AN ENDLESS FIELD OF WHITE

by

HEATHER MATESICH COUSINS

(Under the Direction of Judith Ortiz Cofer)

ABSTRACT

This collection of poetry is a triptych—three discrete works of poetry set side-by-side, hinging on a shared concern with place. The introduction to the collection examines what drives these poems, contextualizing the dissertation as an existential act, a way of speaking to and against loss, an act that Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood has called “negotiating with the dead.” I am writing against the effacing power of time to memorialize people, places, and moments. The field, an image that appears in the dissertation, is connected to the field of the page; it is explored as a metaphor for possibility and transcendence. The first section of poetry, “Editations,” is in the style of erasures, a variation of found poetry, in which sections of geographical, ecological, and historical texts have been “whited-out;” the words that remain behind become a poem. The second section, “Ahnentafel,” is a long meditation on my ancestry, family stories, and memories of growing up in Northern Michigan. The final, titular section, “An Endless Field of White,” presents self-contained, imagistic poems, many set in a Midwestern, winter landscape.

INDEX WORDS: Poetry, Michigan, Philip Levine, Victor Frankl, Diane Ackerman, Hasidism, Mindfulness, Jack Gilbert, Elizabeth Bishop, Margaret Atwood, John Ashbery, Erasure, Ecopoetics
AN ENDLESS FIELD OF WHITE

by

HEATHER MATESICH COUSINS

B.A., Bryn Mawr College, 2001

M.A., The Johns Hopkins University, 2002

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2009
© 2009

Heather Matesich Cousins

All Rights Reserved
AN ENDLESS FIELD OF WHITE

by

HEATHER MATESICH COUSINS

Major Professor: Judith Ortiz Cofer
Committee: Reginald McKnight
Andrew Zawacki

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2009
DEDICATION

For all their love and support, this dissertation is dedicated to my family: Erin, Gavin, Kaitlin, Gail, and Michael Matesich; and David Cousins.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to my committee, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Reginald McKnight, and Andrew Zawacki, for their excellent—and much appreciated—mentorship during my time at the University of Georgia. I would also like to thank my fellow graduate students, whose critiques, support, and friendship have been indispensable.

Thank you to the editors of The Yalobusha Review for publishing “Late” and to Danielle Sellers, editor of The Country Dog Review, for publishing “The Field.”
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIELDS: A MEDITATION ON MORTALITY, LOCATION, AND IMAGINATION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDITATIONS</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHNENFATEL</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AN ENDLESS FIELD OF WHITE</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving North</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear Lake, Michigan</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What They Taught Us</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitous</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear Lake</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treading Water</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning the Mystery</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abeam</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Field</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Is Inside Us</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 1</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 2</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 3</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 4</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 5</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 6</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 7</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 8</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 9</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 10</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 11</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost 12</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Through</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Ossian, Iowa</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passenger Pigeons</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Spade</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavier-than-Air Machine</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insects</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Visitors</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost of a Chance</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese Beetles</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fall</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIELDS: A MEDITATION ON
MORTALITY, LOCATION, AND IMAGINATION

Somebody embroidered the doily.
Somebody waters the plant,
or oils it, maybe. Somebody
arranges the rows of cans
so that they softly say:
ESSO—SO—SO—SO
to high-strung automobiles.
Somebody loves us all.

- Elizabeth Bishop, from “Filling Station”

“Geography is the wife of history, as space is the wife of time.”

- Guy Davenport, from “The Geography of the Imagination”
When I was about eight years old, someone put a “For Sale” sign on the property across the road from my house. The property was raw land, an acre that seemed like a vast wilderness: an Alaska, a Manitoba, a Saskatchewan.

I was worried when I saw the sign. My brother, sister, and I liked to play on the empty property. We did a lot of imagining there: hiking through rainforests, hunting bears, walking lightly with Indians, living Swiss Family Robinson-style.

We spent a lot of time in the field in spring. After the snow melted, the moss and reindeer lichen filled with moisture and turned to sponges under our sneakers. The fiddleheads—baby ferns in a tight curl—would come up in late March and April. My older brother, who was a Cub Scout and had the blue uniform and the golden neckerchief, told me you could sauté fiddleheads, and they tasted like asparagus.

By May and June, the ferns would be full grown. The entire lot would be covered with them. My brother, sister, and I would dig tunnels through the ferns, crawling on our hands and knees, breaking stalks. We made labyrinths. I’d lie on green moss and look up through green feathers and green wings, the ferns’ pale undersides spotted with black spores, waiting to burst.

For two years, the “For Sale” sign sat harmlessly on the edge of the acre. The land across the road remained wild—beating with insects and rabbits and, many afternoons, us—children with that wet look in their eyes that means they are lost in their heads, sneakers clumping down on the earth that is there, digging against the grass and moss, and touching, simultaneously, that world that comes up to their eyes from the inside: a yellow plain, a desert island, a blue sea, a mountainous horizon.
When I was ten years old, I was sitting on the front porch, a place I liked to sit on
warm days, when the sun heated the gray concrete. It was late spring, and I was filled
with the promise of the tulips and daffodils—summer was coming; the cold was gone
(like a dog, during the first sunny days after the long winter, I’d find the warmest spots in
the yard and just sit, soaking in the sun). I was daydreaming, when I heard machine
noises from across the road and looked up to see a backhoe and two pick-up trucks
rumbling into the empty lot, knocking down weeds.

The “For Sale” sign was gone.

I went inside to tell my mother.

“An older couple bought the lot,” she said.

“What are they going to do with it?” I asked.

“Build a house,” she said.

Later that same afternoon, the backhoe ripped a hole in the earth. Over the next
few months, men in baseball hats and t-shirts, with canvas apron belts slung low with the
weight of nails, made plenty of noise: measuring, hammering, and hoisting. The house
went up: a yellow pine skeleton, fleshed out with plywood, white drywall, and, finally,
brown siding. Someone laid down grass seed and hay.

As promised, an old couple moved into the house, a one-story ranch with a small
patio and sliding glass doors. They planted a garden of roses and shrubs with sharp,
pointy leaves, and they cut down a crabapple tree that my brother, sister, and I used to
climb. They cut down the ferns. They lined their house with a moat of white, shiny
rocks. They put up a silver flagpole and hoisted an American flag. They put in a
birdbath and an orange hummingbird feeder, even though I had never seen a hummingbird in Michigan.

I could only visit the field again in my memories. I sometimes looked across-the-road to the neighbors’ yard, their plain house on a flat, brittle landscape—dry grass and empty rose bushes, and thought about how beautiful the field had been.

When, a few years later, I started playing with words in lines and stanzas, filling Mead notebooks with poems, place emerged as a recurring theme. My early poems were filled with Michigan imagery: pine trees, ferns, and lakes. The field got recreated in verbal images. I was trying to describe the landscape of my home in a way that was physically and emotionally accurate, and I had a strong sense of the preservative power of words. I still do.

Northern Michigan, where I grew up, is a place that is still largely rural, full of lakes and animals. The people there are aware of the tense equilibrium between development and human progress. People in Northern Michigan know how to ride horses, skin deer, and gut fish. They know which forest mushrooms can be eaten and which will kill you. Although I live in Georgia now, I still feel connected to the landscape of Northern Michigan. Michigan is the landscape of my memories. It is the place that I think of when I think of home. When I go back there, to visit family, I am comforted by that which is the same—the lake, the hills, the pine trees—and shaken by anything that has changed: that my hometown library has moved or that the gas station has put up a new, electronic sign. The past decade has also seen larger, more devastating
changes, including the cutting down of forest for development, the destruction of natural sand dunes, and the infiltration of many of Michigan’s freshwater lakes by invasive zebra mussels. My own life seems wrapped up in this place, and I want to preserve it, motivated not only out of environmental concerns, but also out of an unshakeable feeling that my life’s meaning is entwined in the land. My skinned knees, my sister’s migraines, the lines on my father’s face, Boy Scout pot lucks, beach bonfires, hikes—my life experiences occurred in this space, and every location is a repository for personal stories.

In a 1977 interview with Studs Terkel, poet Philip Levine described his relationship to the changing landscape of Detroit, the city in which he grew up:

...when I go back home I’m invariably a stranger. I get lost very quickly. There are freeways where there used to be houses that I lived in, and places that had a lot of meaning for me are simply gone. One of the earliest motives in my writing is in a way in response to that. It was an effort to slow down this voracious eating of time of everything that I cared for. I hope to preserve some image, a verbal image... [P]eople were here and they meant something. They did something, and nobody remembers them, and I see one of my central functions as the person who remembers them and records their qualities. (62)

For Philip Levine, these people were Jewish relatives, Russian launderers, and Polish mechanics, living in the tenements, warehouses, and factories of 1930s and 1940s Detroit. My Michigan is four hours north and fifty years apart from Levine’s experience. Heading up I-75, the black, eight-lane highway narrows—four lanes to Lansing, to Mt. Pleasant, to Clare, and then two. The apartment complexes become smaller, shorter, until
there are no more apartment complexes. There are manufactured homes sitting on concrete. There are old cabins with thick stone chimneys, insect-stained windows, and flapping screen doors. There are trailers that sit back from the road. Rusting Ford or Chevy pickups sit in dirt driveways. Someone has decorated her yard with wooden windmills and lighthouses, a silver-blue gazing ball mounted on a concrete pedestal, a resin Virgin Mary with hands upturned, as if checking to see if it’s raining. In December, the hands fill with snow. In January, she disappears beneath it.

Despite the fact that Levine grew up in an industrial city of one million and I grew up in a lakeside village of three hundred, Levine’s statement that his writing is “an effort to slow down this voracious eating of time of everything that I cared for” is one that I identify with. I know the feeling that Levine talks about—the feeling that everything is changing, it’s all going, and someone’s got to get it all down before it disappears. I’ve never come to terms with the idea that nothing and no one lasts. I imagine that I can make it last, at least a little longer, if I can only get the words right.

This essay is meant to contextualize my dissertation, a collection of the creative works that explore the idea of being haunted by particular people and places. This dissertation is the culmination of my six years studying at the University of Georgia, taking workshops, writing poetry and stories, attending lectures, and listening to the advice of my professors: Claudia Rankine, Brian Henry, and, most influentially, the current members of my dissertation committee—Andrew Zawacki, Reg McKnight, and Judith Ortiz Cofer, to whom this collection is offered up for scrutiny and advice.
I’ve written a great deal in my time at the University of Georgia, although, as perhaps should be the case for a young writer, most of it has been relegated to the “scrap” pile: writings in which I assayed, but did not quite achieve, a particular effect—an image or sensation that I had hoped to impress on the reader, but which, for a variety of reasons, stopped short of a full realization of its own promise. This dissertation, I hope, will offer some pieces that are more than scrap material, some poems that are the thing itself: vibrating evocations of experience: “[a] diagram of reality,” as Alicia Ostriker has called poetry, “[a] distillation of reality, that may make us free” (Qtd. in O’Driscoll 3).

As it is, I suspect, for most writers, what is at stake for me in composition is existential; it has little to do with awards or publications, just as a priest is not essentially interested in the golden cup with which he offers up wine for transubstantiation. What is at stake—in the words, the images, the meditations—is a sense that the people and the things that I love have mattered. Through presenting my people, places, and moments to an outside world, I create exterior significance from an interior experience. By transforming a personal encounter into a shared one, I claim communal sense and meaning. It is a kind of memorializing; it is a way of exploring for myself how and why human life matters. Poet Marianne Boruch, in The American Poetry Review, declared: “A poem is a box, a thing, to put other things in. For safe keeping.” (Qtd. in O’Driscoll 7). Like a shoebox or lockbox into which one puts photographs and ticket stubs, I put into my poems the most valuable trinkets and snippets of my life. My poems are material; they are artifacts conveyed linguistically. If I do not evoke an image or a scene powerfully and accurately—through vivid language, metaphor, and rhythm, I have not properly “saved” the primary experience.
Collecting is a measure against dissolution. The need for personal significance is universal, and the writing of poetry is a way of framing such significance. In his seminal psychological text *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl examined his experience at Auschwitz during the Holocaust. Frankl noted that when the Germans had stripped the Jewish prisoners of everything else—food, clothing, sleep, health, family, church—one thing remained: “the last of the human freedoms”—the individual’s right to choose his attitude toward his suffering (104). This attitude allowed the individual to consider the way in which his or her suffering might be meaningful; no human, according to Frankl, feels complete in absence of the belief that his or her life is of consequence: “What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.” (166) Poems are for me Frankl’s “call of potential meaning:” verbal circuits that satisfy in their images, sounds, and sense. If I can effect a charged moment, then I can keep the darkesses of my psyche at bay, especially that big darkness: the knowledge that my loved ones and I are mortal, corporeal, disappearing. As Charles Wright states in his poem “Body and Soul II,” “Every true poem is a spark, / and aspires to the condition of the original fire / Arising out the emptiness” (lines 31-33). Poetry can replace emptiness with energy. 1

1 In the essay “Projective Verse,” Charles Olson uses the law of conservation of energy to define poetry as an energy transfer:

A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge. (16)
In Diane Ackerman’s *The Zookeeper's Wife*, an account of Warsaw during World War II, she describes the presence of Hasidism in Warsaw’s doomed Jewish Ghetto. Hasidism is a Jewish religious movement that emphasizes delight and a personal relationship with God. “How could anyone,” Ackerman asks, “reconcile the agony of the Holocaust with Hasidism, a dancing religion that teaches love, joy, and celebration?” (156). While the Jews of Warsaw starved and suffered, fifteen to an apartment, and worried over an uncertain future, many Hasidic leaders worked quietly in a Ghetto shoe repair shop. There, when not ministering to their suffering people, they discussed holy texts as they cut leather and hammered in nails, and *Kiddush ha-Shem*, the principle of service to God, acquired a new definition in the Ghetto, where it became “the struggle to preserve life in the face of destruction.” A similar word arose in German—*überleben*—which meant “to prevail and stay alive,” a defiant point underscored by its being an intransitive verb. (136)

An intransitive verb is one that does not take an object. Intransitive verbs express states of existence, states in which one simply *is*, in which there is no acting upon. One merely *is* happy. One *lies down*. One *dies*. Compare this state of being to that of a transitive verb: He *feeds the poor*. She *knits the socks*. He *kills the rabbi*. The transitive verb relies performatively on a realm outside the self; the intransitive verb relies on a state of selfness (though not necessarily selfishness). By celebrating their spirituality and personal connection to God, the Hasidic Warsaw Jews were able to find a way of being, struggling meaningfully against opposing forces. These Hasidim, like various prisoners that Frankl met contemporaneously at Auschwitz, were able to turn inward for
psychological sustenance. Within themselves, they found resources of energy and potential meaning.

