why they came—to mine the purple clematis, split petals, and dust their legs with gold. We will remember their touch years later as our husbands trace our clavicles. Like the bees, we will wake under strange night skies, wake in skins we can’t imagine.
MILKWEED

Breathing woodsmoke, crushing gingko fruit
in a place that isn’t home, I remember

my grandmother’s theories on children,
how we begin as wandering seeds, how we travel

for centuries until we choose our times,
our mothers. I remember Ohio,

stripping cloaked fields, shattering corn
on window glass like bursts of rain. I remember

sprinting through cool night air as neighbors’
flashlights drilled the dark—You, come back—

My footfalls, my crooked paths are ashes, windborne.
Everything happens on the inside now, earth’s skull

hatching a familiar dream—white pumpkin,
towering switchgrass, milkweed drifting from the pod.
HONEYMOON

—Lake Carmi, Vermont

Airplanes crossing overhead, 
I pitched a tent with him in a state park 
two hours from home, tying fabric 
to metal poles, hammering stakes 
into gravel and sand. Tent, flashlight, 
candles, sleeping bag, gas in the engine, 
CD in the stereo—all wedding gifts. 
Bullfrogs gulping in shallows, we hung 
wet swimsuits from a broken branch, 
tended a fire over other campers’ ashes, 
peeled bits of tender, smoked fish 
from the bone. Later, we would make peace 
with temporary towns, rented fragments 
of houses, paint we couldn’t strip, floors 
we couldn’t sand. But then we knew only 
the pine and charcoal scent of each other, 
the lean-to that creaked as the wind 
picked up, lightning sparks in distant clouds, 
the storm that seethed all night in columns 
of ink, but never touched our camp.
ATHEIST, ANARCHIST

The night I meet her, Hayley sees my ring
and spits, I don’t believe in marriage. I want to say
marriage is like gravity, not like God, but hold
my tongue. She presses a songbook into my hands—
_All the lyrics are from the Bible, but listen anyway._
At the heart of this river town linked by bridges,
swept by shopkeeps who water buckets of begonias
each morning, she teaches me how the shape
of each note is a pitch. _Once you know the shapes
in your bones, you can open this book to any page
and sing._ She opens the book, keeps time
with her arm, belts—_And am I born to die, to lay
this body down?_—until every dog tied to a parking
meter has settled down to listen. I want to know
the shapes in my bones, to shake down
the shingles of this street with just my voice.
I want to be 19 again, so certain my parents
were wrong, so sure that if I bang pots and pans
by the train tracks at nightfall, facing north, students
rioting in the streets of Montreal will hear me and rage
even harder. I’m sure of nothing. But when fireflies
appear, and the train’s white eye climbs the hillside,
rattling the ground, the air, my bones—_God help me,_
I’m striking my pan with a spoon beside her, screaming.
IAVNANA

As the tea kettle shakes with heat,
Maria teaches us batonebo songs
in the kitchen, songs for healing.
She releases one line at a time,
we echo. Our splintered voices
make a rope, a banister the hand
can follow, even in the dark.
In the mountains, women gather
red lanterns, flowers, and fabric
to children’s cradles, calling the lords.
They spoon milk into mouths, ban
spices, sing the sickness from the body.
STILLBORN LAMB

When the boys carry its cold
body home in a shoebox, don’t think
of the crescent moon snagged
like a fish hook in the pine boughs,
the fruit flies drowning in vinegar,
the chicken’s egg Maria found
smashed in the straw. Don’t think
of the apples you thinned
from the branch that morning
just as bud became body—
apples no bigger than a marble,
skin dark with worms and disease—
how you pinched each one
like the tip of a candle, dropped it
into a bucket for boiling. Just listen
as the boys tell you how they found it,
still early enough to see the stars,
the vapor of their breath, the frost
not yet burned from the grass.
They’ll tell you how the mother
had torn the sac open with her teeth,
how she licked its body clean.
WHAT THE BODY KNOWS

Maria tells us how her pregnant sheep thrash in clover, how the lambs tumble out, wet with vernix. Sometimes a shoulder, a hoof will catch in the birth canal, but mostly it just happens without help, without instruction. *The body knows what to do,* she says. *It knows how to birth, how to feed.* For weeks, I watch the bees multiply and swarm. In the dark milking parlor, sheep’s udders convulse in my hands, releasing colostrum and cream. Tiny apples emerge like fists from the flowers, and I know my body will know what to do. I never dream it was only built for grief—another thread of blood, another month wasted—built to brood like the hens nudging eggs into the highest rafters of the barn, warming perfect white shells that refuse to hatch.
STILL LIFE

After dinner, soft clash of water, metal, and porcelain, glass jars dried with a towel. Wind lifts the porch lantern, plucks a few notes from the belly of a banjo. Maika lies down in the dust, in the heat, flicking burdock from her tail. She listens for snakes in the chicken coop, low yips of coyotes craving sheep.
I ENTER HER ROOM LIKE A FOREIGN COUNTRY—

delicate spools of thread
arranged by color, hairpins
with small glass orbs I never
saw her wear, list of names
that could've been mine—
_April, Emily, Jessica_—
photos tinted like melting
ice cream taped to the mirror,
and her high school mood ring
chilled to black in the bottom drawer.
HYMN

When I climb from the river, bones
washed clean, when I lie in the grass and night

splits me open like a fig, when I see the lake’s
gray muscle tensing, I remember this body’s

hooks and hinges never belonged to me.
Even as I fished for fireflies, dipping hands

and cloth in the dark, I knew. When pear stems
choked on the branch, I knew—my path

ripens as I walk it, fruit cleaving underfoot,
spilling seed and wine, hypnotic drowse for deer.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


