A long time growing up

Kelly Slivka

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Slivka, Kelly, "A long time growing up" (2017). Graduate Theses and Dissertations. 15424.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/15424

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
A long time growing up

by

Kelly Slivka

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:
Barbara Haas, Major Professor
    Kenny Cook
    Sean Grass
    Michael Dahlstrom

The student author and the program of study committee are solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa 2017

Copyright © Kelly Slivka, 2017. All rights reserved.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iv
Abstract .......................................................................................................................... v
Preface ............................................................................................................................ vi

SECTION 1: GLOUCESTER ................................................................. 1
  Two Weeks At Sea, Two on Shore ......................................................................... 2
  Bodybreak I ........................................................................................................... 3
  Marker .................................................................................................................... 4
  Fiber of Winter .................................................................................................... 5

SECTION 2: NEW YORK CITY ................................................... 7
  Bow ......................................................................................................................... 8
  Big Bang ............................................................................................................. 9
  We Who Feel Small and Exquisite When We Look at the Sky ..................... 10

SECTION 3: DENVER ....................................................................... 12
  Homecoming ...................................................................................................... 13
  I Want to Go Back and Talk with the Man Who Reminds me of You ........ 15
  On the Subject of Archaeology ...................................................................... 16
  What My Mother May Have Thought When I Left for College and Didn’t Come Home for a Long Time ...................................................................................... 18

SECTION 4: Ames ................................................................. 20
  Being Small ........................................................................................................ 21
  Humanness ........................................................................................................ 22
  Turbulence ......................................................................................................... 23
  In Sicily, At Akragas ....................................................................................... 25
  Other Places ...................................................................................................... 26
  Bodybuild ......................................................................................................... 27
  Lessons I .......................................................................................................... 29
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written After Finding the Honeybees Dead.</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days of Gathering Light.</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storm Watching.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highways.</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Hard Frost.</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Clouds on Mars.</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mound Talk.</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION 5: CARBONDALE.</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Summer.</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodybreak II.</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons II.</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magic.</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Great Unconformity.</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating Crow.</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firerings.</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermoine &amp; Olly, Heiden, 1962.</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons III.</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward.</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Doe.</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moorings.</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallout.</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodybreak III.</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons IV.</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the ones who didn’t laugh when I told them I write poetry, and I’d especially like to thank the ones who said, after I told them, “Can I read one of your poems sometime?” I’d like to thank my loved ones, who have lent me money, their ears and their hands, and who have never told me once to keep my feet on the ground—or assumed that if I make art, I don’t have my feet on the ground. Thank you, also, to my wholehearted and lively major professor, Barbara Haas, who takes me and the things I make seriously. Lastly, I’d like to thank New York University’s Anamesa Journal for publishing earlier versions of the poems “Two Weeks At Sea, Two on Shore,” “Bow” and “The Big Bang.”
Abstract

A Long Time Growing Up, my premier poetry collection, is memoir in verse. Through its unusual chronological arrangement, the collection wings my audience along on my peregrinations as a human being and as a poet, working through the mired, circular, at times timorous and at times euphoric process of coming of age—and the slow realization that there is no clear arc to growth. The poems, strongly anchored in the physical spaces I inhabit, are both deeply specific and universal, each poem telling a personal story haunted by the overarching questions with which we all wrestle. Of what must we let go? To whom are we responsible? Which rules must we follow? How do we create meaning? Where are we ultimately going? Can we run away? Can we return? Do we ever grow to know anything at all? The readers travel with me as I pick my way through the formative years of my adulthood, from the fishing towns of Massachusetts to New York City, from the slopes of the Colorado Rockies to the farmlands of Iowa, through love and its bedfellow loss, through moments of grace and spells of disillusionment, intricate landscapes and intimate rooms. The meditative poems in A Long Time Growing Up document this restive journeying, both in body and mind, while I seek out sure footing and a sense of cohesion in my life as it is becoming my own, and as I strain to receive the lessons we all must be taught.
Preface

I used to think I would come to know things.
As a kid, I thought adulthood would arrive all at once. I would go
to sleep one night as a child and wake up the next a grown up, and
when I did, I’d have many more answers than questions.

But the years passed, and I grew older and older without slipping
through this magical threshold. And the questions only multiplied
and raised their voices. Now I’m old enough to drive my own car
and buy a house, build a career and find a spouse, raise children
and bury my parents, and questions are all I have.

I find I’m not the only one who doesn’t know anything yet. I’ve
begun to see my elders as people, not gods, and I see them at every
age still making mistakes and looking for answers and still coming
up empty, but open, handed.

It seems to me now that know-how isn’t a straight line but a
circular one—that growing up isn’t something we do once but
something we come back to over and over again.

We live our lives in linear time, but what if life itself isn’t linear, a
route from one place to another? What if life takes the shape of the
Universe, something big and round and bending and spinning,
where there aren’t ends and beginnings, but instead a swirling
galaxy of experiences and thoughts birthing, burning and fading?

The following poems document six years of my coming of age, my
coming into questions. I have realized that different times and
different spaces pose questions in different ways, which is why the
poems are arranged chronologically and denoted with place.

I read these poems myself, and I’m not sure what I have learned,
and I’m not sure if that’s what I should be asking.
SECTION 1: GLOUCESTER
TWO WEEKS AT SEA, TWO ON SHORE

Come in.
There is day’s end
sun lilting through chiming
tree leaves and fingers of
a frail wind grazing my cheekbone
and the tangy effluvium of exhaust
tepid in the air rising from
between my feet as they
flip-flop the blacktop
along Main Street. There is
the swollen sea I scudded
through in haze this very
morning making my head
rise and fall like your chest
during the dark of sleep,
and the pavement surges and sinks
like tarry black water.
There are thoughts shadowed
in the spaces between my senses,
generations of thoughts,
how my grandmother grew
into a woman without having
walked on blacktop
never feeling the empty
hot thuds of her steps
echoing back
but despite these differences,
when she speaks I still understand
her roadless ramblings.
There is the sonorous pitch
of ice trucks pouring their
cargo onto silvery piles
of fish at the back doors of the
processing plants and the miasma
of deep sea and death
mixes with the acrid
air, and somewhere along the front
of my mind through this madness
there is an open door
waiting.
BODYBREAK I

You have bewildered into me.
I smell the softest square centimeters

of your body on the wind while I walk the docks
there between the dry aroma of fall

and the milk white scent of cold fog is your skin
though it's possible I only smell it because I can see it

so clearly between the sheets
spread out like the mattress and wood floor below

and earth underneath cannot be peeled apart and
time couldn't move you for all of its trying.