Reading Ackerman’s description, I began to think about my dissertation. *This*, I thought, *is what I am doing, this is what I am trying to say.* I do not mean to offend by suggesting that my life experiences are comparable to those who suffered in the Holocaust. My anxieties are largely self-imposed. I have never known true hunger, lacked shelter, witnessed murder, or been a member of a community threatened by genocide. I am writing this essay in a small town in Georgia, drinking a cup of coffee, my two dogs curled up with me on the couch, my laptop glowing on my knees. I offer up my meditations from a place of health and material comfort; nevertheless, I believe that the shoe-shop rabbis and poets have much in common. The word for poetry comes from the Greek *poiesis*, which means “making” or “creating.” Poets hammer out words—a system of signs, celebrating (and creating) what it means to be located in the world, just as the Warsaw rabbis were hammering out prayers, consciously inhabiting their lives. To continue to explore the self, against the threat of time, transience, and destruction, is to honor the significance of human experience. “By writing poetry,” Ted Kooser has observed, “even those poems that fail and fail miserably, we honor and affirm life. We say ‘We loved the earth but could not stay.’” (5) The art of poetry is the art of being fully conscious—full aware—of the world. Similarly, the poet Donald Revell, in *The Art of Attention*, explains “poetry is a form of attention, itself the consequence of attention. And, too, I believe that poems are presences, themselves the consequence of vivid presentations, events as may be called, in Dame Julian of Norwich’s word, ‘showings’” (5). For Revell, the craft of poetry involves both meditation and creation, an ecstatic
birthing that emerges from a moment of concentrated attunement. Revell emphasizes the importance of seeing and that the crafting of a poem can be revelatory and redemptive, comparing it to a spiritual encounter, such as 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich’s concrete visions.

At least some of the Hasidic Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto used transcendent meditation and mindfulness (“mindfully attending to everyday life”) in their daily observance (157). Ackerman quotes eighteenth-century Jewish mystic Alexander Susskind, a man whose writings would have been familiar to the Ghetto’s Hasidic rabbi, Kalonymus Kalman Shapira:

When you eat and drink, you experience enjoyment and pleasure from the food and drink. Arouse yourself every moment to ask in wonder, ‘What is this enjoyment and pleasure? What is it that I am tasting?’ (157)

Mindfulness has also been espoused for centuries by Buddhist monks. Buddha taught that a careful and fully-present awareness of each moment is a necessary step toward nirvana, a state of transcendent peace. More recently, mindfulness has been advocated by Western psychologists to alleviate anxiety and depression. Through careful meditation on the present moment, one can transcend suffering—psychic trauma arising from negative thinking about the future, past, or present. Living wholly in a concentrated moment, fully entered through sensory stimuli (such as Susskind’s emphasis on the taste of food), one is able to exist in the intransitive: an unencumbered, ongoing state of being.

All art is a type of mindfulness. Many writers claim that they must write, and I think this is why: the writing is a way of prevailing, of staying alive. Through poetry, one can transport oneself into a particular state of being and explore the meaning and
significance of that moment, evoking sensory stimuli: sunlight, rain, clouds, bee buzzings—with words.

In 2006, the poet Jack Gilbert described in an interview for NPR’s All Things Considered the importance of his poems as a way of re-experiencing his life, its joys and its sadnesses. His second wife, sculptor Michiko Nogami, died in 1982, at the age of thirty six, of cancer. It is of her, particularly, that he spoke, in describing poetry’s function:

What I want to keep is the Michiko that was alive. And that’s what poetry and heart [do] so well for us. It’s a way of finding my way back to what was and to experience it again and again and again.

One’s ability to recapture is never perfect, as Gilbert himself observes in his poem “Summer at Blue Creek, North Carolina:”

**Summer at Blue Creek, North Carolina**

There was no water at my grandfather’s when I was a kid and would go for it with two zinc buckets. Down the path, past the cow by the foundation where the fine people’s house was before they arranged to have it burned down. To the neighbor’s cool well. Would come back with pails too heavy,
so my mouth pulled out of shape.

I see myself, but from the outside.

I keep trying to feel who I was,

and cannot. Hear clearly the sound

the bucket made hitting the sides

of the stone well going down,

but never the sound of me.

As Gilbert observes in this poem, poetry is not a motion or sound-recording device. It does not reproduce reality; it re-imagines from the perspective of the writer at the time of composition. This re-imagining is through the lens of the rational and/or the emotional, the mind and the heart. What comes through is an impression: the sensory moment as it can be recalled—one of many simultaneous truths.

Such meditation is not always joyful, or celebratory—not always full of dancing, as was the intention of Hasidic Jews in their spiritual transformations. In the Gilbert poem above, there is a desperate sense of reaching—a nostalgic pull towards a past impossible to fully re-inhabit. In other incarnations, a poem becomes an explicitly painful meditation on difficulty, suffering, and fear. But perhaps there is something redemptive even in these dark studies.

In Elizabeth Bishop’s famous villanelle “One Art,” the poet contemplates loss, trying to convince the reader that one can learn to manage the passing of a loved one. Mundane losses—keys or a mother’s watch—are presented as conditioning experiences that will allow one to confront the greatest loss—the loss of a loved one—with
equanimity. For the speaker in “One Art” (easily conflated with Bishop herself, who, as a child, lost her father to Bright’s disease and her mother to mental illness, and, as an adult, lost her lover Lota de Macedo Soares to suicide), the listing of the lost objects momentarily reclaims them and serves as an act of faith—faith in one’s ability to keep going, to survive, to bear:

--Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture

I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident

the art of losing's not too hard to master

though it may look like (Write it!) a disaster. (16-19)

It is difficult to believe the speaker of the poem. Using the inherently repetitive form of the villanelle, she protests too much; the effect is that of a guilty party insisting—too determinedly—on innocence. We all know, empathetically, the impossibility of ever fully recovering from the decease of a loved one; however, in the parenthetical imperative “Write it!” we also know that the speaker has the courage to try. This is what makes the poem heartbreaking. We admire Bishop’s expression of suffering and sympathize with the faltering attempt to exorcise it.

The novelist Margaret Atwood, in her essay collection Negotiating with the Dead, suggests that all writing is a reaction to the idea of death. All writing is motivated by transience and is a way to deal with loss:

...not necessarily a fear of death, as in Timor mortis conturbat me, but a definite concern with it—an intimation of transience, of evanescence, and thus of mortality, coupled with the urge to indite. (157-158).

Indite: to compose or write, as a poem. To treat in a literary composition.
In the poems I have been lately writing, my concern with transience has found diverse expression. I have become increasingly interested in ecology. Beginning with a workshop I took with Andrew Zawacki two years ago, I have been exploring experimental means of poetic creation to suggest the destruction of natural habitats and the importance of natural preservation. I have also been exploring the connection I have not only to the land, but to the land’s history, including the people whose energies and footsteps still seem to vibrate from it. My childhood and my family’s history—an ancestry of memories—continue to emerge in narrative poems, informed by the eighteen formative years that I spent in Northern Michigan, around trailers and cabins, Ford trucks, sand dunes, beach fires, January snow, mayflies, rose chafers, birch, pines, mosses, and ferns. My dissertation—my “negotiation with the dead”—explores all these interests.

The open field that I played in as a child is a metaphor for the field that writing presents—a welcoming, personal space: an unbounded realm of memory, perception, and language.

This open field can be considered literally: the page is itself a field. Charles Olson believed that the American poet should recognize the potential energies in writing not only against the left-margin, but upon the entire page. He believed that human breath should be a driving force in composition (as compared to a meter that runs by feet and lines), and that poems should be composed across the page with white space to allow room for breath (17). Reminding his readers that “form is never more than an extension of content” (a quote from his colleague Robert Creeley), Olson notes that an open composition—or “composition by field”—forces the poet to pay attention to each
moment of the poem as it enacts itself across the white field of paper (16-17). Olson’s idea of “composition by field” implies unexamined opportunities in the use of language and, particularly, the construction of poetry. In “Editations,” the first section of my dissertation, I take explicit advantage of this aesthetic understanding of the page. Several poems in the third section “An Endless Field of White” also fully inhabit the page as a field (see especially “Down” and “Digging Out”).

Fields are archetypal spaces of possibility. From the Elysian Plains, a section of the underworld for heroic Greeks (an unknown but desired place) to the savanna grasslands of Africa (which, in many folktales, are a place “outside of the village,”—a site of encounter, travel, adventuring), the field has asserted itself as a location where one will define oneself in diverse cultures throughout history. Anything can happen on an expansive plain.

In modern English, we refer to a “field of play”—the physical grounds of sporting events. The phrase also evokes playgrounds and backyards—the spaces where childhood games were enacted, where one was invited to frolic—to happily roam. The inverse construction “play the field” implies opportunity; invoked within the context of dating, to play the field is to engage with numerous romantic partners before “settling down” with one. In all of these formulations, the field is associated with the unknown, but this unknown is not disturbing or frightening. Rather, what will occur in the field or on the field is hopefully anticipated. The word for field in Latin is ager or campus. From the latter, we take our modern term for university grounds—fields of learning. When we ask young people what their career path will be, we ask, “What field are you going into?” Young people, in answering this question, are asked to envision many possible careers.
and to tentatively choose an occupation to which they would be suited. They are asked to examine themselves and to anticipate their future. Again and again, the field arises as a playful proving ground. The idea of a field as a place of energetic possibility is built-into Western culture through our language systems.

In modern poetry, fields occur again and again, and not only in expressly bucolic and nature-based poems, such as those of Mary Oliver and James Wright. John Ashbery invokes the archetype in an *ars poetica*, exploring the connection between the physical field and the intellectual one:

**What is Poetry?**

The medieval town, with frieze
Of boy scouts from Nagoya? The snow
That came when we wanted it to snow?
Beautiful images? Trying to avoid
Ideas, as in this poem? But we
Go back to them as to a wife, leaving
The mistress we desire? Now they
Will have to believe it
As we believed it. In school
All the thought got combed out:

What was left was like a field.
Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.

Now open them on a thin vertical path.
It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?

For Ashbery, the bare expanse of the field is connected to human subconsciousness. The field represents a realm beyond the logical and analytical; it is impulse, intuition, and inspiration—those wild growths that are sometimes “combed out” by formal education. The poem insists that the field of imagination is the ground of human identity; it is Frankl’s last human freedom, what remains when everything else has been stripped away. When we close our eyes, we can feel the well of imagination within us, an expanse of feeling. Ashbery’s poem is full of question marks, suggesting that the poem is a place where one seeks; it is a questing place. Poetry is an exploratory act, explicitly or implicitly sounding for answers.

Ackerman, in *The Zookeeper’s Wife*, also includes an account of a field. She presents this from an anonymous Warsaw Ghetto inhabitant:

In the ghetto, a mother is trying to explain to her child the concept of distance. Distance, she says, “is more than our Leszno Street. It is an open field, and a field is a large area where the grass grows, or ears of
corn, and when one is standing in its midst, one does not see its beginning
or its end. distance is so large and open and empty that the sky and the
earth meet there... (159)

For the Jewish mother, the field functions dualistically. It serves as a plaintive reminder
of the natural treasures her child has not experienced. In the child’s brief life, many
ordinary points of reference have been amputated by Nazi politics. What is available of
landscape is a one-mile square of Ghetto. The child’s microcosm is guarded by police
and separated from the rest of Warsaw by a ten-foot high, barbed-wire topped wall.
There are no fields in the child’s vocabulary of place; there is only crowding, hunger, and
illness. At the same time, however, the field is an experience that the child can
understand imaginatively, closing his or her eyes and going inward, as Ashbery suggests.
The field is a place understood through negation: a place where the constraints of the
ghetto fall way, as invoked in the mother’s description “so large and open and empty.”
The field is what the Ghetto is not. The mother’s evocation of field prepares the child for
eventual freedom and/or death, experiences that will allow the child to transcend his or
her situational suffering. The narrative of the field—where “the sky and the earth
meet”—is the story of a mother offering her child hope of a better future; it shows the
redemptive power of metaphor, imagery, and language, and the way the past (the
mother’s memories) can be saved up and gifted upon a new generation.

My memories of fields—all of the fields that I played in during childhood, not
only that wildest, most green, most Saskatchewan one—are wrapped up in my thoughts
about loss, transience, and poetics. Each square of white paper is a plane upon which
words play. Just as the Ghetto mother could create for her child an imaginative,
redeeming world, inspired by memory, I can create a world for readers. A poem is a box is a field. The world that I create is necessarily steeped in what is important to me. I am trying to create something that will simultaneously plumb meaning and preserve a spark of life. I am playing in the fields of time.

This talk of fields and preservation aligns itself with the concerns of ecopoetry. In the 20th century, ecopoetry emerged as a term to describe poems that self-consciously 1.) speak of place 2.) imply or explicate environmental threats and 3.) critically invest themselves in natural conservation. Ecopoetry tends to find expression through innovative and experimental aesthetics. Poet Christopher Arigo defines an ecopoem as “a house…founded on the tension between the cutting edge of innovation and ecological thinking;” Arigo connects the identity of ecopoets as protestors—those who practice political resistance—with their aesthetics. Resistance is manifested in poetry through experimentation with received ideas of the line, stanza, and page (such as Charles Olson’s exploration of composition by field). Many poets and critics, including Arigo, have stressed that a Nature poem—a poem simply about nature—is not an ecopoem. Ecopoetry does something more than interact with nature; it pushes boundaries and is aware of destructive forces. Of my own projects in this dissertation, “Editations” can clearly be seen to fit this definition; it is a work that re-examines the traditional definition of poetry and, at the same time, provides political commentary: in the 21st century, we have lost—and are losing, at an alarming rate—vital landscapes, landscapes that provide natural resources as well as psychological sustenance. As William Wordsworth wrote in his sonnet “The World is Too Much With Us” (what might be considered a proto-ecopoem, though it lacks any impulse toward structural innovation and fails to
acknowledge the important way the speaker himself is essentially tied to materialism: that he himself is a participant in the material, mercantile, industrial world): “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in Nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!” (2-4).

Ecopoetry is engaged with external imperatives; Nature poetry is engaged with internal imperatives. Ecopoetry calls for action: work toward the physical preservation of the environment; nature poetry calls for reflection—for the conservation of an experience. Whether or not nature poems lead the reader to any sort of political action, make the reader more aware of the destruction of natural habitat, or make the reader aware of his or her own destructive footprint is beside the point. This not a necessary part of a nature poem’s project. What a poem about nature aims for is not physical preservation, but psychic preservation.

Jorge Luis Borges asserted that the main reason that Dante wrote the Divine Comedy was in order to encounter Beatrice again (Atwood 172). Dante’s time spent in the circles of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven was a means of mental travel: a step-by-step psychological journey toward an encounter with the Beatrice who persists only in his memories. The Divine Comedy is Dante’s way of using his art and his memory in order to re-encounter her. Dante is systematically hypnotizing himself to Beatrice as vividly as he can.

Similarly, I would assert that poems of place are a poet’s way of recreating and re-encountering: a person, an animal, or the landscape itself. This is the project of many of the poems in the third section of my dissertation “An Endless Field of White.” At times, in “An Endless Field of White” (and in “Ahnentafel,” which, at different points in
its several dozen pages, expresses the prerogatives of both the Nature poem and the
ecopoem), the words on the page are meant to purely inhabit a memory and to save it
from extinction. I have an impulse to call all writing about nature “ecopoetry,” as all
writing about nature is invested one way or another in caring about a landscape; however,
I can also appreciate critical discussions that seek to distinguish a particular trend in
modern nature writing (toward innovation of form and awareness of the complex effects
of human-landscape interaction, toward caring for a landscape--stewardship).

Nonetheless, I would argue that the “mere” Nature poem is a cousin to ecopoetry.

Some modern critics and poets dismiss the “Nature poem,” believing that such
meditations somehow fail to accurately describe consciousness in our post-Industrial
world. Marcella Durand, in the journal *ecopoetics*, denounces “the exploitativeness and
inertness of traditional Nature poetry” (60). Marcella Durand suggests this poetry is
reductive, citing poet Juliana Spahr, who “has pointed out in recent readings and essays
that such poetry, the poetry of ‘walks,’ smacks of old fashioned Nature poetry, a poetry
that….doesn’t include the ‘bulldozer’ along with the ‘bird.’” (59)

The reference to the “bulldozer” and the “bird” can be found in Spahr’s evocative
essay “What Anti-Colonial Poetry Has to Say about Language and Why It Matters,”
inspired by the landscape and political truths of the island of Hawaii, her home:

Many people around them were so moved by the land that they wrote
poems celebrating nature. Sometimes people arrived by plane, wrote a
poem, and then left by plane. These poems were called 747 poems by
those who either didn't leave by plane or by those who both hadn't arrived
by plane and didn't leave by plane. Late at night in bars they could often
be heard declaiming to anyone who would listen that nature poetry was the most immoral of poetries because it showed the bird, often a bird that like themselves that had arrived from afar, and not the bulldozer. But when they looked more deeply at nature poetry, when they looked beyond the poems collected in anthologies that had images of the surf on the beach and looked instead at poems written by those who had deep connections to the islands they realized a whole new use for nature poetry. They read a poem, for instance, by Kuʻualoha Hoʻomanawanui that begins as a nature poem with the koaʻe bird gliding over Halemaʻumaʻu which turns into a plane over Waikiki and ends with asphalt. This was a poem that included both precontact and postcontact nature in it and that split perspective changed the things they could say about nature poetry dramatically they realized.

Spahr’s essay is a demand for ecopoetry—poetry that contains the bird and the bulldozer. Her entreaty is vital: as artists, we must not idealize a landscape—see only a half truth, a surface truth—truth with one-eye closed. We must fully see the world, using both eyes, acknowledging the complexity of our landscapes, even when that complexity means that we must ask more of ourselves. A poem that is “pretty,” but not true, is like trying to eat plastic. Even if it is a plastic cake—colorful and delicious-looking—there is no actual taste and there is nothing nourishing: intellectually, spiritually, aesthetically, politically…

But does this mean that all poetry with “birds” must contain “bulldozers?” Is veracity always the bird and the bulldozer? It is vital that some poetry treat this subject matter, and that, in viewing the scope of modern poetry, we do not find it divorced from
the realities of the modern world. Ecopoetry has a vital truth to express about twenty-first-century Earth. But, at the same time, there is another truth: not everyone walks around viewing nature through the lens of human contamination and/or influence. While the bulldozer may be an implicit reality on a macroscopic level, on a microscopic level—on the level of the individual and his or her daily thoughts, impressions, and feelings—the bulldozer at times leaves one completely.

As a writer, I want to be an articulate witness—to fully inhabit what is present. If I am truly mindful of the particular, I can be absorbed in a moment, focused on the petals of a flower, the smell of earth, the sound of wind in pine trees. If all writing is writing against death—against the fact that everything is being destroyed—must that poetry explicitly address destruction? Must that poetry be always conscious that it is a negotiation with the dead?

A human life is full of moods, a multitude of truths, some of which are in opposition to one another. Sometimes a “call to potential meaning” is found in the pure beauty of a lake, a walk in the woods, a view of a gorge. In James Wright’s poem “The Blessing,” he concludes, after describing an encounter with a horse in a pasture: “…if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom.” (23-24) This final image involves a dissolution of the self (line 23 pauses dramatically upon the breakage of the self), but this dissolution is ecstatic, delightful, and transformative, ending with the speaker imagining a momentary reincarnation out of his own anatomy and into that of a flower. We can lose ourselves—we do lose ourselves—in certain encounters with the natural world, and our knowledge of our own complicity in destruction can be lost too. The nature poem is a negotiation with the dead by preserving a moment in language and
by allowing us, as writers and readers, to lose ourselves: our sense of ourselves as mortal, corporeal, disappearing beings. A poem can be outside of time and destruction.

While death may be implied, as any binary lurks behind its counterpart, it is not always actualized. Poems can be about life. About what we love. About what is worth saving. Such a poem writes against the extinction of experience, and in doing so, reclaims life. Wordsworth’s class Nature poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” in which the speaker recalls an encounter with “a crowd /A host, of golden daffodils” is not outdated. This poem is not wrong; I do not find it inaccurate or problematic. It still moves readers because they recognize the speaker’s encounter with beauty, and they recognize nature’s transformative power, as described in the poems closing lines:

For oft, when on my couch I lie

    In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
    Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
    And dances with the daffodils. (19-24)

Agiri insists: “There is virtually no landscape, no ecosystem on this planet that has been untouched by human intervention, by technology and its byproducts. So the possibility of writing a Nature poem that ignores Spahr’s metaphoric bulldozer is virtually impossible.” I disagree. Perhaps my stance emerges from the fact that I grew up in a place that contains traces of the wild.
If a truth is focused, if it is isolated from other truths, that does not mean it is false. Sometimes the essential truth of a moment is a blissful singularity. Sometimes all we see is the birds. We live in a world of multivalent truths; in each day, we experience a variety of thought vectors. The wonderful thing about modern poetry is that it is a house containing endless rooms: numerous structures representing numerous truths. The prefix eco-, as Agiri and others remind us in their writing on ecopoetics, comes from the Greek oikos, meaning house. Perhaps poems, as Jed Rasula suggests in his critical treatment of ecopoetics This Compost, are ecosystems (7). Rasula cites Gary Snyder, who views poetry as an “ecological survival technique” (7). We survive in our post-Industrial world in a variety of domiciles: poems are boxes are houses. Poems are pulsing, electrical, energy-filled constructs that convey what it means, moment after moment, to be.

I miss the field that I played in as a child. I miss the sound of my feet running across reindeer lichen—my legs full of animal power. I miss my hands and chest cutting through a sea of ferns. I miss my brother and sister, grown up now and thousands of miles away. I can scarcely bear these relatively minor losses. How will I negotiate greater losses? How do I negotiate the knowledge of death? I walk through the rooms in the house of poetry. I pay attention.

I. “Editations”

The first part of my dissertation is a collection of poetic erasures in the style of Stephen Ratcliffe, Ronald Johnson, Jen Bervin, and Mary Ruefle. These erasures are a variation of “found poetry.” With erasures, a new text is created through excision:
certain words are cut from a source text, while other words are allowed to remain. Jen Bervin’s collection of such erasures, in which she deletes large clumps of words from Shakespeare’s sonnets, is aptly titled Nets, a metaphor for the project itself, in which some words escape (slipping through her verbal net), while others stay behind. Mary Ruefle’s collection A Little White Shadow suggests in its title that the whited-out words are ghosts—shadows of absence-presence that persist on the page. The confusing paradox “absence-presence” seems an appropriate way to express the methodology behind erasures, one which creates through destruction. This artistic process can be seen as a metaphorical expression of worldly processes of decay. Just as in the natural landscape a fungus might overcome a fallen log or a person might walk into a forest and chop down a tree, erasures involve the alteration of the verbal landscape—words are swallowed in order to create new vistas. These vistas express themselves all across the page in accordance with the theories of Charles Olson (later furthered by Robert Duncan) concerning composition by field.

I’ve titled my erasures “Editations,” a play on the word “meditations,” with a dropped, whited-out “M.” The source texts for these erasures are a variety of environmental, ecological, and state history books. The emphasis in the collection is not on political boundaries, but on the less-certain boundaries of natural topography: marshes, woods, fields, lakes, and rivers. Besides an interesting constraint with which to create poetry, these white-outs are an ecopoetic act: they express to the reader the urgent problem of our increasing loss of wilderness and natural resources, and the concomitant loss of a human connection to the land—a connection both physical and emotional.
As American politicians and citizens scramble over whether or not to drill for oil in Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and billionaire real estate mogul Donald Trump argues with Scottish natives that their ancient dunes on Balmedie Beach would better serve the world as a golf course, questions about the importance of place have proliferated in the twenty-first century. At what cost should wilderness be preserved? What is the importance of natural spaces? Of sense of place? What, besides a construction platform and a reservoir of mineable and commodifiable natural resources, do places have to offer?

Most of us know intuitively that they can offer a great deal, though it is sometimes difficult to put into words—and impossible to place a monetary value upon. Barry Lopez, who has, for decades, been writing nonfiction about nature—about our world’s remaining “empty parcels”—notes that writers and artists have been important figures in the battle for natural preservation. He suggests that in their aesthetic presentation, writers and artists express the argument that “as vital as any single rationale for the preservation of undisturbed landscapes is regard for the profound effect they can have on the direction of human life” (81). One might think here of the tingling power of Ansel Adams’s photographs, Paul Cezanne’s emotive, wiggly trees, and William Turner’s watercolor skies. Poets have been as instrumental as visual artists as stewards and celebrators of natural space. I’ve been influenced personally by William Carlos William’s Paterson, Charles Olson’s The Maximus Poems, Elizabeth Bishop’s poems of place as found throughout her collected poems, Frost’s New England pastorals, Gary Snyder’s chiseled, ecological poems, Philip Levine’s Detroit poems, and, more recently,
John Taggart’s *Pastorelles* and Eleni Sikelianos’s *The California Poem*. These poets ask the reader of their poems to honor place.

The poems in “Editations” evoke nostalgia for natural places that have been destroyed or are being destroyed—places that are irretrievable. At the same time, it would be naive to believe that spaces *could* remain unchanged. Even nature decays in its own time. Lightning storms cause forest fires, droughts cause rivers to dry, tectonic plates shift. Ralph Waldo Emerson suggests throughout his collected essays—in “Nature” and “The Poet” and “Spiritual Laws”—that nature is a kind of book—one that can be read to answer questions about the human condition and spiritual truths. He suggests natural processes are philosophical metaphors, and these can be studied to prepare us for the body’s changes, new births, and our own inevitable deaths. Decay is natural, but humans have accelerated this natural decay through industrial processes, motivated by affluence into raking land of its flora and fauna, hoping to make our lives more comfortable. We have also groomed the earth in order to make our landscapes more aesthetically pleasing; we trim our lawns and plant monkey grass borders. We cut nature down, and then try to bring it back in teaspoonfuls: a bird bath, a hummingbird feeder, a rock garden. The irony, of course, is that the places were more aesthetically pleasing before our wrangling. It is the ungroomed lands—the lonely forests, the mountainsides, the riverbanks—that people turn to in order to soothe a prattled psyche, to feel something inexplicable and powerful in the center of one’s being, to be made more whole and more warm—with tingles of the numinous, touching the wild.
I’m confused and overwhelmed by culture, history, and place. And I hope that a little bit of this confusion comes across in “Editations”—the way we’re all disturbed by disappearance at the same time that we make things disappear.

What I also hope to approach in “Editations” is the idea that place constitutes more than a location on a map. Edward S. Casey, an anthropologist, notes in his essay “How to Get from Space to Place:” “...I do not take place to be something simply physical. A place is not a mere patch of ground, a bare stretch of earth, a sedentary set of stones.” (26) Casey asserts that place is an event—a happening that is experienced in memory or in the present tense by a participant. For example, even the idealized field of the Warsaw mother was a happening place: a place of possibility, memory (a “before the war” place), and a localization of the experience of horizon: the meeting of heaven and earth. Place is dynamic, the physical space layered with emotional experience, histories, mythologies, and ideologies. In “Editations,” erased texts evoke the physicality of place, as well as the experiential happening—the tip of my white-out brush touches the black letters of the word “green” on the page, and I might remember playing in the fern field, and, simultaneously, the fern field being mowed down; I remember the smell of damp moss, and the replacement of the moss by a manicured lawn. The words that I leave behind (arid spaces, sky, curtains) evoke for my reader landscapes—places conjured from signal words, some of them damaged or threatened, others ecologically sound.

The ultimate awkwardness of “Editations” is its awareness of culpability. With any artistic representation of nature, there is an ironic relationship between artist and subject: the artist admires the beauty of a landscape untouched by humans, but in her admiration, she is touching the land—is leaving a footprint. The eye is simultaneously
II. “Ahnentafel”

The second part of this collection is a riff on genealogy and personal memories. Ahnentafel refers to the numbering system used in genealogy to identify individuals in a family tree (1 for the subject, 2 for the subject’s father, 3 for the subject’s mother, etc.). The term is German, from “ahnen” for ancestor and “tafel” for table or list.

About a year ago, I began to work on my family’s history, tracing lines out from my four grandparents into the exponentially multiplying world of ancestry. My mother’s family, which is British and Scottish, had many more records than my father’s family, which is Norwegian and Croatian. On the Croatian side of the family, the Matesichs, I have not been able to trace my family back any farther than my own great-grandparents. The earliest record I have of a Matesich to whom I am related is a 1920 Zanesville, Ohio census that describes my great-grandparents as restaurateurs who came to the United States in 1906. Who were they in Croatia? What town in Croatia were they from? What stories have been lost?

I began to think about what it means to have records—to have one’s name, place of birth, date of death recorded. My ancestors who were doctors and governors and treasurers had their names inscribed in court documents and wills. But most of my ancestors are unknowable. They were farmers and bakers and blacksmiths. They worked under the sun and their fingernails were packed with dirt. In public memory, they never
They existed. They exist in my eyelashes, the snakes of my colon, my long fingers, my X and Y, my codons and nucleotides.

In “Ahnentafel,” my genealogical research has been woven into a long, fragmented strand of poetry. The language is factual and simple. The tone is declarative, occasionally questioning. The poetry flirts with prose, which seems appropriate for a work that is trying to establish history. It is the language of factualizing. Throughout “Ahnentafel,” I am searching for a personal narrative, cobbled together out of death certificates, family legends, and my own baby book. In the end, however, the poem acknowledges the impossibility of a true history, a fully-realized conception of my ancestors. The structure emphasizes the difficulty of reconstruction: it is presented in discrete sections, representative of mere pieces of the past. The poem moves in and out of family history, personal memories, and historical consciousness, jumping in and out of various subject matters and concerns, dipping and weaving, like a spiral of DNA.

Stylistically, I am building off the work of Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*, in which she traces memories of her family, bringing in objects—a great aunt’s Irish song book, a childhood photograph, her Uncle John’s copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 1899—to excavate the past. Howe also weaves her own academic interests into her poetry, explaining that “where philosophy stops, poetry is impelled to begin” (115). Howe’s various concerns are similar to my own: the ephemeral, the mysterious, inclusion and exclusion, availability and access, how memory functions, and how history is constructed.

“Ahnentafel” also relies structurally on the work of David Markson—his *Reader’s Block, Vanishing Point, This Is Not a Novel*, and *The Last Novel*. In these texts,
Markson posits a barely-present author who assembles note card-sized tidbits about writers, artists, scientists, and philosophers. His characters are history’s great thinkers, their wisdom and their sufferings. His books lurch forward one fascinating fact at a time—toward what? Ann Beattie called Markson’s *Writer’s Block* “a prose sequel to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.” Each book crescendos in mounting existential desperation, as the implied author, with whom the reader sits side-by-side, explores the creative life and the burdens of consciousness:

Jack the Ripper was left-handed.

Like Osama bin Laden.


While also dismissing Plato as a frightful waste of time—unquote.

Does anyone ever die who is not remembered through the remainder of at least one other entire lifetime by someone?