I see your lapis eyes pilfered
by crests of waves and the transitive churn of sea clouds

or even by the pearlescent halo of the moon
and I want you, I want it, I want it all, the dying leaves

and birthstone moon and a jar full of fog,
whispering waves with the illusive clouds up above

want to line it all up on the table or stack it all up
in your shape because I see now when you fell from me

you shattered into fine shining pieces,
shards of you piercing all parts of this seaside city and now

everything beautiful, shore to sky, scintillates of you.
MARKER

I feel the hollow but deep round sound
of the buoy bell banging on the
steel frame of Red Number 2
outside the first shoals of the Narrows,
whose gouged channels hairpin
between those gray jagged and green islands
heaved up near Boston’s white Light.
I feel the tide splitting around
toothy barnacles at the buoy’s base
then the scramble as the waters braid back
together behind. I taste the rush of the tide,
swift, unflinching, giving the buoy a
trying tilt, as if it’s fallen forward
against a wall like a man with
his forehead on his forearms, weeping.
I feel the oil-black cormorant
amongst the buoy’s wires, wings spread in oblation,
clumps of feathers and snared beak
still, and above the cormorant
the heat of the ring-billed gull whose neck
and shoulders and half-closed eyes pull
inward against the red glow
of Red Number 2.
I feel the gull bob with the buoy, bob
on the energy of some Azorean storm
that pulsed through four thousand Atlantic miles
to break soft, stir this small buoy bell.
I feel my own passing of the buoy
and how my wake makes
the bell bang and bang and perhaps then
it will go quiet, the shifting of the tide and the slack,
the buoy balances upright, arrow straight
under a moony night, or perhaps never silent in the
moving sea but ringing always without
pattern, carrying to the stones
of Gallops Island and Lovell’s Island
these hollow sounds that ring around us,
me and the cormorant and the gull,
happening always as they happen now.
FIBER OF WINTER

January hangs an empty canvas,
and it’s blue-black at night
when I walk down to the piers,
and the moon is a cold cube
of pale light, and the stars
scream through the skies,
and the cold sears the skin, and
steam rises from the animal mouths,
rises from the wavelets of sea,
rises from the steel street potholes,
rises from the stone chimneys
with their sooty cylinders on top.
In the places between hoops
of streetlamp light I wonder
where this sleigh of time has taken us
and to what we go.

Yesterday in my car I dropped down
an afterthought of a road,
the coatless trees arched over,
boughs sagging with slop,
and the hedges huddled in.
The road curled around and down,
past a stone chapel, then slid out
onto a wide marsh, brown grasses
lumped on the left and a
very cavernous, very emerald bay
on the right, all under a white sky,
snowflakes falling in handfuls,
tossed from the clouds like coarse salt.

A fence listed between the road
and beach, and I pulled off,
slabs of ice crunching
beneath the tires, stepped out
and slipped between the fence pikes
out toward the sea.
A thick carpet of wet snow hid
a kaleidoscope of beach stones—
I trudged through it, and it whined
and squeaked beneath my steps,
and the flakes feathered every which way, caught in my eyebrows and on my lashes, on my coat collar, melting on my skin. I went until I met the water tonguing in against the land, licking my boots, awake and hungry.

Before me the bay inched and breathed, behind me the winter piled up, and I stood at the seam, listened as the slide of waves counted out the seconds, listened as the snowflakes laid down, listened as the mindless wind decided who will lay down in the sea and who on the shore.
SECTION 2: NEW YORK CITY
BOW

In autumn
such things that had been carefully laid
and cautiously loved
died (as all things threaten).
Pain bloomed in place,
a bud of blood unfurling outward on a cream cloth and
My first instinct was the instinct of millions
(as were all following-intuition
uncovering us naked to our roots)
the instinct to run
But anguish is a sticky shadow
warping the feet and floor beneath--
Secondly I buried
shoveling new jewels moist and heaping on top
but newborn brilliance made the shadow deeper
and bluer and colder
Shadows can only be covered
by something bigger and higher and darker;
Third I never looked over my shoulder
but it was there sure as the sun shone
(which it did, any way)
How many instincts am I allowed?
As I tread time curled up behind me
sagging and looping back
so the hurt didn’t travel steadily away
with the past like baggage on a conveyor belt
slipping behind the curtains
It coiled at my heels, a pile of unkempt yarn.
Yet
Slowly
All at once
there were buds on the trees
the earth thickened, filled in;
I had forgotten how;
and in winter’s recession lay clearly its length
its obtuseness and the many revolutions of its passage
Time grew taut again
The past strung, wrapped, and vibrating
and one day I believe
I might play it as a bow
hard against violin strings.
BIG BANG

It occurs to me on the train that our lives in entirety are supposed to be as clipped and straightforward as conception, as the moment when intent is stripped clear and all the unrestrained dreams of an existence come clean to one feasible desire and a pulsing movement forward toward its immanency.

There is a simplicity in that instant attained by our forebears which it seems we spend most of our time after losing and seeking. We do not explode into complexity from a tiny base animalism. We are a tiny base animalism, and we’re all in cahoots making a lot of something out of nothing.
WE WHO FEEL SMALL AND EXQUISITE
WHEN WE LOOK AT THE SKY

The newsman says
the Perseid shower
peaks at eleven-oh-nine tonight over
the radio waves

as we lie belly-up
on highrise roofs
before the pink-skinned sun sets
underside the earth.

We yell back
and forth
across alleyways
below long-dead
starlight—

brave against
what we will never
know and never match,
the movements
we will never make.

We open our
necks
to the wind
and feel its
cold-blooded fingers,

push our cheeks
to the rain
to let it pit
language
into us.
We let the arcing constellations we were born under mark our years, celebrate them like hippie pagans at midnight in the city summer heat.

We are the ones who wrote infinite into the heart of infinitesimal,

and we are not afraid of seasons piling up in the dirt underfoot, of leaves clawing the ground

tisker-tsk-tsk
on the wind.
SECTION 3: DENVER
Family can be a muzzle
or silk skeins spun from
the folds of your love belted twice
around your neck—
have you peeled off
down the highway, made it
far enough
to see the sea glisten
on the rim of the land
just to have them
yank you and you are
slipping back in toward the
middle, the landlock, the
 crush of snow like sheets of
tissue paper under your
knees and hands, lips
dry as hay baled in the quilted
fields and sent into
intestate muck seven days
before Christmas? The bodies
I hug before
skeleton trees and
LED snowflakes, they
take my life
as their own and I
give it because
this is family,
under blood lines,
under name sakes, I duck
their kisses and shrug from their
hands but cling to their stories
moving through the
solstice scape, the winter land,
here and there like pinprick
sticky stars and I
am the bullet hole moon
that revolves among them.
I have trundled
up a hill out in the plains,
the houses small squares
in the distant grid,
and peered at the river cut and
watched the hawk shadow
careen a tighter noose, and I know
I will always return.
We all slide back home, it’s
who we are and what,
like how the sun
in winter makes its heavy
arcs, dips narrow and close
over our heads.
I WANT TO GO BACK AND TALK WITH THE MAN WHO REMINDS ME OF YOU

With a silken stream of steaming water he encircles the grounds he spooned into the filter, poured from his kettle that has a spout curving out from its bottom like a charmed cobra, and from behind the counter he tells me about coffee-making—the Chemex, the Woodneck, the AeroPress, the oils and the aromatics. He says the beans from Bolivia grown under orange and avocado trees keep well their nips of caramel and sweet cherries, their notes of earthy chocolates.

He smacks of your diligence, I think, your mastery of uncommon arts and how it seems you know the things you know into your body, your grasp wrings the neck of the world, and his face has your tones of warm desert sands and the smatter of silvery willows down your jaws and your temples. I am sad that I feel so close to you when all we’ve shared is a smattering of interrupted conversations across our desks before I left that job, talk of books, hobbies, small thoughts of the world, I feel like I’ve lost you even though I never had you out on the sidewalks, in the cafes—never even made a thing with you half as real as coffee.
ON THE SUBJECT OF ARCHAEOLOGY

I loved a man in New England once, or
I loved him many times over.
He was mast-height with eyes
like blue pearls ripped off oysters’
tongues earlier that same day,
if there ever was such a thing.
He owned many kinds of boats
and had dark-skinned hard hands that said so.

And there was a Chilean man in Argentina
with Irish creme skin and a voice
rolling like pebbles on a bay floor,
saltwater moving over, and he moved
through me the same way
waves move through the shore,
readjusting sand and compacting it,
rinsing out loose bits and washing in new.

Of course there were other men too
who went about in bodies they
built foremost themselves, who spoke in
voices dredged from deep channels
and whose faces turn worn in memory as
mountains buffed into mounds by the breeze.

I quit some and some quit me,
I quit Boston and I quit Buenos Aires, I quit loving
and if they ever loved they quit loving back,
and you quit knowing most details
like how their lips unfurled when invited to smile
or slopes of shoulders and jaws, rhythms of walk.

Sure lovers mark you, so that
as a sailor you’d have a few swallows
tattooed on your chest to mark the miles
you’ve cut through the sea. But after many
landfalls you stop being able to sort out
which waters you’ve wandered and when.
Loving over and over is
like glacial silt, a shoulder dislocated there,
a skull over here, and soon it’s a jumble,
soft muddied muscle and joint
calcifying in the strata of the self.
WHAT MY MOTHER MAY HAVE THOUGHT
WHEN I LEFT FOR COLLEGE AND DIDN’T
COME HOME FOR A LONG TIME

She at first was nothing
more than an extension of my generous
body, my blood, my choices, mine
wholly and she would not survive

without me, surely. And then as if unseamed
by the very Earth she started to
peel from me, pulling

when, when she first sighed or first stepped
first spoke a thing built forth from her own
electricity her organs pumping and biting,
became first bent on direction or when I forced
her small fists off my skirt folds

on a warm plains day before kindergarten
I walked off while she wailed. And she learned
how to stay away for a day. But even

then as she became she and not me
each night my girl came home
I watched her eyelids weigh to sleep
held her when I pleased, in the morning, before
dinner, a kiss anytime on her crown
on the concavity of her cheek,

so mine. Yet, I pushed her out
more, unruled muscle mother memory—
up trees, interstates, into
stories and Spanish language
dictionaries, degrees and distant continents,

oh she looked back at me,
missed me, stumbled, me miming
push forward, push forward, until she
saw how it is and went willingly,
wild and winsome
she swallows others’ hearts, embeds in,  
and my empty arms feel  
as untempered steel in their sockets.

I had my daughter on the hook, but  
I slipped it out  
and threw her back.
SECTION 4: AMES
BEING SMALL

Mom whisked into our room an hour before the sun sussed out a winter morning, pulled on our ski socks, long johns, brushed our hair, packed up mittens, hats, neck gaiters, goggles. Dad gathered our droopy bodies, heads tucked to his shoulders, mine on one, sister’s on the other, and carried us out to our old white Chevy, placed us in the back seat, drowsy and pliant, strapped us in for the long quiet haul to the ski hill. This is what I recall of being small: People often held me and I didn’t think a thing about it. Now I’m a grown up and sleep comes laboriously. If I work for it, promise, settle and please, I may have someone to cradle me, catch my tired head, but I have to ask first Will you come here? and might be told no. I wake to walk the dog through drifts of snow, catch myself when I slip on the underlying ice. I set my own alarm clock, sketch out to-do lists: Shovel the walk, Call home.

At night I go through the empty rooms and pull down the shades, pat my bed so the dog will jump up, will curl his warmth into the crook of my knees.
HUMANNESS

“For any animal, happiness seems to consist in the opportunity to express its creaturely character—its essential pigness or wolfness or chickenness.”


But what, then, is our humanness?
I take the dog for a walk in late morning and we go deep into the neighborhood caverns, sycamores, oaks and cottonwoods curved above, their trunks wide as silos.

I see the squirrel in its squirrelness, in the scrape of its wiry claws, thoughtless, through the wet soil under a spruce’s shade, in its silk-nosed quiver, in its narrowed eye, its boa-tail twitch, in its acorn clutch.

And the dog, his dogness as he scents the squirrel, his shoulder muscles stiff, ears cocked and open and hearing, his primal pounce, the sinuous stretch of his belly as his nails, fossil-like, scratch into the tree’s trunk.