From future transmigrations save my soul. (*Vanishing Point* 111)

In “Ahnentafel,” I invoke a more fully formed “I,” while adopting Markson’s fragments, his urgency, and his interest in human anxiety. I add Howe’s concerns with the construction of history, as well as my particular obsessions, memories, fears: the
stories that I tell myself about what it means to be. Like a time traveler, I desire to inhabit an accurate past where I might witness my ancestors fully fleshed: walking around, coughing, spitting. There is an implied hope that to speak with my ancestors would be to find greater meaning and context in my own life; but, of course, I cannot travel through time, and my ancestors can never be fully realized. In the end, I refuse to make them characters—stick-men fleshed with imagination; thus, what remains—my ahnentafel—is a tableau of skeletons: bones of random facts and desire. Any vitality in “Ahnentafel” comes from the living—family members from recent generations—my father, mother, grandparents—those whom I have known, whose verve, breath, and being I have experienced.

III. “An Endless Field of White”

The last part of my dissertation is a collection of free verse poetry. These are brief, largely autobiographical, narrative poems; they explore memories of growing up in a small town in Northern Michigan, relationships with my immediate family, my interest in ghosts, and my battles with anxiety and depression.

The poet and critic Clive Wilmer, in The Times Literary Supplement, has said: “In any poem of value there seems to be some poetic element, some inner intensity, which is separable from the language it is embodied in.” In my favorite poems, there is something behind the words that wanders through the psyche after reading, something the words didn’t say—that words can’t say—but that was suggested and felt. The short poems in “An Endless Field of White” are flashes of experience: a mountain of ice, the whirring of
a beetle, a dog barking. I hope that besides recreating the sensory details of reality, they might also contain a sliver of what cannot be explicated, the *mysterium fascinas*, in order to effectively translate human experience.

In January, while I was working on the poems in “An Endless Field of White,” my father was diagnosed with prostate cancer. The cancer was caught early, but it was an unusually aggressive form. I had to confront—more directly than ever before—the prospect of my father’s mortality. My anxieties worked their way into this collection. There are several poems that deal explicitly with my father and his cancer. In a way, the cancer hyperbolized what I was already writing against: time, change, loss.

I was thinking a great deal about home and my childhood before my father’s diagnosis. The cancer drove me into a fury of writing and remembering. Although he is recovering well (having undergone surgery to remove his prostate), the poetry work will continue—my ongoing negotiation with death, the white field in which I play, question, and preserve. I hope to make idiomatic to others the people and places that have been meaningful in my life.
Works Cited


http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/essays/arigo.html


http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/poetry/2008/11/10/081110po_poem_gilbert


  [http://people.mills.edu/jspahr/anticolonial.htm](http://people.mills.edu/jspahr/anticolonial.htm)


  [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/tls_selections/poetry/article2306009.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/tls_selections/poetry/article2306009.ece)


Wright, Charles. “Body and Soul II.” *A Short History of the Shadow*. Boston: Farrar,

EDITATIONS
The story of the remarkable immigration
which commenced and in less than twenty years
created a State.

Many are now living who
remember their fathers and mothers
their

ucky
inina

land or ania.

the old Wilderness Road

The account herewith presented,
is for the
and in the
THE VERNACULAR LANGUAGE OF THE PINES

A o i
O a y
A a u e a e i l

o o o flo

o c u c a e e e et
A e a i a a eau o

The pineys call it sparkle.
"In wilderness is the preservation of the world."

All this is necessary for human existence.
soil land

gullies

lichens, fungi, insects, bacteria, mammals, birds, trees, ferns, and underbrush

radiant with soft green light

high ridges and meadows
them also.
There are many paths that lead to the summits.
I often sat on a bed in an upstairs room
of our house and looked across potato-land
dark green hills and valleys
At dusk they turned almost black at night the sky

the Empty swallowed them all.
human hands shrivel, the blistering death

What I want to say is this: With my boot holding down the barbed wire

I had

corpses
This book represents an attempt.

With great feeling, that feeling. a feeling of place, a love, even, that seems almost incomprehensible,

many, many attempts to understand varied in tone and form

the underlying assumption that there is something powerful, something significant, something noteworthy

This something may be part of the past:

This something may be part of the present:
a place of great antiquity and utter newness

trees bearing crosses, X’s, circles, and arrows

She was “prieta,” the ranchhand, Isácar, had said. That was dark brown, the color of tobacco resin.

I could feel the whole world at a tilt, careening voices
a vague blur of familiar noise. She would take you deep into the woods an unexpected whoosh and then, just as suddenly, leave you
intimately involved in numerous lives

I became

passed shacks, abandoned schools, empty plantation mansions
looked for and found

I

had to crawl on hands and knees for two days

lived in

a

vine-covered dwelling

with

torn wallpaper, scraps of leather, ratt
chewed letters, books,

it

culties

was marked by diffic
an exercise

a secret

A returning coconspirator

to inquire
to demand

reopening old memories
probing new ones.
Buxton Woods has the most signal and remarkable
Buxton Woods marks a boundary

At . . . Buxton a few oleanders were growing.

Anyone can see The Line.

One can see it from air
One can see it from
ground.
look east and west:
there it is—

The Line is Buxton Woods.
I was happy. But why?

fresh air

when I was eleven

and all

that was exceptional

I noticed

I noticed
her which once existed. she

Okeechobee, where I was

Okeechobee

Okeechobee

where I with a beekeeper

was lost in the vastness of what I saw
what I saw

verdure Paradise
custard apple swamps,

Okeechobee
To Walk in the water
Friend.
Listen,

you and all the

Chiefs, together with the youngmen,
Listen

I am resolved to stand

I am able to do it,
Let us hold up our heads and speak
Sun, silence,

It is the Great American Mystery—
—the United States which
is not United States.

—mañana

The most incredible
unparalleled blaze

—pasado

world

that

the most awful
I eased my canoe down off the bank and kept a hand on it as it trembled in the water. The river was cold, a murky green

This is the moment of grace.
a hushed rippling as the water carries you away

I tried to be a river animal once.
meat drunk                 coyotes,

at a dead run             ran and slipped and slid
                          wolf
                          over the top of the hill.
                          herds of
                          elk and bison.

it is easy to believe    life
black, white, grey, sorrel,
cream, brown,
red, or blue, yellow,

Gold
selections in that range, townships 8 and 9

selections were in ranges 2 and 3 east, townships 2, 2 east, and 1, 3 east

5 entire sections, numbers 3, 10, 11, 15, and 26 The lands of this township

in 1836 and 1837

In 1847

1,880 acres
mineral sections

as late as 1848 Township 1, 3 east
mainly prairie
excellent soil

sections 28 and 29
good farm lands 4,480 acres

1848 and 1849, 1,800 acres

on particularly easy
terms
"a mind imperishable"—if, that
is, time is imperishable—
past and present,

The
the Old World and the New,

the fields of Troy and the

bluegrass of Kentucky

He stands looking at
the world created
and wonders what we built

across the Atlantic...
Windrock does not really exist. At least not on most maps.

My very first night on the mountain I saw unexpected lights burning I was standing on the porch It was summer, just after the sun went down, great upheaval the edge of the
tied together, sometimes by the wrists, sometimes, by the thumbs, drawn up to a tree or post.

I give you the woman's words. She did not speak of this as of anything strange,

And to all this

I listen—I,

I

choking

I

I

I

I

I

I

I
If a stranger is comin
If 
If you trim you will be sick
If you point at a funeral line a sign of a death.
If you prick your finger
blood If you
cry for every stitch
If you go
If you
jumps laugh.
a spoon
a fork
a knife

If the moon
An iron ring the devil will have you
If you

all year if

a stranger is comin
"How did we become so desperate?"

Desperate . . . I let the word reverberate through the bowl, the spoon, the bones.

it had brought me closer to
the natural world, closer
to
childhood millions
of years the main genetic
branch How

desperate might we have been
in the newly settled ash of volcanoes?

in central Africa, three figures moving in a straight line—

desperate? Or just amazed at a world once again changing,

transformed
I found a human skeleton.

cast away
poor bones with moss and leaves

its white mountain
fountains and spreading out in a fan
tree-fringed
yellow adhesive cloth inches wide

the wound was dressed with pieces of young banana leaves

When the cholera raged one summer and negroes were dropping in the fields, they were brought to their cabins to die. George and I watched cholera and yellow fever in the middle of the night, I heard someone dying on tip-toe, I stood peering over the foot of the bed.
I thought it was a field at first. Two or three feet of snow lay on the ground, but at the far end I could see headstones poking up through the snow. Perhaps this is the moment, I thought.

The snow had a hard crust on it, strong enough to hold me if I walked carefully.

I will be there soon, I said. Then, my foot broke through and I went down

I lay down on the snow and crawled forward

This is not the moment, I thought. This is some other moment.
desert arid spaces
sky curtains,
thin and white, The cracked earth, once mud,

breathes and hisses
curled lip.

animate
form monument
patterns that converge in the moment,

in search of skulls I read poems.

all over the earth all
over again, we've run out of words
of naming.
Red Bear proposed

Red Foolish Bear

insisted
was getting farther away
said good-bye
would follow

Red Bear

Red Foolish Bear

Red Bear found the road

Red Foolish Bear got into

camp

Red Bear

saddled up

Red Bear:  This is a hard trip

Red Wolf and Scabby Wolf then came up

They told him that there was no need to hurry
O, I know I did wrong & pray God it may never be again. O, Lord wilt thou & him forgive; & God

ah, * * *

it caused anger, yes, deep anger,

pray God ah,

tis evening &

am alone

& broider some. * * *

&

finish broidered &

&

Yes,

O alone
holes accompany five

horses.
Wyoming

clouds skid across our foreheads.

My dog, a dingo bred
flies over the sky.

the land is whittled to slivers—

Wyoming.

and burdensome in us.

can heal what is divided
The day was clear and quiet. The anemometer
was turning leisurely
turning leisurely
the release was pulled
flame came out a steady roar.
it rose

It looked magical as it rose
it said I've been here long enough.
AHNENTAFEL
1.

Mothers and fathers.

Bennett, Stone, Johnson, Jauert, Matesich, Fordyce, Drascovic.

Trickster and water spirit. Changeling and fairy. The Underground People.


*

My baby book has a 1970s salmon pink cover. On the cover is a silver rose bouquet. You can rub the gilding and a little sparkle comes off on your hand.

Inside the baby book is the birth certificate, and the impressions of my two feet—wrinkled kidney beans—facing each other on yellowed paper.

*

Thumping.

As in the room above you.

Across the floorboards, a steady tread. Boots.

Dust flying up from between the slats.

*

I want to know their stories. The color of the ribbon, the lines of the palms,
the opal of the eyes, the railroad dreams
of thrum, thrum, thrum,
and the fever dreams:
tongue crackling.

*

Mary Ann Kerr begat
Ann Jane Higgins begat
Maude George begat
Fordyce Virginia Stone begat
Gail Susan Bennett begat
Heather Susan Matesich

*

One of the children died of blood poisoning.
One of the children of scarlet fever.
One died on a ship.
One on the floor.

*

There are christening gowns with yellow lines
along the folds, tucked in my mother’s cedar chest,
and, wrapped in wax paper, the long tapers
of baptismal candles. A packet of seeds—
dry as stones. An envelope with a swath
of hair.

*
I’m going out for some wood, one ancestor said, and he didn’t come back for seven years.

*

How did they?

Sometimes I feel a yellow light inside me. My chest is a lantern with clear windows. A candle that burns and burns.

Sometimes the bottom falls out of the lantern.

A roaring hush.

Sometimes I walk around for days with darkness.

Inside the glass is a chamber of pitch, hushed, blackness. What has gone out.

*

One of the fathers was crushed in a turnstile.

One of the fathers was eaten by cancer.

One of the fathers turned blue at the lips, his lungs filled with sputum. Two long sponges soaked.

*

From ante meaning before and cedere meaning to go.

*
There was a game my sister and I used to play: “Statues.” We’d spin in circles—hands outstretched to one another, locked in, a chain of two. The world thumped and rolled. The grass and sky came in jerks.

We’d take turns being flung away, a human discus, holding whatever position we landed in, imagining ourselves marble, creamy white with flashes, specks of hard light. The other one would ask “What are you?” and the statue would answer: Ballerina. Hunter. Cowgirl-on-Her-Horse.

We’d take turns being the statue, seeing what shapes our bodies could make. Seeing who we might be.

*  

If I could speak to them. 

If they could answer. 

Were they happy? 

Too busy to stop?  

*  

A hypotenuse: 

the longest side of a right triangle. 

Angling toward a point: 

sharp zenith. 

The other two legs are called catheti.
I walk from room to room
stirring up the air behind me
like an orchestra.

Crash of strings.

*
I grew up in Bear Lake, Michigan.
The lake is shaped like a bear;
the state is a mitten.

In the fall and winter, the houses
around the lake are deserted.
Empty cottages, doors locked,
curtained windows staring out—
closed eyes.


My childhood bedroom looked out
on the lake:

Its changing surface
a mirror of the sky.
Full of sun or wind,
stones, sand ground
like meal,
minnows and walleye,
dark, tangled seaweed:
lake hair.


I remember dock-putting-in-days.

Late May.

My father, wearing waders, would haul
sections of dock, ten feet long, out from our gazebo,
where they’d been stacked all winter.
He’d float them one at a time across the lid
of the water. He used his rusty monkey wrench
to bolt them into their braces.

He let us ride each section like a raft
out to the deep water;
they would tip and the cold lake water
would pool up against our gray skin.

*

My father is a good swimmer.
He used to be a lifeguard.
His arms are propellers through water.
His legs are knives.
The water gives way in front of him,
and he slips through—a small rattling
that breaks a line of lake into light—
a hundred squares.

*

One summer, he lost a silver cross,
saints on its four arms—
St. Joseph, St. Christopher,
the Miraculous Mary, and the Scapular—
and on the back of the medal, the words:
“i am a Catholic, please call a priest.”
The chain broke—or the buoyancy
of the water lifted it
from around his neck.
He looked down and saw
the whiteness of his own chest,
hairs, already graying, knives and forks,
pressed down, dripping
clean.
He offered a dollar for it.
My brother, sister, and I jumped in the water
and spent several afternoons sifting through

sand and muck, pulling up
brown and green seaweed,

staring into the deeps and the shallows, looking for a silver sparkle.

We never.

*

He doesn’t want a gravestone.

“But I want you to have a gravestone,” I say.

He shrugs. “I don’t want one.”

“What about for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren? A place to see your name,” I say.

He pauses. Shrugs again.

His father shoulders.

*

Ephemeroptera.

The mayfly.

With delicately veined wings.

*

In the summer, they would wrap their sticky legs around the wires of my bedroom window screen. Mornings, there would always be five or six dead ones, still clinging to the wires, stiff wings ruffling in morning winds.
Some of them live only a few days.

John Carlo Matesic
begat Stephen Joseph Matesich
begat Michael Stephen Matesich
begat Heather Susan Matesich.

I can name them.

But I can’t name them all.

When I name them, they approach, as if out of a darkened corner of a farmhouse or out of large black fields. I imagine them waiting to be called, a great deal of time on their hands—hands palm-up like God’s.

One of the fathers was a farmer.

One of the fathers was a doctor.

One father was an undertaker, a taker down—to the darkest place, tucking them in, among the dust and rocks of history, in the dead gardens.
Here is a game I used to play
with my brother and sister
under the map
of the night sky, stars blinking
above clouds
of mosquitoes and gnats:

Bloody Murder
also known as
Ghost in the Graveyard.

The driveway turns to cobblestones.
The hills become alleys.
The moon is a gaslight.