And I watch it, and the wind is in my hair, simple as wind in hair, and I tug on the leash, cluck-cluck at the dog, give whistle, and I walk through the landscape, the hips yawing, the femur a pendulum—

knee hinge, ankle arc, the careless way
I stroll forward, footfall, the arm at swing swinging the hand, the finger-curve, so casual.
Is this happiness? This utter mindlessness of movement, of rhythm?
TURBULENCE

At 4:30 AM I’m tucked on my couch in lamplight, afraid of creaks, appliance hums and shudders, and I’m thinking about the airplane this morning, the tow-headed toddler who sat next to me on her father’s lap, her glossy eyes leaping into the world hungry, she wriggled, kicked out her feet. Johanna, her father murmured in the rough patches of air, Johanna look at the tiny houses, isn’t it fun to see from the sky when you’re flying? Johanna will age, and then turbulence will remind her of death, of those she loved not enough, of decisions doubted, left unmade, and she’ll learn to be afraid, like when I’m up scared and I don’t hear my house settling down on itself, I hear men crawling through windows to take what they can get, hear murderers coming to test my will to survive. Johanna, breathe, her father urged when her confinement between the rows of airplane seats made her storm, Calm your body, Johanna. He kneaded her back with love-filled fingers. There are animals who exist, I think into the blackness outside my house, without fear. Monarch butterflies move Southward
over three generations to sustain the species, don’t contemplate their afterlives as they survey the plains of Oklahoma, oil rigs spattered across the Mexican Gulf. They have survival scribed into every cell. It is written, we’ve said. Instincts. Though lately I’ve read the population is in danger.
IN SICILY, AT AKRAGAS

My sister and I walk the ridge of temple ruins on Christmas morning, Temple of Zeus, Temple of Hera, the one called Concordia—

flesh-colored pillars sticking out of the dry earth like defoliated sandstone tree trunks, speaking of portents, of egoism chafing up against eternity. I’m curious, did the Greeks too find their greatest clairvoyance after sex and go out to build their monuments with the hum of virility in their ears, and what pillars will I leave behind since nothing is carved out of stone any more,

just plastic and gigabytes and rare metals mined in places not pictured, the leftovers leaky black car batteries and beaches heaped with soda caps and spools of floss, and it’s sad to think of these things on Christmas and in Sicily on a day so blue and clear the sky sounds like water dripping in a cavern, round and empty and austere and pure, and Akragas is deserted for the holidays and we’re lucky, we’re lucky, to see what we see. Later, at dinner on a hill above the temples we eat octopus and sardines while the Mediterranean glints off the flatware, and when the conversation lulls, I watch a beetle who had dropped on its back on the window ledge struggle to flip over, struggle on and on, heaving and straining and trying to master its own body, find its center, get a foot on the ground but it never does. Just can’t.
This is it, I think, *If my bus doesn’t come in 30 seconds, I’m leaving Iowa.* I start to count down in my head. Winter winds plow over farmland and into my clothes, sandpaper my skin—*fetch*, a sea captain friend called it once over the phone, a measurement of the open distance wind ranges across the surface of the earth before it meets an obstacle: me, a barn, his boat.

I laughed at him then, asked where I could get a Sea Dictionary to keep up with his dialogue. But he’s earned his words. Though she eats his steel hull to rusty holes and breaks over his beams, absconds with his things, he’s stuck with the sea long enough to have her embedded in his language like the Iowa wind embeds itself in me. I miss listening to his boat yaw against the Provincetown pier, my tan, sandaled feet swinging to the rhythm, the sound like geese honking.

My countdown reaches one. No bus. I start again from 30. I collect each quiet second as more evidence the bus is never coming. Outside the orb of bus stop lamplight the moon and Jupiter pair off in an awfully black sky. My lashes freeze together in bundles at the corners of my eyes, and I kick apart chunks of snow with my boot toe and sniffle. I think of the glass vase by my kitchen window, where the cold has made the water film over with ice five days in a row, the two blue Dog Stars Delphinium there wilting faster than they ought.

I’ve lived a dozen places over the last six years, and they all came off on me a little as I walked through, collected on my body like burrs. I waited for a place to beg to keep me, but none did. They just sent me off with their seeds. When my second countdown runs out I stomp my feet and blow puffs of ice crystals from pursed lips. I squint up the road and will the bus to come, until it does, lit up like a Carnival cruise ship. I picture how it’s been inching toward me this whole time, making its left and right turns through the town grid. It sighs around the corner and closes in, brake pads singing soprano in the fractured air.
BODYBUILD

In the stink of testosterone at
the college gym weights clang,
clatter, crash together, and I seethe,
I don’t get why all the noise, the
show, like we all need to turn
and see the deadlift’s end, clap in
awe, shake the hands of these
young men who grunt apelike, strain
their necks, drop their sour sweat onto
crimson t-shirts, “Iowa State Wrestling”
and “Iowa State Track.” Yeah, sure,
you guys are so tough, I think,
your poundage proves it, your press
proves it: the body makes the man.

These two kids come near my bench,
can’t quite be twenty yet,
country boys, tow-heads
grown up, blond hair cropped tight
to their scalps, skin so fresh
I can picture their fathers’ hands
on their shoulders—
these boys drip with mother’s love
and little sisters they taught to throw
pitches and steer John Deeres,
and they have their muscle shirts on
so we can all see just how well-built
they are, and I roll my eyes back
into my head, think,
Weren’t you taught it’s about
what’s inside, not out? but

I catch then a slice of their talk—
one says He changed after Iraq,

and the other one purses his lips,
nods, He came back from Iraq

a total fuckin’ asshole and
I’m thinking, Have mercy,

what have we done
to these boys?

Why do we tell them
over and over, prove it?
Above me the sun of late spring sings hot and the trees beg to bloom, plum buds hang in laurels of turgid fuchsia kernels, verging, not yet, not yet, a gasp, then nounounow.

I don’t know how to write about this loss. I don’t like to see myself as one reverential to the past but lately I’ve wanted to revisit the violence of my emotions before living leveled me off.

Last night at a late hour I fingered through letters I wrote a lover after he left me lonely and never sent, tried to conjure the lawless misery of heartbreak, despair, but couldn’t. I’m still as in love with you as ever, I’d written. I need to get this last scream out of my body.

I miss enjambed euphoria, floating, invincibility. I miss how speedboating across the ocean or plucking a kiss made the universe palm-able, eatable, tart. I used to think I ruled over something.

I haven’t popped like a plum tree lately. I’m wary with my blooms. The hurts are less hurtful, the joys less joyful. I let love spool loosely in my hands, hope it will get snarled there, arms’ length from my heart. I would like to be with you, I’m apt to say, but I can do without. And it’s fine. Civil, even.
WRITTEN AFTER FINDING THE HONEYBEES DEAD

We had bought two colonies last spring, nestled them in whitewashed wooden hives on a hill at the edge of a cedar forest. We watched them in May and June, in July, in August as they bred and spread themselves into the fertile landscape, furious with summer. When winter came, it was the coldest in thirty-two years, and a few million acres of farmland turned into tundra. We should have waded through shin-high snow in January, heaved a bale of hay out to the sleeping bees, packed it dense and high around the hive boxes, knocked the wind-sheared icicles off their ledges. We should have returned in February with reinforcements against the freeze, but we didn’t.

The last time I saw them was September, the air buzzed with warmth, with weedy prairie scent. I crouched near the hives and watched bees step foot by foot in and out of the bright, meager city we’d built for them among tall plains grasses, all budded—blazing star, goldenrod, feverfew, bluestem. A mourning cloak butterfly titled about on inky linen-like wings. We took several racks of honeycomb that day, relieved the bees of their months of labor. Many of them chased us a long ways down the county road, the racks shifting in our truck bed. At home, we seared the comb caps off with a hot blade, drained the honey into canning jars. I still have one, glowing like sun-struck amber in my cupboard.
DAYS OF GATHERING LIGHT

Under clod, 
humus, clay, 
mineral, stone, 
a half foot of 
snow, slush, 
crust, I saved 
my daylight, 
planted my 
hyacinth bulb 
in November’s 
mouth and now 
in this first thaw 
it is knowing, 
prepares its 
paper sheath 
to crack, soft 
emerald shoot 
warms its 
voice for 
one lambent 
breathy paean. 
I stand over 
the spot where 
my fingers 
wrested out 
seven inches 
of soil five 
months past, 
where I invited 
light to cling 
to iron ions, 
oak detritus, 
then buried 
it with my bulb, 
and I wait, am
sure I hear its
pastel petals
thrumming.
STORM WATCHING

Look, you say, eyes wide,
point at your cell phone
screen where weather
radar shows a red
slash of storm clouds
just west of our home.
Let’s go, you say. We
snatch the keys from
the table, the dog bounds
from the yard—he doesn’t
care where he’s going,
just itches to go. We
drive through town and out
of it, night falling down
on us black and soft
as loam, drive until we’re
alone, two gravel roads
crossing somewhere long
after the light posts ended.
You park the car and I hold
the dog, we hop on the hood,
heads propped to watch
the weather come—every
lightening flash switches on
the lucent clouds like lamps,
x-rays them from their insides,
 thick blooms and tufts
and pillars. They remind
me of deep sea vents, I
say. Sky sorcery, you call
it and it’s a wonder all
that witchery can be so
silent, we only hear blips
of leopard frogs in the
roadside ditch, our own
mosquito smacks and

the dog sniffing out farm
musk as he peers perked
up into the dark fields. He's
not too entertained by
the show, you say, scruff
his matted head. And it seems
peculiar, then, we came out to
see a storm, what kind of
animals that makes us.
HIGHWAYS

I blurred down the interstate at eighty, my mother riding shotgun and chatty, and I had to squint for a few seconds before I grasped that the dark smudge ahead in my lane was a mallard with three fuzzy yellow ducklings in train— I’m not sure I really saw yellow and fuzzy but I’ve seen Easter chicks in farm boxes, I know they’re down and they cheep and they’re light as eggshells in your palm, and I couldn’t tolerate the break of them under my tires so I swerved left just in front of a Wal-Mart semi, and when the adrenaline cantered through my blood in the silence after, a red shame rode with it because my mom and I both knew then that my gut instinct is to kill her rather than ducklings. This was twelve miles west of Iowa City. We reinvented what it means to cross the earth when we conceived a direct route to somewhere, supernormal speed on lines so straight they please the eyes, diamond-cut linearity left for the crows until human minds imagined barreling it into the soil. I likely killed a swallow I hit 168 miles east of Chicago, heard its meaty clunk on my car hood, saw its splayed wings shudder as it rolled up and over my windshield. These are the occasions that come with highways. I’ve passed truckloads of piglets, downy blushing noses poking through steel side grating, eyes slitted to the wind, and in the gap beneath
the trailer door, their delicate hooves
dancing to lane changes and swerves.
I’ve passed accidents, glaring red strobes,
steel bent like wadded up paper,
maybe I slow my speed, but not
for long. These roads are built for saving
nothing but time. I’ve daydreamed

about a truck hauling a wind turbine
blade a football field long, arced
as a swan’s neck, crashing into a truck of piglets,
the trailers overturned, shards of
the blade struck into the soil like
flag poles, warm piglet bodies
scattered in the median or some

that survived running scared across all the lanes—
not that this scene would make us
question the beneficence of
highways. They are progress—
efficiency, utility, cooperation, regulation,
all of us pushing ourselves faster than we
can think toward whatever is ahead.
OUR HARD FROST

Last night, October twenty-fourth,
under a waning gibbous moon
our first frost sneaked, slipped its fingers
up the necks of our leaves, many yet green
on the trees, and lopped short their lives.
And so on my morning walk I saw them fall
like fat, waterlogged feathers,
    plink
    plink
    plink
heard their bodies hit the icy grass
building up perfect, tender piles
about the trunks of their trees.

But little matter, really, over these small deaths.
Star-shaped, fan-shaped, heart-shaped,
they’ll be back whether I’m here to see them or not,
a few short months and they’ll push out of fresh stems.
Leaves live short that trees may live long, it’s a rule.
I’m sorry for leaves all the same, their fleet lives,
I see we are rather more like leaves than trees,
popping out short and bright and wispy,
then going
    plop
    plop
    plop
down by the common duress.
Don’t ask, though, because I couldn’t tell you
where we bud from, around which trunk we fall.
NEW STUDY: SCIENTISTS DOCUMENT MYSTERIOUS LARGE CLOUDS ON MARS

I've thought, We know so much about space—captured nebulae and novae, counted
a hundred billion galaxies, baptized them Whirlpool, Black Eye, Cartwheel, Carafe,
listed in tables the compositions of their central stars—but what of the space we hold between us and what we love, the space between our years, my breath and yours, my thumb and forefinger as they grasp at a pen like they know what must be told.

I've thought before, Science is a forceful light, but I'm not sure the things we most want illuminated cast shadows. And if we discover what caused the clouds on Mars, will it bring us closer, me to you or each of us to our elements, to the dark matter inside our minds. And what if all this shining outward is a glamour against peering in, it's easier to gaze at distant spheres than into our private plumes, seek out from where they come, ask how your light bends in response to my gravity, whether a blinding sun or a black hole sits there spinning at the center of me, or you.