One person is picked to be the Bloody Murderer.
He goes and hides in the yard.
The others count to thirty, then say
“Ready or Not, Here We Come!”
Together, you and the others creep
around the house,
into the backyard,
looking in bushes and behind trees
for the murderer.
When someone finally sees
his dark shadow
crouched, perhaps
in the gazebo or under
the deck stairs,
perhaps at the base
of the cedar tree, she screams “BLOODY MURDER!”

The murderer runs as fast he can
to catch you,
to catch you,
to catch you.

*

The suspense was almost unbearable,
walking across the sparkling night grass,
on a clear night. A feeling of electricity:

zip, zip,
in my fingers and toes and tight girl calves
waiting for a dark figure behind every tree,
in the midnight shadows of the swingset,
in the gazebo, or curled up in the rowboat
thunking in its braces
against the dock,
the lake lapping
against the aluminum hull
and lapping against the beach,

lapping,

everything gone silver and black

like an old movie.
3.

I have recurring dreams about the lake.

Objects are washing ashore:
broken clocks,
shoeboxes,
rubber balls.

I wade in to shallows,
grab and grab:
dolls and
plastic pails and
wool sweaters and
coins and
necklaces and
books.

I am dizzy and awful.
Everything is coming
to me. For a reason.
Forever.

And the water has not ruined them.

I have pulled them out just in time.
4.

Their cities, towns, villages
are a map to my own past,
a story that folds-out
into the rose
of my sitting
here.

*

Mecklenburg, Germany.
Isle of Kjelmeland, Norway.
Tounj, Croatia.
Chelmsford, England
Aberfoyle, Scotland.
Brockville, Canada.
Westerly, Rhode Island.
Zanesville, Ohio.

*

My husband and I live in Georgia.
A year ago, we bought our first home.
$133, 500.
Red earth.
Hard and dry.
Every place has its own energies and buzzings.
Its own memories.


In the north Georgia woods:

Murmurs, lean and pale.
Men with yellowed Bibles in their rucksacks.
Pages curling from wind and rain.
Weaving through the hickories,
they talk and hum to keep the wildness out.

The more ancient people before them—
feet touching the moss, stirring the spores.

We can stand in a place and feel them,
the iron in our blood—in filaments—
lines up to them.


In Michigan:

The Manitou of the Lake.

Old stories of bear, turtle, owl.

French songs of the fur traders.

Clanking of wooden wheels over corduroy roads.

Smell of woodstoves—pine arms and legs.
I used to dig in the backyard, 
through horizons of dirt:  
black, brown, red, yellow.

*

In Georgia, it is all red.  
As deep as I can go:  
red.

*

A neighbor says that strange things happen in her house.  A blue ball of light floated through her living room.  And late one night, she and her son heard a man’s voice cry out—a low, loud human shouting—from an empty room.

*

Everything I know, I am repeating.

*

If I throw and keep on throwing in various directions, from the cords of my body to those other cords, it will catch.  It will throw something back.

*
In the game of Red Rover, children divide into two teams, making chains, holding onto one another’s hands.

“Red Rover, Red Rover,” they chant, “let Erin come over.”

And then, of course, Erin must run as hard as she can into the other team’s chain. She must break through the clasped hands of the others.

* 

If I can only cast the web far enough—a net into time—
I can catch stones in the dirt river.

* 

This must be what is in my ears.

There is a roar in my ears: clicking of fluid:

a pressure,

like being at the bottom of the lake, keeping one’s body there with the force of hands, digging down and down through the water.
I have their things,
which I like to touch:
    A golden ring, engraved initials wearing off, a few thin lines, like stray hairs.
    A German clock shaped like a church.
    World War II patch with eagle.
    Milk glass dish.
    Photographs:
        A small boy in overalls, belly out, cheeks like aprons.
        Three sisters and one brother. Dark bobs.
        A young woman in a nurse’s uniform,
            leaning against a boat-sized Chevy.

    *

I have a rosary in a box
lined with purple satin.

The box’s little silver hinges
are flecked with rust
and when it opens,
they groan—

        the church’s smallest organ.

    *

I have to look and keep on
looking.

    *

Also I have moods:

    as many moods as hairs upon my head,
        God’s count of them:

    German mood
    of big black boots

    Scottish mood,
running-on-the-heath

Norwegian mood
with cabled knee socks

mood of the grandfathers
mood of the grandmothers
mood of the long witch finger
mood of the curled tongue

the lips as thin as straw

the crouched legs:
ready to spring.

*

Croatian mood is salty,
with tang of fish.

*

John and Frances Matesich,
my great-grandparents,
came to the United States in 1906.

The 1920 Ohio census lists them
as restaurant owners.

What did they serve?

Fried Courgettes. Walnut rolls.
Pepper Cakes. Primosten style chicken.
Salami with paprika.
Oysters. Sarma. Palacinka?

*
In the year 1900, the *Ladies Home Journal* published an article titled “What May Happen in the Next Hundred Years.”

It proposed:

Strawberries as large as apples.

Peas large as beets.

No flies and no mosquitoes.

There will be no C, X, or Q in our everyday alphabet: “They will be abandoned because unnecessary.”

Black, blue, and green roses.

Roses as big as cabbage heads.

And pansies with the perfume of violets.

* 

There is also: mood of the poet, quixotic: in white ruffled shirt, speaking Spanish, eating a pea as large as a beet:

kwiksotik?

* 

It’s part of being human, always trying.

* 

In Croatian, *duh* means spirit and *dah* means breath.

*
To have breath
is to have spirit:
the white fog
of being.

*

At the bedside of the dying, certain people
have claimed to have witnessed a silver rope
rising out of the body of those-about-to-pass.
A thin tornado of light, stretching, growing
thinner and thinner. Attached by breath
and heartbeat.

*

*Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
or the golden bowl is broken.*

*

I keep trying to throw my cord around a monument,
a stone. Cast it out, let it latch to granite,
let it hold.
5.

My father, a Boy Scout, used to practice tying knots in his basement.

*

My mother rode her bike, played with a Chatty Cathy doll, and liked to sing along to Petula Clark’s “Downtown,” a black plastic record spinning, a quiet machine hum underneath.

*

My father once ran through a glass door. He was playing hide-and-seek with his brothers. The glass was clean; my father didn’t see it. The door shattered and glass shards rained down on his child body. His left shoulder is still scarred—lines, indentations, webs. A geometry of glass.

*

In her bedroom, my mother remembers a summer afternoon, dancing and singing in her bra. Fifteen years old. She heard whistles. Looked out her window. Saw the neighborhood boys on the street below.

*

Heather Susan Matesich, daughter of

Gail Susan Bennett, daughter of

Fordyce Virginia Stone, daughter of

Fordyce Homer Stone, son of
Elijah Fordyce Stone, son of
Elijah Fordyce Stone, son of
Nathaniel Fordyce Stone, son of
Patience Fordyce, daughter of
John Fordyce, of South Kingston, Rhode Island, b.1738.

*

A dozen gray hairs sprout out of the top of my head like fireworks.

My heels are thin and bony.

I have the blue eyes of a stranger.

Someone has given me their smallest, curling toe.

And my left breast is slightly larger than my right.

*

One of the mothers was a nurse.
One was a teacher.
One owned slaves.
One of the mothers chose John.

*

John Fordyce, son of
John Fordyce, son of,
James Fordyce, born 1687 in Westerly, Rhode Island, son of UNKNOWN.

* 

4 Grandparents.
8 Great-Grandparents.
16 Great-Great Grandparents.

We are the rope that unravels
32 times.

* 

We are the rope that unravels, its fine silk strands, 64, 128, 256.

Finer and finer. A mystical rope
full of breath and hope and neurons.

512, 1024, 2048.

* 

How much more can we learn about them?

To want always more
is to be voracious,

a kind of vulture, tearing
too much.

* 

4096, 8192, 16384
I sit on my black haunches  
and open my gullet.

Crow and crow.

* 

Ante: before  
Cedere: to go, to withdraw, to retreat

* 

An ancestor is a person walking away.

* 

Mary Ann Kerr. Born in Ireland about 1838.  
Died in Brockville, Canada on January 23, 1916.

I found her name on a page  
from a Brockville death registry, a record  
of decease in a small town  
in Canada.

Cause of Death: Cardiac Disease.  
Duration: Several Years.

On the adjacent pages are the names  
of the people who died in Brockville  
that same week,  
a cold January,  
at the beginning of World War I:
A 13-year old boy, Henry, 
suffering from nephritis for one month.

A 19-month old boy, Michael Anthony, 
suffering from pneumonia for eight days.

*

One long lady coffin 
and two smaller ones. 
   The smallest one of all 
      should be for doll babies, broken, 
         not for bully boys.

*

Passing:
By the way: incidentally.
Going by.
Having a brief duration.
A phrase with an implied liminal space.
A window, a door, as in “passageway.”
And/or decease, as in “passing on.”

*

Hide in the small spaces.
The dark ones.
The passageways.

*
Hide in the places you are afraid of—
you won’t be found
in the crawl space,
in the broken trunk,
in the coffin room,
body pressed against the display,
rugs of gray dust
and hairs of dead dogs
gathering in your eyelashes.

*

My mother grew up in a funeral home and used to play hide-and-seek in the casket room.

*

Olly Olly Oxen Free.

*

When the game was over, all the players came out of hiding.
On road trips, my brother, sister, and I played the Alphabet Game.

You find the letters of the alphabet on billboards.

It is a simple game.

You start at A and end with Z.

There are no winners or losers.

* 

We’d get stuck on Q, X, and Z.

* 

In the country, you could ride for an hour without seeing a sign.

* 

My husband David Shreaves Cousins suffers from Becker’s muscular dystrophy—a spontaneous mutation of his X chromosome.

* 

Shreaves, which is his mother’s maiden name, is perhaps a derivation of the word “shrive”? To hear confession and give absolution?

* 

Or, more likely, from the old English “shrieve”
or “shreve”: a shire reeve, a maker and keeper of laws, from which we derive the term “sheriff.”

*

David sits, arrested, his toothpick thighs, on an examination table.

The doctor listens to his heart.

I am a few feet away, in a gray office chair.

Heavy, dark, clouding.

frightening imaginary black birds

out of imaginary black trees.

*

David’s X has drawn itself out-of-the-lines, a creator, an artist, a protestor. It is not a law-abiding citizen.

*

Human:

```
taaaccttcgacatttgcacctttagataactaactaactttcgtaccaagcaagctctttttcagcccaacagcatgacctgaaagaaa

```

99
We see another Becker’s patient in the corridor when we leave. We know it is him because of the way he walks. Like Frankenstein’s monster. If Frankenstein’s monster had toothpick legs. He rocks and trembles back and forth, legs pigeoning and then splaying.

In my hand, I am carrying a piece of paper with the name of a geneticist.

My palms sweat easily, glisten in the folds, leave dark wet prints.

The piece of paper is damp under the pads of my fingers.

The geneticist, when we meet her, is a young woman. She had brown hair and soft eyes.
Bambi’s mother.  
She pulls out a binder. Flips through  
its slippery, plastic-covered pages.  

She shows us a nest of chromosomes.  

*

Ramblings.  

Bramblings.  

Dry and brown and sticking to wool pants, sticking to sweaters.  

*

There is a chart in her binder  
with pink circles and blue squares.  

I am a pink circle; David is a blue square.  

She points to the pink circles and blue squares  
underneath us.  

“Your daughters will be carriers,” she says.  

*

My X and David’s X.  
Two kisses.  

*

What is the rope we are casting out from the two of us?  
Into what empty field? I imagine a white expanse,  
but what is approaching  
out of it  
won’t come into focus.
Are we asking too much?

*

Winds are coming. You can hear the air picking up speed, as it runs across the shingles. The metal damper of the chimney rattles.

*

Last week there was a tornado warning, and I crawled into the bathtub.

I brought a heavy quilt with me—a patchwork of six-inch squares of bright cloth. Pinks and greens and blues and yellows. I’ve read that blankets can protect against flying shrapnel.

I tried to get our dogs to come in with me. They are small and yellow. “Come!” I said, and patted the bathtub. The dogs looked at me strangely, stayed just outside the bathroom door, looking in.

I tried to get David to crawl in with me.

David said: “It’s not that bad yet.”

I tried to get David to bring me the dogs, to lift them into the bathtub with me.

David said: “It’s not that bad yet,”

I rubbed the quilt and thought about the ceiling falling.

After five minutes, I got back out.
ROLLIN: Do you ever get mad at God?

SISTER MARY ANDREW: Oh yes. I was very mad at God for what happened to my mother. I really went through a big issue for some months with God about the amount of suffering my mother had.

ROLLIN: And are you mad at God for what he did to you?

SISTER MARY ANDREW: I have been mad, but not as mad. In a sense, we wrestled it out then.

ROLLIN: How do you do that?

SISTER MARY ANDREW: You have to express to God what you really feel, and you have to rail and yell, and you have to cry, and gradually there aren't answers, but there's acceptance that comes—and strength.
8.

Clamoring,
sweating,
banging on pots,
rattling tin cans,
throwing handfuls of dirt and lint,
ripping out hair,
twisting arm skin,
digging finger claws into moss,
eating mud by the fistfuls.

*

Cyril Herbert Bennett died in his sleep in 1993.
Fordyce Virginia Stone succumbed to a prolonged pulmonary illness one month later.
Audrey Mae Johnson died on Halloween in 2005 in a nursing home.
Great Uncle Marco drowned in a lake in Canada.
Great Aunt Amy hemorrhaged.

*

At Bryn Mawr, where I went to college,
I would go for walks. There was a convent nearby.
Next to a park, about a mile off campus.
I’d walk to the convent and peer over a stone wall
at their cloistered garden. I never saw any people. Any nuns.

The cloister was small and simple.
A statue of Mary stood in the center,
surrounded by boxwoods. One stone hand
over her heart, one stone hand raised
gently towards heaven.

*wave your hand, I’d think.
I won’t tell anyone.
On my mother’s side, there is a family legend that we are descendents of Rob Roy McGregor, the Scottish Highlander and folk hero known for his red hair and cow thievery.

* 

Rob Roy is thought to have had outrageously long arms—much longer than normal in proportion to his body.

* 

In a perfectly proportional human being, as illustrated in Da Vinci’s “Vitruvian Man,” arm span is equal to height.

* 

If Rob Roy McGregor is my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather, If he had outrageously long arms, If the gene for those long arms were passed down to his son, Etc., Etc., Then, Have I, unbeknownst, been dragging around outrageously long arms?

*
I ask David to measure my arm span.

Then my height.

He uses a white plastic ribbon of measuring tape.

He is holding the tape and holding a place with his fingers.

He is dropping the tape and lifting the tape.

* 

Arm span: 63 inches.

Height: 65 inches.

I am off-kilter,
not lugging
long, swordsman arms.

I have Tyrannous Rex limbs,
stilted,
pawing at the air.

* 

I measure David:

“What is this for, again?” he asks.

“A poem.” I reply.

Arm span: 68.5 inches.

Height: 68.5 inches.

* 

The most famous account
of Rob Roy’s life
is the highly fictionalized version from Sir Walter Scott.

*

I read Scott’s *Rob Roy* during a summer vacation when I was an undergraduate. I learned the Scottish words “kirk” and “bairn.”

Sometimes I read passages aloud in a bad Scottish accent.

*

Sir Walter Scott’s romantic novel is used by the editors of *Oxford English Dictionary* to elucidate the historical usage of 620 different words, including:

abuse, v.  
1829 SCOTT *Rob Roy* i. 64 I dare not promise that I may not abuse the opportunity so temptingly offered me.