And what nebula begot it. And what should it be named.
At Wrigley Field I rehearsed in my head
what I’ll say when I tell you it’s over.
The stadium was so small we could have spit
on the players from our grandstand seats—an
intimate ball park, they say in the news.

The Mets played, your hometown team, we went
for your birthday to Chicago from Des Moines,
I bought it all weeks earlier, a nice room, the tickets.
I hadn’t known then I’d want us to end it, but
I also had known. You know how it goes with me.

What happened was you moved in your things,
you didn’t like my sinking pillows and I
your rough blankets, we pretended to watch
one another’s shows but daydreamed instead. I ate
your flavorless pasta and you walked my silly dog.

We were happiest when we had our own beds,
back when you lived in that apartment you hated
because the doves would wake you
with their mourning songs. You always slept late.
I never liked how you wasted so much daylight.

But none of that’s important now. Listen:
The heart has gone out of us, our future
is cold and neither of us want to save it.
The Mets began to lose bottom of the seventh,
a waning in the pitcher’s arm, a lull of energy.

The catcher trundled up to the pitcher’s mound,
cleats prodding the soft dirt, and leaned his head in.
His eyes rested on the pitcher’s shoes and he murmured
his truths, gave two soft pats on the hip—lovingly—
It’s okay, anyhow, he seemed to say, You’re doing just fine.

I want to know how to speak man to man.
Not this belabored narrative, reasons, regrets,
they’re not telling you easy. I want to lean in, and
when I whisper my truths into your ear, I want
you to see, calmly, how it must go on from here.

MOUND TALK

I want to know how to speak man to man.
SECTION 5: CARBONDALE
THIS SUMMER
—En route to Denver, August 2015

The dark wet front
last night blew in
a chill and the air
changed, not its color
but its depth, its smell:
Fall knocks. Football
on the Des Moines
airport bar TV, kids
buying pencils, binders—
do they still do that?
We all know winter
in the backs of our
throats, the roofs
of our nostrils, no
matter pencils or not.
So I believe. This
summer they axed
every ash in my town
to prepare for a
blight. This summer
I planned to watch
the Perseids shower
but fell asleep to
sitcom reruns instead.
This summer I left
my partner and moved
from Midwest to
mountains alone. None
of these things
are related. This summer
I picked a tender sweet
gum leaf in Harvard
Square and a sweet
baby girl on the Green
Line ripped it
from my fingers and
tore it to shreds and
laughed the whole time,
and it was good
enough for me. Life
is a practice in letting
go. I learned that this summer. Jimmy Carter has brain cancer, the West Coast is burning, and the sun is a red yolk in the smoke. The police may murder whomever they want and we may marry whomever we want. We are all still in our bodies and know we won’t be for long. Fall knocks, and we’re still looking forward. That’s what’s crazy, how wide we keep our eyes, how blind to the unvarying wildness of it all looping by: Summer, fall, winter, spring, and each year is different, and the scent of each is the same.
BODYBREAK II

This cyclist hurtles towards me, un-helmeted, sport jacket, retro sneakers, at first a glint

in the yellow streetlights, then a credible threat, and I—on vacation, crossing from Hyde Park
to The Swan bar—step up to avoid him then back-step while he swerves one way then

the other, a panic-dance, and we cannot for the life of us but implode into one another like two

planets pulled then pummeled in, the shock of it after on my hands and knees quaking—

a small, mercurial moment and we are eye to eye with our marrow, bodies owned

not by us but by the birth of the Universe—our borrowed atoms coaxed apart,

rearranged and repurposed. We live between the roughened palms of physics and

it is law: hemorrhage bone-bend skin-split
contusion concussion cavitation: these are the ways we come to see ourselves as matter. Kneeling in the street I survey myself, fingers

on each part, Am I okay but I can’t say surely in the warp of bloodrush before I lunge

at the guy, us both spitting-mad What’s your issue You could have killed me Watch where you’re going.

Outrageous and foolproof, our fragility. What else makes us feel so alive? Sharpened steel, glottal

growls, a branch snapping in a dark forest. Glimpses of our deepset orbits.
LESSONS II

There are over a hundred bucks worth
of books in my arms, and I am poor.
It’s Christmas Eve. My family fled
to Santa Barbara and left me here

in the blizzard, where I have work
shoveling snow, chipping away at ice.
I’m a blue collar kid with a white
collar dad, downward mobility I’ve said,

my smirk a mask on my shame.
My parents raised themselves up
from the flour and water of their
immigrant parents to prime cut

beef and well-paired wine, but I’m
more worried about landscapes
than namesakes, a sense of meaning
than a sense of success. I think

everyone stumbles around. I think
inside a thick snow is falling, and
I don’t think it matters where you
come from or what’s in your pockets

if you have pockets at all. A snow
is falling in your mind, a light breeze
blows, and all you see are shadows
that could be rocks or rivers.

I have been a long time growing up
and still don’t know a thing that’s true.
Do you? I wonder if I will have
everything or nothing, and how

do we tell which is which. I’ve waited
to one day find it simple, to intuit
what to do with love, how to change.
Does it happen like that? Please say

yes. Please say I will some day see
the world beneath this thick snow.

MAGIC

I can’t allow it. I want to believe that when I’ve dreamed of you you’ve dreamed this, too— you following me down a path

in the Swiss Alps moments after a thick summer rain and your curious hands are reaching for my wet shoulders—

our spirits out running the roads our minds refuse to walk, but I can’t allow it. And when my cheeks uncannily flush I can’t allow that

maybe you are mentioning me in some room, the realm of your bourbon timbre a viscous, supple space— can’t allow the thirty years

spread between our ages, can’t allow that you’re my boss, can’t allow you’re married. I can’t allow it if the word

love takes shape in your mouth when you say my name, can’t allow if that is why you rarely say it. I want to believe we can

master a thing without earning it, like when Tchaikovsky is on in the company car and I watch the hills and their black tufts of trees pass

while you drive us to work and my fingertips twitch and if a grand piano sat a-glimmer in front of me I swear I could play this piece perfectly.
But I can’t allow that either, can you? Can’t allow Meant-to-Be or More-Than-We-See, can’t allow it because I can’t look, will never wonder—

did you search me out, did you know I was coming, do your hairs stand on end when you walk away and do you stop yourself from turning back— can’t allow for any answers, can’t bear having to believe, always, that what we feel is real.
A GREAT UNCONFORMITY

First described by early Grand Canyon explorers Clarence Dutton and John Wesley Powell, The Great Unconformity is an inexplicable 1.2 billion-year gap in Earth’s geologic record.