*

I measure my dog’s legs with the long white plastic tape measure.

“Fifteen inches for Oscar,” I call to my husband.

“Why are you doing that?” he asks.

“Scout—thirteen inches.”

The dogs have their tongues out.
Scout is trying to eat the tape measure.

“Is that proportional to something?”
My husband wants to know.
There was a Halloween mask: the face of an old man: a map of wrinkles, huge nose, wild white hair, and two black holes for eyes.

My sister and I would take turns putting it on.

It didn’t seem to be a mask at all, but a face with its own taste for cookies, liquor, children.

Whoever wore the mask stared.

We’d see how long before the other person shivered and squealed, Take it off, take it off.

Sometimes, all by myself, I’d carry the mask to the bathroom, turn off the lights, and stare into the mirror wearing the mask, until I wasn’t in the bathroom, until I was only a face: old man, old man.

*

Under the page, “First words” in my pink baby book, my mother noted:

“At two years, Heather asks many questions such as “Where Daddy going?”

*
Anthropologist Ashley Montague asserted that the idea of an afterlife originated with human dreams.

Because in dreams, the dead can walk and speak again.

* * *

Why are we here?

* * *

I’d pull my teeth out for an answer.

Here is a molar. Here, here take them all.

My little white gnashings.

* * *

Sister Mary Andrew, my father’s cousin, was the first nun I ever met.

We were briefly introduced at my grandfather’s funeral.

“Hello,” I said. Shook her hand.
It was warm, but dry,
like bread.

I was thirteen.

She wasn’t wearing a black habit, and I was disappointed, because I thought all nuns wore black habits.

*

In the Oxford English Dictionary,
the first quotation cited under “ancestor,” c. 1300,
are the words of one Robert of Gloucester,
English historian:

Vor þyn auncetres dude al, þat we þe hoteþ do.

Whereby our ancestors did all that we hope to do.

*

In my salmon pink baby book:
Is [child] imitative or original?

Mother has circled “imitative.”

*

Children learn their roles through games:
dolls, chase, house, war.
We try to sort ourselves out.

*

Hiding in the alcoves,
we learn to be quiet, to be patient,
waiting for the next thing.
heather:
1818 SCOTT *Rob Roy* xxxv, It's partly that whilk has set the heather on fire.

Some of us keep playing,
sent to the attic, old Emily,
old Bertha, old maiden aunts.

One of our earliest mammalian ancestors
resembled a lemur.

Nocturnal, living in trees, with grasping hands and feet.

Lemur: from the Latin *lemures*, meaning “ghosts” or “phantoms.”

*Lemures*, in ancient Rome, was a word that had no singular.

Are humans the only organisms who are burdened
by the knowledge of their own mortality?

I am haunted by knowing,
a hunter of time.
I walk up and down the hallway,
my bare feet slapping against
the floorboards. I am wearing
a white nightgown, ringing its soft cloth
in my crooked hands.

I am not the only ghost.
It is 1919. It is a Friday the 13th, and the nurses are joking: it is a lucky day.

* 

It is 1951.

“Shall we?” Her husband asks, “Get you all checked out?”

* 

It is 1947.

The nurse is in the birthing room, lying down. She is not used to being the one lying down.

* 

It is 1978, just before lunch. The nurses are ferrying carts filled with lunch trays, turkey sandwiches, fruit cocktail, and chocolate pudding. My mother can hear the clatter outside the room. Inside the room, there is only push: the drawing of a deep breath between the push. Push and keep on pushing.

* 

It is 1980, the night before my sister is born; my grandmother looks up into the sky and sees a bright star.
I trace the constellations of their skin.
I make a wish on each of their fallen eyelashes.

There was a game called Sardines that we only played a few times.

One person—the first sardine—silver, slippery fish—hides.

Everyone else goes off alone in search of him.

You don’t shout, you don’t chase.

Instead, you lie down.

You lie down beside your friend, your brother, your sister.

You wait and wait, for each searcher, in turn, as one by one, they silently crouch and become.

You are a tin of sardines, lined up, one beside the other, waiting quietly for the last.

You do not want to be the last.
AN ENDLESS FIELD OF WHITE
Driving North

We start out in t-shirts
with the windows cracked, the air
smelling like wet pastures, wild onions,
and kudzu: the smell of vines.
The dogs poke their black noses out,
strain at the wild air, all its new pollen.
Hours later, in Tennessee, I reach
for a sweatshirt. “Look,” my husband says,
“Nashville.” We pass a green exit
sign. The dogs, who have been asleep,
each in their own space, rouse themselves
to look outside for guitars. The silver
road passes, pit- and tar-hobbled. By dusk,
we’re bouncing and roaring through
the backyards of Indiana, long rectangles
of brassy light cast from the windows
of farmhouses. The barns are piles;
the land is flat and vast. “It’s like
a giant cemetery,” my husband says,
nods to a tall white silo. Michigan,
we’re coming. The dogs have moved in
on each other, huddled together for warmth.
Under the cold moon, we see our first
snow, fields dusted: a white film,
a winding sheet. The breath of a horse
hangs in the air like lace. The land
turns to skeletons: jawbone stumps
and femur trees. I pull my wool coat
from the backseat. I carry a pillow for you,
Michigan; I’m almost home.
Bear Lake, Michigan

As high as the ceramic drinking fountain,
I am standing on tip-toes to reach
its silver bird mouth.

The water tastes like metal,
and I shrink against the wall, away
from the game, returning to my seat.

In the high school gymnasium,
the town gathers every Friday night,
clapping red, chapped hands, and sucking

on soft globs of white popcorn,
cheering on the men’s basketball team.
They toss the orange ball through nylon ropes.

They flex the muscles that know
car engines, snowmobile chains,
oil pans and oil stains, lifting

a dented thermos of Folgers coffee,
sorting out stray grinds with tongue,
spitting brown in the snow. January,

the lake is frozen. A white field
in the center of everything. Cold.
It is dotted with ice shanties—

the crooked sheds of a few fishermen
crouched over the hewn holes, listening
to classic rock on battery-powered radios,

filling Styrofoam coolers with walleye
and snow. The town of Bear Lake
isn’t even on some maps—no black dot

of place. When we gather together in the gym,
on cold Friday nights, snow melting
from our boots, down the wooden bleachers,

we are two hundred strangers to the world.
We gather on hard seats in the center
of an oblivion: a white-out—a storm
of ourselves. Underneath the bleachers, 
a gang of children studies the heavy legs 
of the grown-ups and waits for coins 
to come falling from the crowded, 
yelling sky. Our point guard
is making his charge

down the right lane, a lay-up 
from which he parts his hand
at the last moment like a priest.

We are a town of welders and shinglers. 
We put things together for you. 
We deliver. In winter, we feed wood

into the hot mouths of fire stoves. 
We wear knit caps and down jackets
from Kmart. We line our boots

with bread bags to keep the melt out. 
We eat venison from deer
that we shot in the woods with a bullet

that rocked for a moment
in a dry palm. Everything we touch
turns to meat and powder.

In the middle of the crowd
of hats and coats, my sister and I listen
to the swish. We don’t know how to whistle.

All we can do is watch.
What They Taught Us

In second grade was
where to kick a man
so that it hurts;
not to talk to strangers:
  moustaches, purses, Camaros;
to have our parents check
  our Tootsie Rolls
  for razor blades;
to stay away from the surprised face
  of the electrical socket,
Ten times anything means
  add a zero.
Easy Reader Books
  were full of “there,” “this,” “and,” “but.”
What you can trust is
  your scream, as loud as
  a siren.
Disaster is coming
  like candles.
Manitous

My mother’s skin
was a soft rope.

She pulled me up to her
with stories.

There are two islands
in Lake Michigan

named Manitou:
one North, one South.

The islands are graves:
two sister bears

who drowned, swimming
from Wisconsin,

away from a big fire,
pine trees crackling,

vapors of scotch,
whistles of sap.

They almost made it,
but their short bear legs

wore out with paddling,
their snouts, numb as rocks,

suckled water. First one
drowned, and then the other.

Their skin turned to sand,
their hair turned to grass.

A mother is a body
of suffering.

In the narrows of my bed,
midnight sheets,

full of waves,
I had nightmares
about bears,
huge and black,
with wet fur, specks of foam
in their jaw hinges.

In the morning, I’d go
to my mother’s red hair,
crawl into her black lap,
and she’d hold me,
slippery girl,
who fell out of her,
and save me
with a new story.

She smelled of a nightdress,
warm cotton, a little sour.

My mother tucked
my hair behind my ears
and said: Listen.
the sun came up
an hour ago: pink
as an ear.

Mother, I keep swimming
up to you.

I can’t stop thinking
about home.
Bear Lake

The lake has yellow shallows
full of hairlike weeds, tickling
rocky ankles. It grows its tresses,
barbs, and rope in the darkest
water—the water full of cold push.
In the deep, you can’t see the mush
bottom; we don’t know what
we might step on: a fishing lure
with its sharp anchor-shaped
prongs, a broken beer bottle,
or worse: something alive,
whipping, with teeth.

We stay on its black surface,
pressing our long, sticky bodies
against inflatable mats—
red, green, yellow—from the crowded aisles
of the Variety Store, downtown.
We bought one for five dollars,
picking a color that made us feel
more alive. Then we made ourselves
dizzy blowing them up, squeezing open
the clear plastic mouth hole,
to lay ourselves down,
feeling the cold water sneaking up
to bite us. A leg might dangle off,
and chains of brown seaweed rub up
against us like arms. Our skin goosebumps.

We look over the rippling surface, barely
a breeze. We know there’s something
alive and waiting, underneath.
Vital is from *vita*: life. When I was ten, my brother and his Boy Scout troop launched themselves off our white dock—long arm stretching out into black water. I watched from my bedroom window. Seven boys, fully clothed—pants, nylon jackets, sweat socks, tennis shoes. They took off their shirts, netted the air above the surface of the water, captured it; their shirts were balloons—white pillows—bouquets held in front of their faces, teeth knocking together, for a date with catastrophe, her curly wet hair. It was September. Boys were bobbing in my backyard like apples dumped from a crate. They were earning their swimming badge.

The next afternoon, I went out in the old aluminum rowboat, dinged like battle armor. The oars knocked with the thud of slow horses. I wore a sweater, pink corduroys, Keds. When I jumped in, the water took my breath—a cold theft: electricity: paralysis. I began to kick. The boat was gray, rocking above me. A good swimmer can tread a full day. The world record is eighty-five hours. My hinges creaked—elbows and shoulders; my feet were dumbbells; my skin was pink flame. I struggled to get my sweater off, a heavy, frantic undressing. I wrestled with the fine knitting; the sleeves stretched on and on. To live is to keep moving.
Learning the Mystery

I had catechism in the basement of St. Joseph’s Church.
Outside the snow was flecked with gravel, melting into grit-filled puddles;
inside, there were little rooms, hard curtains that closed like accordions,
blue berber carpet, the church kitchen and the church coffee maker,
its stack of tissue paper filters like large cupcake holders.
I learned about sin. I pictured sin as a black spot on the heart—
a smoker’s lesion. If you sinned too much, your heart turned black as burnt toast, crumbled.
The instructors were parents, retired schoolteachers, one real nun.
I was excited until I saw her. She looked like everyone else.
She wore wool skirts and gold earrings. What had I expected? A black habit that hid her burning. A halo for a hat, pinned with cherub feathers. We met on Monday nights and we sighed like winds, groaned like ropes, creaked like pipes; we did gymnastics with our ankles around the legs of the aluminum folding chairs. Our eyes followed the dips and curves of the painted grain pressboard tables, rating the walnut accuracy of its knots. It was school without tests, and I was bored of God and his white birds, Jesus’ beard and the red holes in his palms. Things that happened in the Bible never happened to anyone I knew: bushes did not burn and the dead did not arise, a little wax-faced, and walk again. One day, our religious instructor passed out baseball cards of the angels and saints. I picked Raphael because he was gilded: had a little sparkle on. He stands with a yellow astronaut head—
moon globe—on the bank of a river. There’s a spear in his hand. I rubbed his head until a little glitter came off on my hands. There is no God, I worried, and waited for something to happen.
Sadness

It gets passed down through families like baldness or a long second toe.

In sixth grade, our teacher gave out thin strips of paper and asked us to put them on our tongues.

He was a bearded man with short, wide hands: carpenter’s hands. Chalk dusted the hard crevices.

A bitter flower bloomed on my tongue: a nightshade with sharp petals.

“What is it?” The other children asked, beginning to lick their strips hurriedly, panting a little.

It was poison.

My mouth went sideways, as if a hook were pulling it down, mirror image of my teacher’s smirk, beard-spiked, stroked by a handful of tendons and muscles and piccolo bones—the hands with which he shot himself, fourteen years later: a man alone with a dull, black gun.
**Abeam**

My first time on a sailboat,
the boom swung at my head.
The air passed over: a blessing
hand. I felt a whirr of hair—
static closeness—pricking
the tight hat of my skin.
I flattened my body and breathed.
This was the movement
I had been warned about.
A fast blowing change.
The world turns like a sail.
We duck. Tack back.
Any wind can take us.
High School

The shop teacher showed us how to rabbet and plane with coleslaw milk in his beard. He smelled like vinegar and cabbage instead of the forest. The room was filled with the tang of saws and a confetti of pine; a fine powder covered everything, made our hands dry, thickened our eyelashes.

Our math teacher, Mr. Dent, smoked cigarettes with the seniors between classes. Together they stubbed out the small, tan butts, and the plumes of gray smoke blew away from the bricks. During the next hour, they’d suck on their musty tongues. Mr. Dent’s butt of chalk would squeak over the green chalkboard, scratching up numbers and dollar signs, the deformed face of the percentile: two eyes divided by a smirking mouth.

In keyboarding, we tried to type too fast, as Mrs. Herndon’s flat-heeled shoes tapped out our metronome: pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat. Her feet were the smallest part of her. Our pointer fingers went for “B,” and, dipping for “X,” our ring fingers, weak, trembled to stay on course. At the end of class, our hands felt strange—long, limp shoelaces. We’d put the plastic covers back on the computers, and Mrs. Herndon would lift her large breasts onto her desk with a sigh, tell us to practice finger exercises.

We all carried Mead notebooks, wide-ruled, writing between the blue ghost lines. Some of us pressed hard, tearing the paper, the silver-gray graphite as solid as beams, steel scaffolds, breaking the tips off pencils. Some of us went to the sharpener, again and again, watching the pencil disappear beneath the grinding, the pencil’s yellow dust drifting like glitter to the floor. Some of us pressed lightly, our messages thin as spider legs, delicate as thread, pale as skin. Our words did not make a sound, scarcely denting the page—a trail of smoke. Specters,
we waited for release, our presences to fade,
float back into the promise of nothing.
The Field

It is flat and clear and full of small black birds. It is stubbled like a beard. The corn stalks are sharp and hard, their brown leaves drag in the earth. Everything in the field is tired. The birds are tired. The open furrows are tired. The emptiness is a limp, long-legged emptiness.