Like you, I have tried to scry most every day of my life and I end up here anyway, crouched on the spring dirt with my back pressed against juniper bark, a hailstorm I didn’t see coming chinking down like comets, each fat ice globule an omen from heaven. Through the loose copse of trees I watch the legs of Cindy’s sorrel flick and stutter, she’s clinching his sides with her thighs, she named him Wildcard, she bought him after cancer cut off her breasts but before last winter when her dear baby boy disappeared on his way home from work, and we three are hiding, Wildcard and Cindy and me. I thank my gods I’m not astride anything big—have you noticed these trees are not much for cover? This will make a memorable day, I yell to Cindy through wind and splats of rain, although I know we are here to forget, I know how the unexpected does not sit well with us. We mold our pasts into broken records: invariable Sundays—eggs over easy, The Denver Post, Holst’s planets in stereo—and touches from loved ones who touched the same each time, snow every December and crocuses by March, cabbage rolls just how Grams makes them. I think repetition, not cataclysm, is memory, I think what has happened to us is as obscure as what will come, we invent both out of resolve and rote desperation: redact what we do not care to remember or to foresee, gift ourselves gaps in our records. So, no, Cindy will not re-call today, will not re-call how surprisingly wet and cold this season’s been, will not re-call wrestling down wide-eyed Wildcard in this thin forest, this freak storm.
EATING CROW

I don’t deserve it—
so I used to think. Sound
of featheroil in wind as bird
heals low, flitter, shudder, shadow
on my eyelids, eclipse of
sun, rivershush, smooth stone
in palm, levity and leniency
in my toss, the drop, a hollowsop
when the water yields then swallows
what I gave it, leafbell, one
thin branch taps at another
and another, the aspen crowns
moan as they rub into each
other, Earthcreak, siltsuck, all of this
being here I do without
trying, this sensuous mess
I take inside—I thought myself
unworthy, the gift inequitable,
but I was wrong, life
demands no justification:
Coyote at scratch in every groundhole,
flicker in mad hack for each writhing grub,
wasp aswarm on the dead meat,
same as those, same as you—
I’m hungry, and each unearned
molecule, each brilliant sliver
of light I reap, I take, I eat, I keep.
FIRERINGS

Do you know what  
annealing is? It’s the  
strengthening of metal  
through heat  
and pressure. Heat

and pressure. July  
is dry, windscorch  
and crackle and  
everyone fears fires—  
we think we see

sweeps of smoke  
on the valley floor  
some days but it’s  
 thick throats of haze. Do  
you know I’ve moved on

from each thing  
I’ve grown to love,  
 onward, as if it’s the holy  
quest, the inner sanctum:  
the ritual, the praxis of

 onward. I’m in love  
again. Loosening  
of cottonwood cotton,  
limber aspens, tall grass  
lists in the gusts. He has

warmth that rounds  
 wander into wonderment  
and yet I can’t  
but consider how  
we can always

say no. I’ve done  
it so many times,  
unburied myself  
from the hearth  
coals and squelched
out. Do you know
why we turn
away from these fires?
And step from their
rings into the night.
It was your grandmother
in her indifferent seventies
who had finished scraping
the warm sacks of innards
out of an old laying hen,
who had plucked it and
saved the feathers for your
pillow, who planted then
carressed the pink geraniums
in their hanging boxes
all of the supple Swiss hill
summer, who gazed at the
cross smirk of lake separating
her from poor Germany
as she stood at the sink
slopping hot water into the
hollow bird’s breast, who aged
on this same Earth whose air
even in her time suspended
the Higgs Boson, whose climate
changed, whose politics stamped
newspapers black, whose North
Star was our North Star, whose
core boiled hot, whose essential
questions dangled unanswered—
your grandmother who leaned
from her white-washed window
frame, who scooped the front
paws of her spaniel out with her,
threw a dimpled arm over
his shoulder blades, who squinted
at her husband in the yard
amongst sunflowers, their
new camera poised delicately
in his stiff weaver’s fingers,
and smiled so carelessly.
LESSONS III

The flocks of daisies nesting
on these high hillsides mean
summer recedes again: Late
bloomers. Under the cool, clean
sun they ruffle their petals, they
bounce. They live their brief
apogee. Down in the cities
my friends’ parents are dying,
in the heart, in the bone, in
the mind. Sometimes they’re
told two days which turn into
two years, sometimes two
months which turn into two
days. Sometimes a friend
says to me There are things
I wish I could tell my father
while his father is still here, still
listening, while the words
are still possible. But I am learning
possibility has surprising limits.
There are tragedies we see coming
that cannot be sidestepped.
It is not possible for these daisies
to survive the winter, and it is
not possible to utter the right thing
at a deathbed. It is not possible for us
to go through these motions
without meeting our losses—
of daisies, of dearests, of daylight.
FORWARD

“What we call the future is a condition of increasing mess; what we call the past is increasing tidiness. Our ability to easily distinguish between the two shows that time in our world has a clear direction.”


At 30 I came home and worked on a ski mountain. This was last fall. I had been gone many years, and my father had tired of work—would rather tell me news of the owls nesting in our trees than news of his business—and my mother had tired of making meals—we always went out to eat—and the valley roads had clogged with traffic. Each day I drove up through the crevasses, up to the whipped tips of the Rockies, a large and breathless silence among the peaks, and I powered on chairlift machinery, felt the steel quiver in my teeth, watched the succession of chairs swing past in endless, meditative monotony. When no one needed a ride I took short circular walks through snow drifts, up a little hill and down, scouted ermine tracks and mountain hare, the crows shiny black missiles in the bright sky, wary of my lurching steps as I tamped down the thigh-deep snow. Now and then I stopped to watch snow crystals blow off spruce boughs in glamorous swirls, luminous, and I foresaw how the ashes of my parents will move when I cast them into the air above these peaks, who knows how many years into the future. It is certain they will die, and I will burn them. I long for the meaning of that moment, long for the severance life will provide as it takes things away from me, always, year after year, proving its own maxim: Decay will happen to everyone and everything: The boulders will fall from the cliffside onto the road, the oak bark will split, the land will slide from the hill into the river and take you, too, if you’re standing
there. And the only way to escape these collapses
is to live through them and put them behind you,
and the only way to live through them is to build
a good life that will one day collapse.
This is why I have circled back home to watch the
chairoilift spin, to guide my feet through the snow,
to listen for the owls at dawn with my father and
cook dinner now and then for my mother. I want
to live well enough to survive the countless undoings.
The world is going forward, no matter what, us
tucked in with it, farther into the wilderness, thickets,
brambles, marshes, the past at our backs brighter, easier,
criss-crossed with trails. Now and now and now, tidier.
THE DOE

She came out of nowhere. That’s what I tell myself. We swept around the bend at nightfall, you and I, the Utah sandstone still kindled with sun heat, the scrub oak pleached in shadows, and the doe was there a-hurtle across the two-lane road, her arched back, her hooves striated like petrified wood, like our fingernails in winter, the black strikes of her eyes, a furrow in her bushy brow, the splay of her ears—did I see these things in the flash of her?—our heads thrown forward and the seatbelt digging in, my hands jerking the wheel, brake shudder, street skid, her thin legs cracking on the car door, a clatter too childish, too flat. After, askew on the gravel roadside, I watched in my rearview mirror through the settling dust as she clambered up the bank along the freeway and slipped off, the drum of my heart, Are you okay, Yes, are you, our quickened breaths. We got out of the car to have a look: A deep crater in the fender steel, hare-like quills of fur pinned in the window seal, rivulets of fine, white soot on the glass—all that she left us with. We hiked the bank where I’d seen her go, we craned our necks at the barbed wire, the thick mesquite. We looked in each other’s eyes, you rubbed your hand in the small of my back, we turned to the night, the far canyons, the La Sals. Perhaps I should have seen her coming. It was in the dusky desert air, in the pale bowl of the full moon rising through lilac cloudstrips, the field of deer we passed outside that last town: I’ve never seen
so many in one place, you said. But you know I don’t believe in omens. We can’t read fate forward, no soothsayers here. We get hit, we’re shaken, left fingerling the traces, wondering of powers we’ll never have.
After he moved in I felt adrift outside myself, though when I lived alone I’d felt adrift on the inside. Each night together we planned out what to eat. We bought a stand mixer in Evergreen, This is the first real thing that’s ours, he said. How much of my sense of mooring can I buy in kitchenwares? Why do we see faces in the marks on bathroom tiles, in the bark of trees? No sentience is enough sentience—we want every object to see us, to speak to us—haven’t you noticed. I asked him to move in so there would always be eyes finding me, from behind cupboards and couch cushions, in the mirrors’ fathomless reflections—so I would always be aware of the small truth of me, of us: stray and lonely planets revolving through these rooms.

MOORINGS
FALLOUT

In the weeks before winter, we the people voiced our concerns about laying down under a woman president, about race relations, about a pipeline through the last squares of land that are not ours, and the most powerful man on Earth used his final days in office to protect a few acres of tribal forest in Utah, a patch of overfished sea off the coast of Cape Cod, and I took up meditation, wanted to rise close under my own skin again.

I’ve noticed how as I grow I’ve grown calluses, so I buy books on Buddhism, sign up for classes, learn how to sit, how to center, and with each sunrise salutation I long to be soft again, let the world at my skin’s edge maw me, open me, mutate me without my permission into a mad, new thing. Like when I was seven and my second grade teacher caught me cheating on a spelling test, the answer sheet hidden under the lid of my desk. She walked by, ripped it away, crumpled it in her fist. Even now I blush when I think of it. The shame in my throat, the tears that gathered—to let such a small thing burn through me.

I was supple then, and you? We didn’t know it, might have been told our quickness to cry, our tantrums were all weakness, but we were braver than we’d ever be again, brave enough to move about without a tempering shield of glass between our living and us—everything passed through as radiation, nipped at our bodies—everything caused consequence, and we didn’t refuse it, hadn’t learned at the end of my rope or rock bottom, last straw or had it up to here. We were boundless.

We held our arms open, our bellies exposed to the most impenetrable clouds, the most blinding flashes of light. I want to go back there. You, too?
I don’t mind getting naked anymore in public, in front of my gym locker, my skin pale and taut in some places, then dimpled. I used to push myself around, haven’t you? I used to shrug and shrink in my body, like it was a tacky holiday dress I resented having to wear. I used to give myself the strong-arm, ward off the things I didn’t like or understand: feeling one way but acting another, arguing just to argue, the quick whip of mood, mandibles, mischief, eyebrows, ilium. Intransigence. I like all these things at a distance, but in myself they’re inscrutable, like too many colors overlaid.

My lover takes classes in Aikido, and sometimes after dinner in front of the couch he’ll show me what he’s learned. *Come at me with a knife,* he’ll tell me. And when I fist my hand in pretend, lift it over my head, lunge out, he spins through my hacking, jams his leg between mine, buckles my knees, my limbs left pinwheeling at his back, unable to cut or wrest him away. *Aikido teaches us to step into trouble instead of stepping back,* he says.

The body is like that. A year or so ago I found a stronghold behind my sternum where my thoughts like to go and fall away, and I started to come closer rather than hold myself away, started to yield to these bones, this softness. I don’t push myself around now—that’s a game for others. It’s safe here at the center.
LESSONS IV

My first teacher had an upright near her bay window, a cat curled up on the sill and the sun aglow on paisley curtains with gold tassels. I went after school, learned how to hold my hands like two oranges rested beneath each palm, fingertips perched on the keys like wrens, strange, nervous pluckings of When the Saints Go Marching In and Ode to Joy. I wanted to play because my father did, my mother, too. We had a grand piano, a Kawai—cherry-stained, brass-footed, its lid cracked open like a beckoning door, smudges of dirt hidden between the keys—sprawled in a corner of our home, a quid pro quo from one of Dad’s clients who couldn’t pay his attorney fees up straight. Dad sat down late at night, usually it was tax season, laid his legal pad aside and left a glass of Jack to make a ring on the music rack while he unpacked the dips and twirls of a waltz into our rooms, the ball of his right foot coy on the soft pedal, knew it all by heart though he couldn’t remember the title, hadn’t seen the sheets in thirty years. My second teachers, odd-duck twins, virtuosos in leather vests and tilted caps, came to our house, sat one on each side of me, the bench legs creaking.

When I practiced, Dad or Mom might wander by, circle back, hover, arms crossed, eyes closed, might say, I should take lessons again, but they know lessons are beside the point. I don’t have a teacher anymore, either, but still I play. This is how it goes all over, this yearning to use our bodies as well as our minds. Some folks use lathes or picks or knitting needles, some throw pots, some hoe rows, some shape or spray or comb or caulk—so many ways to go about it—for my mother it was the rolling sea of The Homecoming while I cast the loose net of Leibesraum. It is ritual, it is its own end. We must make good with our hands.