It is December. The kernels are black with cold. The crows and starlings open their shiny throats and the shriveled corn goes down like teeth. The field is full of molars—what the combine leaves, a hasty dentist. Cobs. Mouths. Leaves like lips peeled open. Its puckered emptiness sits on the ear; the silence of the field is a flat silence. It enters the black tunnels with dead pricking, sharp like the corn stalks. I could touch something to it, open a hole, and shatter. I could open my body like a jacket. My ghost leaves in tiny, hard pieces: white corn, dent corn, flint corn. I am shaken to bits. I am emptiness, with my bits flown out. The small black birds are dark hungry. This is the field in front of which I stood. This is the field that swallowed me the winter of the open casket. It would not snow. The ground was black and hard. A box. Your coffin had leaves of black walnut. All I wanted was for the emptiness to be covered. To put a lid on it. The corn was cut down. You were cut down like the corn. It was golden once. You stood in a field and the blade swept you into emptiness. I lost my faith. The lid of your coffin was open like an eye. Your face was waxed. The leaves of the missal were turned to prayer. A black book. Come emptiness of snow on corn. Cover black. Cover bird. Cover field.
Leave nothing open, so nothing leaves.
Home Is Inside Us

The spaces in my body are filled
with Michigan light.
Inside each finger is a fern
that curls up and dies,
then fiddleheads
all over again,
a tender shooting.

Inside each bone is a marrow
of mulch—
bits of rot and needle,
a smell like earth’s
basement.

I am full of rocks.
My pelvis is a basin of basalt,
stone cradle.

When inside of me comes winter,
a snow,
the lake freezes over—
gray, burred white.

My heart sits
in the frozen center:
a red leaf
several inches down.
**Ghost 1**

When you were a little girl, she slept in the closet, draping her specter skin on a hanger—like cheesecloth.

You could sense her. You knew she would walk out one day with her no-face. So you buried yours under the blue sheets.

She has an ancient name; she has come to others, smelling of mold, as washer woman, floating head, or hag-of-the-mist.

You hate her and you love her. You want to bite her. She has put her mark on you: a glowing thumb.

When you became a woman, she began to talk to you with death breath. Tell you terrible things:

*You are worms and smoke. You are my sister. You are my twin.*
Ghost 2

“If a man lives or moves, it can only be because he has a little man or animal inside who moves him.”

Inside, I have a little woman. She is somewhere in the center, pumping her legs on a little stationary bicycle.

Only when she pedals hard enough can I move my arms.
**Ghost 3**

In the photograph, the ghost does not smile, does not look at the camera. She is sitting quietly on a bench, thinking about death. One moment it was life, the next moment death. Death, death, death, such a feathery word, with winds that keep on hissing from the mouth. Everything is much lonelier than expected, much more always.
Ghost 4

The ghost squeezes lemon in her hair,
goes out under the sun,
and fades and fades.
Ghost 5

The ghost’s black feet blot out
the line of yellow at the bottom
of the door.
You’re watching the brass doorknob
and wondering if she has hands
to turn. You feel her presence—
er her steel wool heaviness—
on the other side.
Does she feel yours?
Two magnets with a piece

of paper between. A kilogram
bell on each side of the scale.
Two trains, one leaving
in the morning from Tulsa,
one at midnight from Chełmno.
You don’t want to know
if the ghost has two black holes
for eyes. You want to live
and keep on living.
Ghost 6

The ghost pulls on your sheets. Lying in bed, you feel the tug, the weight of the quilt sliding away—a gentle rub, a lightening, a changed atmosphere. You are shivering against the charged black: in the negative.

The quilt is bunched up at the foot of the bed, one long arm of it stretches across the carpet—darker than the darkness—a cloth spill, counterpane, through which you can see somebody dead wanted it.

Is it cold where they come from?
Ghost 7

It looked like a white plastic bag blowing across the backyard.

You thought it was the wind directing its movement—first one way and then another, and then

up like a pale balloon.
It looked like the kind of plastic bag you’d get at a grocery store.

It was thin and waifish, emptied and ragged.

You waited for it to catch and tear on a branch.

*Be careful,* you wanted to say, watching from the kitchen, warm and washed in light,

but you knew from its wild movements it would never fill with care.
**Ghost 8**

Wants to be remembered. Wants to be revenged. Wants to find peace in order to proceed to the afterworld. Wants to reveal its murderer. Wants forgiveness. Wants to point out the location of its skeleton. Wants to point out the location of buried treasure: a diamond necklace or a buried bag of Spanish gold. Wants to warn the living of impending disaster. Wants to warn the living, “Repent.” Wants to eat. Wants to drink. Wants to have sex one more time. Wants to recommend a business deal. Wants to buy into a pyramid scheme. Wants to have its shoelaces tied. Wants to show you how when it sucks on a cigarette, smoke comes out of its eyeholes.
There aren’t as many in literature as you would expect. Shakespeare comes to mind: Hamlet’s father. Banquo. And then the pale Victorians, gliding through paneled libraries and wainscoted bedrooms: Marley with his long, thin face; Quint and Miss Jessel brooding for Henry James. The Canterville ghost, traipsing across carpets, trilling his white tongue, projecting up the banister. They bring messages. They rattle their chains. You’ve forgotten Dante—Virgil as a kind of angel. And, of course, the ancient Greeks—Orpheus’s trip to Eurydice, and Odysseus’s descent—always a going down for the Greeks: the vertical geography of death. Addie Bundren. Beloved. Emily Webb. Then your mind goes blank—a whiteness like static. You try to think of more, but you get lost in it, riding the white wave, a fuzz and blister in your ears, as if small white animals lived there.
**Ghost 10**

Disembodied voices have been captured on hand-held tape recorders.

This is what the disembodied voices say:

“What do you want?”

“Go away.”

“Leave us alone.”
Ghost 11

The ghost looks like a torn dress. Hanging in shreds.
Ghost 12

She follows us around,
sits in the empty chair,
drums invisible fingertips
on the armrest.
When we read the newspaper,
she climbs on the back
of the sofa, chin
over our shoulders,
leaning in, ear-to-ear,
scanning the black
letters greased
on the gray newsprint—
very black, she thinks,
very there. When we turn
to the funnies, she laughs
her dead laugh.
It smells like sardines.
She gives us headaches
and we have to lie down.
She sighs—gong
of an empty tank,
dried-up cistern,
drained tub.
In the bedroom,
she curls up next to one of us.
The mattress doesn’t sink
for her, doesn’t hold
her body in a cup
of motherly down; for her
nothing gives.
Getting Through

I go to a psychic to make contact.
I bring a watch and a wedding ring.
The psychic touches the silver. She takes up
the watch and drapes it on her fingers.
We sit across from each other at a table
in a small white room. I look
in the corners of the room and imagine
my dead floating there. Or perhaps
leaning against the table, leaning
against the psychic, leaning
with all that dead weight,
whispering urgent messages
into the psychic’s pink
transmitter ear. The psychic takes
a deep breath and closes her eyes.
There’s a woman’s energy, she says.
A tiny woman. A woman
very reserved, very serious. Stern.
Does that make sense? I want
to nod my head, because the psychic
and I are wishing so hard—so hard
that our wish is a snowstorm that fills
the white room with fine snow.
I shiver. That’s not my woman. I shake
my head. That’s someone else’s tiny woman.
A white out. No other shapes come through.
In Ossian, Iowa

A man in overalls drove a wagon
led by two horses through the neighborhood streets.
In the back, hay and sawdust
padded blocks of ice: a nest
of raw diamonds
cut in the winter on a far away lake,
chiseled by men with long saws
and axes, ropes and pulleys.
For months, they had been kept underground,
next to the roots and potatoes—
out, now, in the sun,
sparkling with light, full of brief glamour.

It was summer in the 1930s. The dust
rose up off the streets in thick clouds. Dust
powdered the women’s skin, tanned
the children. People went to bed coughing
and woke up with a black tear in the corner
of each eye.

The children followed the ice man
through the cloudy streets, begging
for a chip. He gave them out, thin
like paper, treasure that melted in the children’s hands
as they raced to their tongues.
The ice was sharp as a city, as cold
as some far away place
from their readers: Antarctica,
its name studded with crystals.
The children rolled their eyes up to white.
Their teeth ached.

My grandmother was one of them.
She tucked the ice in the soft pocket of her cheek.
It disappeared like cold sugar, like everything
worth having.

She told me about the ice man seventy years after.
She was about to begin the forgetting
through which she would slide
to the end of her life, memories and faces exhaled
out of her like cold breaths, filling the air
with balls of white: a disappearing—
a kind of melt.
Passenger Pigeons

*Petoskey, Michigan, 1878*

Hunters killed for five months
with wooden clubs, a hallowed
thud against grass and winged bodies.
The scolding echoed down Main Street,
a sharp chitter. Birds fell like bruised fruit
in nets and wicker baskets, heads crushed
like grapes between thumb and forefinger:
anger dissolved to white determination:
a blindness like snow, wiping out everything:
oh!, a gaping hole through which our flaws
might tumble, the holiness of absolute zero.
At night the people of Petoskey curled up
in brass rail beds and were carried nowhere—
had no dreams. Their heads were gray caves.
Fisherman, cooks, housekeepers, and lumberman,
schoolboys and schoolgirls, waking with dry mouths—
dry as feathers—and sharp humming headaches.
On the last morning, they had trouble
getting out of bed—a heaviness in their chests.
The fine canals of their ears felt emptied;
something had been sucked out,
vacuumed. Zero, as heavy as air:
the weight of nothing.
A Spade

The man with fast hands
is shuffling, and the cards make a sound
like bird wings, strong feathers brushing
against earth.

Pick a card, he says,
and he splays them out into a wide fan,
on their backs, flashing imperial red
Corinthian: leaves

and vines. Some
of the cards stick out more than others.
My hand hovers, then darts in, grabbing
a smooth rectangle.

Don’t show me,
he says. I peek at the black spade eight—
and it peeks back with round goggles.
We are playing

at magic. I will stand
amazed when what has gone from my hands
comes back. How often the universe takes
and keeps taking.

He’s got it again,
and the cards are roaring, flush in their waxy
plumage. It’s going to happen this once:
infinity returned to me.
Heavier-than-Air Machine

Eilmer of Malmesbury, a monk, fastened bird’s wings to his hands and feet and leapt from his abbey’s stone tower. Tumbling down, he broke both his legs. They were twisted wires among the trees and bracken where his body hung like torn paper

Father John Dampier, on hens’ wings, surveyed Scotland from the heights of Stirling Castle, before reaching out his arms to make a wish, plummeting. His fall was broken by a heap of kitchen midden: the trash pile: eggshells and limp lettuce, feathers among soup bones and chicken gizzards.

In Andalusia, Abbas Ibn Firnas, used vulture wings. “Presently,” he told the gathered crowd, “I will take leave of you.” And he did glide—did soar—cut through the air, and with lift, higher, went up and up, over the stone tower that he launched from, before curling around, back to the crowd, and crumpling into a wall.

They walked with crooked legs, after. They dragged one foot behind. Their backs curved and their shoulders crept toward the earth, as if pressed—more than the rest of us—by the weight of gravity.

But isn’t there something beautiful about it, a commitment of body to heaven, a suspension of bones in sky?

My grandfather, six years old, leapt from a tool shed, his black boots
leaving the mossy shingles behind, 
kicking through fine air.

If only we could flap our arms 
hard and fast enough.
Insects

I am thinking everywhere I go.

The thoughts fly back and forth
between my ears like insects
with four wings.

When one leaves, in a rising off,
a whirr of cleared air, the sharp
rotor of wings,
there is a new insect.

If our heads were glass domes,
we would see the insects in each of us,
flapping and buzzing under the skull’s
clear bell jar.

Every now and then, one light up.
*Firefly.* Blinks off again.
The Visitors

I put my ear to the metal;
I don’t hear anything
coming.

Once there was music here—
the hurtling hymn of metal,
clunk of trunks and chains.
Chiffon of parasols, skirts, wind.

All the seats taken.

The women wore straw hats
with silk flowers. Underneath, their hair
was held with barrettes and pins.
Some of the pins were topped with pearls.
They worried about the sun,
its long white arms.

Against wood paneling, leaning,
the men wore linen suits and smoked.
Their breath smelled like ham and boiled eggs.

The children’s feet hung
from the green velvet seats—
derby pendulums.
Their hands framed the windows
like curtains, open faces looking through.

This is what they were promised.

This is what kept them good.

They will be there soon—in their black bathing suits,
watery as heavy as a second body.
And then they will be back out again, drying,
already leaving.

Everything was moving too fast.

The people inside were the fastest thing moving.

I put my ear to the track—its cold stretch.
I expect a low moan,
an iron howl: vibrations,
but there is only stillness.

They have gone
farther and farther away.
Ghost of a Chance

It was there, yellow and shiny, disc-shaped. Take it, they said. They all said: take it.

But you did not. And now it is not there.

You reach out your hands to close them around nothing but air.

Your fingers are piled on top of one another; they are piled up like pink logs; now they are stretching like animals with long necks.

It is gone.

You thought it would be there always like the sun. Evening comes. There is nothing in the sky but purple. Wisp of smoke. It is over.

You see inversions flitting by in the darkness: the nothings that used to be your chance.
Japanese Beetles

They are copper and neon green
and make a sound

electrical: the whirring
of an automaton.

The world is full of things
that I have never seen before:

these spiny black legs,
wings that keep sneaking out

from under the hard, shiny
carapace. Their backs

look like frozen gasoline.
On of them darts toward me,

flaring bug legs out behind him
in a gymnastic split. He lands

on my arms with the sticky cling
of his thorny beetle body.

I shudder, flick him off
with my hard nail, collapse

upward, away, leaving much sooner
than Darwin would have,

Too strange for me—or not strange

enough? Nothing stays
strange enough.
The Fall

This yellow and red
doesn’t know
what it’s asking:
How are we
to keep on, knowing?
I’ve been looking
at pictures
of people falling.

People tumble
every day:
The girl in silver shoes
at the bottom
of the metal platform;
a 10-31 in a black suit,
standing on the chords
of the Golden Gate Bridge,
The Falling Man,
who slipped through
the long arms
of the wind, leaving
everything burning,
frozen in the moment
of falling through.

When
I was a little girl
my white socks
slipped out
from under me,
how?—there was
the moment before
it happened,
and then the horrible
bouncing
down, thumping
xylophone of skin
on hardwood; I was at the top
of the stairs;
I was
    at the bottom.
Dog

The neighbor’s black lab won’t stop barking. Something got him going: the hollow clink of our bamboo chimes or a plastic bag raking across the lawn in a night breeze: a hungry ghost. Once he starts, he can’t stop. From my warm hollow on the mattress, sunk in sheets, limbs and body kink-curled like a child’s fingers in prayer, I hear my husband groan. “I’ll go,” I say, peeling back the soft sheets; I rise, bend, drop to the carpet. My feet are two charger plates. I lift and drop them like spelter. Heavy saucer things.

Outside, I see the dog in the neighbor’s grass: black, moonlit body, jaws snapping open and shut, hot heart-air smoking from dog pipes. All he knows is bark and bark bark. His reflector eyes watch a spot in the black sky. His wet nose points, flexes, flares. Trying to smell stars? The dark creak of clouds? He strains his black ears, as if he understands something of night cloud-speak, the hum of fern-lipped trees, the darkness’s thousand cicadas, glassy wings, the sturm and drang of velvet grasses, wild, wild—grown much too wild, much too full of the smell of running.

“Quiet,” I shout

and clap my hands.
Runs

My dog wants to run
and keep on running.
If we take off her leash,
she will never stop.
She will run up into
Kentucky and Tennessee.
Her tongue will hang
sideways out of her mouth
like a bundle of grapes,
but she will keep on
running.

We have built a fence
to contain her.
It is made of steel.
You can look through
and see trees and moss
and ferns framed by
wire. Neat diamonds
of possibility. She runs
around the perimeter,
wide circles, her legs
a ruffle—an in-out
of cloth, a rippling
of linen. What have we trapped?
We are trying to keep her.
We are trying to keep
the spaces from growing
too large.
My Dog

My dog stands up on her hind legs and balances on ballet feet, tip-toes stretching her thin calves out, ropy with tendons, curving up like a vase to her dog thighs.

She begins to walk around the house like a satyr, examining tabletops and shelves that she’s never had perspective on. Her two front paws flop like small, useless arms.

She walks from door to sofa to window. She can’t stop walking. She needs the momentum. How long are you going to keep this up? I ask her. My dog propels herself into the kitchen.

I hear her white nails click across the linoleum, her useless paws bat the cabinets. Her low animal voice calls back: How long are you?
The Ice

A girl and her father
are crossing the snowy field
of the lake. The father
wears snowmobile boots—
heavy black with silver buckles
flashing like mirrors
in the winter sun.

With one hand, the father
is holding the girl
by her pink mitten,
and, with the other,
he is pulling a sled.
There is a fishing pole,
a tackle box, a grocery bag.
The sled leaves a running swath
in the snow. The sky is gray and wide,
and if they kept walking,
they would walk up the sky,
trudge across the curved
white ceiling of the earth.

The girl and her father
are getting smaller.
They have almost reached
their shanty, no bigger
than a child’s play house.
I hold my thumb up
to the window, and the little girl
disappears.

When I was her age,
the frozen lake was a continent,
land with a large A,
and my father was a pilot.
I could walk anywhere.
A father’s hand holds you
to the world. It will hold you
against any pull—strings
of gravity, whirr of motors,
density of water.
A cord of life.

They will spend the day
inside the dark cave
of the shanty. Their invisible
lines will stretch into
the hole that the father
has already cut. People say
there are sturgeon in the lake,
five feet long,
giants who shadow the black bottom.
The little girl will wait
for the lines to tremble.

But how did her father know
the ice was ready?
Is there some rule I’ve forgotten?
Some rhyme with “safe” that says
the ice can hold a shed, a sled,
a man, a little girl?
Down

My father is in bed with the catheter tube stretching down his leg—a new vein.

His skin is bruised, mottled, marbled from the surgery to remove the black pith of cancer.

His bandages must be removed everyday, the white medical tape peeled off, his father parts wiped and cleaned. His girlfriend used to take care of new mothers, giving sitz baths and bringing little meals with plenty of fiber; now she is the one anointing my father’s body with her long, cool fingers.

The divorce was five years ago.
My mother calls every-other-day, her voice slivered, as thin as shavings: I still want to take care of him, she whispers.
I see the bandages in the bathroom trash can, a smear of yellow and dark purple on the corner of the gauzy, smashed cloth—the stains of his father body, his leak, his torn-open.

*

There was always at least one day in the cold Michigan winters when my brother, sister, and I tried to convince my father to sled with us down the side hill. It was steeply sloped and led down to the lake.

He would be pacing the snowblower up and down our driveway, its mouth blowing out storms of snow—white mist, white blizzard, white chunk, and we’d hurry into our hats, mittens-on-a-string, wool-lined boots, puffer jackets.

The snowblower would go quiet—the air dense with the absence of noise, a hole of sound, a dip. We’d meet him in the garage, where he was pushing his machine into a corner, the round whorl-blades black and waiting.

We stood underneath him with our sleds, heads tilted up. His face was covered with a sweatered ski mask, his eyes looking out, dusted with snow. Garlands of gasoline hung in the air.

*
My father is sixty-two years old. That would have made him an old man once. But he still has arms corded with muscles, running like pulleys, ropes underneath his skin—a quiet mass that wants to lift, to push, to work.

He lies in his bed, a kind of mummy, hidden and cased by white sheets. He lies in the bed he and my mother shared. When his girlfriend comes, she sits on the very corner, her body held on the edge of a shelf. He’s alone in it, and it seems too big. A white plane. A white plate. Serving him up.

It’s like looking at a snow-covered field. With one tree in it. You drive by and wonder about the tree. Who left it there. The beauty of singularity. Threat of lightning.

* 

One early winter, the lake was not yet frozen over, its shallows covered with only the thinnest plate—a kind of glass, full of bubbles and as clear as a window, down to the rippled sand and green stones.

My father batted his gloves against each other, knocking off ice. I’ll watch you, he said, and followed us to the hill, covered in the first snow—only inches—grass poking through—a green spine on the steepest part of the slope. He said, Whoever goes the farthest wins. My brother, sister, and I nodded to the wind, to the crunch beneath our boots, to aim and angle, to the plastic runners of our sleds. Holding onto the sled handles, we backed, each choosing our own approach, braced our bodies into dynamism, and ran. We pressed against our sleds and tucked our limbs in tight—nothing loose, nothing resisting, nothing wasted.

* 

When we visit, we bring him history books and action movies. We sit in a rocking chair at the side of the bed and tell him how good he looks—his face has “color”—a mussel pink. We tell him we like his doctor. We tell him how wonderful the girlfriend has been. We tell him about the books we’ve brought. They are about presidents and cold winters and sharp nibs dipped in inkwells. We tell him about the movies. How the car-chase sequence took two weeks to film and the actor broke his arm, refusing a stunt double.
The bottom of the hill was banked—a hummock where the soil fell away, where water had eaten it off. It was the last piece of earth.

As I went down, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, my sister’s small body—a purple coat, a hat with white pom-pom bouncing—on her blue sled. She was falling away, losing momentum.

Ahead of me, my brother was putting out his heavy boots, having to knock them into the bank, to stop himself from going over.

I kept myself tucked up, legs against my chest, chin down. I knew my father was watching from the top of the hill, as I grew smaller and smaller. I could see from inside of me, and I could see what I must look like to him, as he waited for the last-minute turn, the tumble over, the saving collision with snow that did not happen.

I felt the rocky thunk of the bank, a jump over the snowy beach, and the sled coming down. A sound of shattering and of water. I had broken through, the water—like cuts and slashes—filling my boots, pants, gloves. So cold I couldn’t breath. I was in the shallows, my body cradled in two feet of water and triangles of ice.

When the breath came, it came with animal strength—a hairy lumber.

I breathed my own black surprise.

   Turned around.

   Looked for him.
Fathers

When I think of the fathers of this world,
I think of work: the jobs they do, blue and brown and black
lifelines of instrument, accessory:
    They make their bodies tools, rod-straight
men with wrenches for mouths, serrated-grip teeth.
They grab everything and turn.
    They were up
in the darkness. While we kept our eyes closed,
they drank coffee out of dented thermoses
with dry hands, ragged nails. They carried into the purple
light their
    shovels, briefcases, pencils, hammers,
knives, pistols—
        weapons
to batter the world with. They thumped their fists
into it,
        to make a way through: punching out
the hard white dust of a gypsum wall.

My own father
was a history teacher. He wore tired khakis,
a starched shirt with four-holed buttons,
collars yellowing behind the neck. He would grab
a textbook in the vice of his hands and open it.
He would point with a sharp finger, crack the board,
crack his teeth against the board:
    This, this, this,
he told his students. You are going to need. He threw
pieces of chalk, his broken teeth, into the crowd
of desks. Opened his black mouth to them
like a hole.
Giving

I sit in the high, padded chair 
with the needle in, my left elbow opened 
like a mouth, jaws unhinged.

Through the tube, my purple-red 
blood is making its way—out of my human vein 
into the plastic one, tunneling through 
to the baggie I can’t see, 
filling, puffing, pushing out with my warmth. 
I am giving blood for the first time.

I am thirty years old. I have put it off; 
afraid of the darkness that might sneak 
over my eyes like a veil, 
of going down to the hard floor 
on knees and a hard hip, a slap of chin, 
a chipped tooth, my senses ripped from me 
like a performer on a stage, vaudeville, 
a giant hook around the waist. Curtains. 
The phlebotomist tells me to keep pumping 
the cushion in my hand—every five seconds— 
he says. I scrunch it, again and again; 
I make a fist, the life power 
still in me. After seven minutes and forty seconds, 
there is a beeping sound. The phlebotomist 
in his white jacket smiles, unhooks me,

“How are you feeling?” He brings me 
pineapple juice, and I drink the yellow sugar. 
“A little drained,” I say, sit up,

my head with just a little helium. 
I am one tenth missing. 
I step down and the floor does not 
rush up to meet me. I am gliding across 
the black and white linoleum, 
and then I am out the Red Cross doors,
into the sunlight, my eyes have to blink
and blink. Someday that blood, too,
will come out of its darkness, its cold
sleeve. My AB into someone else’s AB,
angles and triangles and red blood donuts.
It is good to have fought against the veil
and won. My eyes are taking in the light—
pupils ringing. Let there be light
for someone else.
Drawing Trees

Without looking at one, 
using the inside eye, 
most children draw trees 
that are trunk-heavy, 

with branches rising 
in thin rectangles 
to a round green bush 
for a head.

Their trees are heavy 
and thick, 
full of strength, 
weighted at the bottom—

brown pillars. 
Their trees 
are like senators. 
Like strongmen.

Children dying of cancer 
draw trees that are black 
and twisted—
trees that don’t have 

their leaves on, 
arms naked as poles, 
crooked 
black lightning,

the crayons pressed 
deep into the paper, 
the wax shining, 
sending back 

the glare of an overhead 
bulp, buzzing. 
The trees are floating 
in the middle 

of the page, rooted 
to nothing. 
They are taking off 
like shuttles.
Happiness

The last thing I expected to see after a day of work, grading essays full of missing commas and awkward sentences: sentences tall and gawky, all elbows and knees

is a boy in a puddle

where the road and curb meet: the road’s shoulder.

It is sunken there, a sag where the water collects, and he is lying down.

I can see him through the flip-flop of the windshield wipers.

His body is horizontal, bare-chested with jeans, no shoes, cold pink feet. He back-floats in three inches of rain, a white, puffed fish.

I slow down, my foot pressing, worried, on the brakes.

He lifts his wet head and smiles.

I was wrong about the commas. Sentences should go without pause go and keep on going.

Everything is beautiful.
The Melt

Some years the ice sinks into the open mouth of the water and disappears.
Some years it breaks up into smaller and smaller pieces, a crack-up, a dissolution, everywhere
the sound of chink and jangle, of glass and coins, of too much laughter.
One year, it went off groaning—human—
like a pelvis cracking and widening. A gray wind pushed the floes against the banks. They piled up
into bone mountains.
I went down to watch without my hat or winter coat.
My t-shirt sleeves fluttered against the chapped skin of my upper arms. I stood close. My face in front of that other face—sheer, stern, grimacing, and glowing with what was left of cold.
It felt like it wanted to hurt me.
It couldn’t reach.
Gravity

Gravity is not what we thought.
It is not two bodies in black
air, smaller sphere drawn to bigger.
It is not a child orbiting
its mother, under the apron,
lifting the white sheet, stepping on
the mother’s feet. Gravity is
two objects on a soft mattress,
and the mattress bows down
under the weight of the bigger one;
like a marble, the smaller one
rolls. The universe is the place
we sleep. Space can coil its springs—
compress and wave. This is what I
run to tell you. You are reading
in bed. I leap into you. “We’re distorting
space-time,” I say. “Everything
that has mass distorts space-time.”
I tumble into your sag, and we
make a bigger sag, together.
Happening and Becoming

1.

History is well rehearsed.

Again and again,

we remember the cradle of life,
a fertile crescent, where wheat came up
in thin green forks, and people stayed
to watch it grow. Again and again,

we remember Egypt,
its boy kings and obelisks,
petrified rays of the sun.

Greek hands carved marble statues
with curved blanks for eyes,
smooth hemispheres that look beyond
foreground and background, into creamy
mystery.

Again and again,
Siddhartha sits under the pipal,
thin as a corpse, and vows
not to leave until
he knows the truth.

Again and again,
Jesus shrivels the leaves and fruit
of a fig tree. The figs become small shrunken
heads.

2.

It is 1906. At the port of Rijeka,
which means river, my great-grandfather
drinks his last beer in Croatia:
amber pivo, color of tree resins,
frozen: a bee, a leaf, a pine needle.
But it is not frozen yet; he is swallowing
it down.

He will come to the United States
and marry a Croatian girl
and have six sons, one daughter.

He will tell his sons in English:
“Make hay while the sun shines,”
“Actions speak louder than words,”
and “Nothing is set in stone,”
even as his stomach is turning
to golden rock.
We are walking a path worn in snow.
The snow is hard packed
from the stomping of boots. On either side
of us, the snow rises up—
a winter alley.

It is the only way in or out.

I have fantasies about blizzards
that bury the whole town. Our neighbor Ruth
and her three black cats; the shop teacher, beard full of ice;
the cherry-haired Gundersen twins, Elise, then Greta,
whistling like birds; the point guard of the Varsity team
with his mechanic hands; the old men from the VFW,
grumbling with Normandy voices; the stool swivellers at the bar
like miners, one after another, holding their cigarette lighters in front of them
like flares; the band leader and the band, led by the trombones, their long golden slides
out;

    everyone
    has to dig,
tunneling from a pried door or a buried window; paddling
with shovels and mittens: blue mittens, green mittens, leather gloves; up and up,
into the day.

    At the top is an endless field of white. A world
without end. We see each other,

    amazed

and full of grace.

Everyone breaks through.
Late

Everything that comes to Northern Michigan comes late to Northern Michigan.

The sun that rises on us has already risen on the Atlantic Ocean and its jumping fish; the brothers of Philadelphia standing in a circle, fists dug like roots into pockets; the Connecticut gardener holding a wooden-handled spade, mixing grinds and eggshells; the New York train master, brass keys wrangling on a gray cord, taking tickets from people who are going somewhere: click, click. Click, click.

Spring has already lit the azaleas in the South, Savannah’s pink and white and soft conceit; it’s already greened Kentucky and Tennessee, chased across pastures, up the river banks, and it’s crawling up the blue mountains like a flame, like a maniac, like a sex tingle. Even in Ohio, the crocuses are pushing up their sharp white and purple heads.

In Michigan, we’re still waiting to see a robin. He won’t come until the snow is gone, and the snow keeps coming back. *Robin, robin red breast*, we soft voice, afraid of the scrape of our own warbler. We look at our fences and trees. The snow is flecked with pebbles and gray, edged with mud. It is not the snow of winter’s clean. He’ll come to us like the Old Testament—a bird, a sign.

We’re cold and white and tired. When we step outside to open the rusty mailbox—bills, bills, bills—our boots splash through slush and slide with mud. The bitters in the wind crack our lips and sting our noses. But it’s not trying to bury us any longer. Sharp like smelling salts, it’s trying to wake us up.
The Burden of Proof

lies within each of us. You can drop a ball into a body of water and watch the water rise. The small letters of science curl like ribbons, tie everything together: c, r, m, g. There is a way to express every line and curve in the universe of observable phenomena. A taut string can swing, weighted, in a perfect circle—more ideal than our imaginations, or back and forth: a pendulum: parabolas, arcs. Precision can meet chaos: the probabilistic algorithm, the derivative ending in an empty set: zero with a slash through it. Under a microscope, the world is division: the inside of the inside of the inside. Our lives are experiments. We don’t know how to make it. And then we do.