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From Below Table Mesa

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FROM BELOW TABLE MESA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University
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From Below Table Mesa

Cynthia Grier Lotze

For my family

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Below Table Mesa

Table Mesa: First Snow - September 29th

I lived in Boulder, Colorado long
enough, and I dreamed low-resolution
dreams, sharp only at eyes and slow moving
hands.

Kate's hair was a cloud of insurrection
on the tarmac, then I would watch the hours
melt off the wings of her plane as each
state became not-Tennessee, not-Kansas.

I wanted to meet her in the air; I
could will this without a plane, with sadness,
with need, I would enter the plane in flight
and I would say, "Kate, take me home," and she
would turn the plane around. Everything
would become not-Colorado, not this
staticky dream, hard breath miles up from the sea.

Table Mesa: Church

I.

This is the café I used to visit
in college: on Sunday morning, strollers
of the secular jammed up under tiled
patio tables and my pen working
over Milton's paradise, not that this
could make up for it, atone for unkept
mid-mornings-to-church. This sounds more guilty
than I am, in truth; this is not the place
I marked up Milton's tumbling universe,
but I watch the thin, young mothers strap their
toddlers back in and then this is the space
I've been holding for years, the fast forward
of living amplified against my next
note in the margin of a great book.

II.

This is not to say that books are all I
know. I love Motown... and Gershwin standards
sung in French, because I know what they are
saying, but also I don't. Yes, these things
are incidentals, and the things I like
merely pad the time between books, but here's
the Real Thing (as opposed to the things that
are simply here to take up space): I have
been sitting in this café a long time,
my pen in the air over Milton, or
whomever; my stillness here lets me think
of how I have sat still, and watched, and thought
other places, happily skipped church, shown
anyone's child leaves on a Sunday morning.

Table Mesa: Queen of Hearts

I am watching Andy shift around, his
critical edition of Huckleberry
Finn unobliging in his hands. The risk
of settling to the task, of the fury
of any world or motion unnoticed, bits
of what might be, but only because I
see it happen: *my* fear. Andy's pen flits
from the margins and he says, "I used to
line dance to this song in the second grade."
He was in love with Joanne, but in line
dancing no one holds hands and he would stride
around in the lonely box of his nine
steps, planning the stumble toward her, how Joanne
might reach out to hold him, like dancing could be.

St. Francis

after Robert Lowell

I see him cemented, leafed-over by the garden wall,
no saint so frozen, so many times as he.
His bird in hand, still as his arm outstretched,
and robe unfluttered falls tight, no leg improper.
So passive, anchor of hydrangea banks adrift
and ordered lawns where no live thing dare move.
His history revised beyond sweet freedoms
of poverty and wantlessness in life.
Now sits he in four seasons' great infinity,
to stiffly care for clothing and cold bird,
forgetting Brother Sun and Sister Moon,
feel neither in the spun earth's careful route
down paths of garden cut with ordered plan,

it is in dying, we are born to Eternal life.

Revision

Tell me how you remember it, or,
better, tell me what you want
to recall, how perhaps we read
the paper Sundays and the silence
was not heavy? Tell me
it was like that. When
you've told me enough, I will
take these things, only things you could
love, and fit them to make
the whole of me. Like your amnesiac
uncle, the day he came up
the road like he'd gone down it
eighteen years before. And your family
pieced him back together. This is
your Ford, Chris. You take coffee with three
sugars. This is Madeline, your wife,
Chris. Chris, Chris, Christopher, Christopher,
until they might have said
the syllables in reverse and let it
be anything, anyone, the man
they know, knew, imagined.
This is you. This is you.

You will treat me in this way. Coming
home, along a road I somehow
remember, know somehow I
love, you will
invent me. Introduce
me to what I must be. For you,
my love.

My love, my love,
I know nothing, not even
myself without your mouth
to shape its truth.

Front Range

She leans into her sink
on Brentwood Avenue, who wrote
her father's alcoholism, *a bird
on the shoulder*. She swore
she would never live below
Table Mesa, that South
Boulder was asleep in its numbered
streets. The tiny orange-carpeted
ranchers are gone now, though, and she presses
to the gleaming edge of her sink, her face mirrored
in the marble countertop, cannot revise
the shallow poverty of the yard of her girlhood.

Plunged down the face
of the eastern Rockies every new minute,
she knew how he would die. It was
certain, but never so sure
as how she'd wanted it, played his
fall like a great flat rock
rejected from the sky, smithereens
scattered in the backyard in her day dreams
and the suitcase she kept in her closet.

He'd flown Harriers.
You just sat there, he'd said. *You knew it
was different*, the plane hovering on the thrust
of its own engines, but it was only him,
sitting, so much like still being
on the ground, strapped in, waiting.
He forgot the earth.

Maiden

Never change your name, she said. If they can't shelve them together, Barnes & Noble will forget you have two books. You have three books, I said. I know, she said. And how many do they think I have? Two. So there you go.

There are some unfortunate things about my last name: unpronounceable on the first try, one syllable – entirely missed by customer service hotline staffers. “Low?” Three consonants with ending long “e” sounds. “T” as in “Tommy,” “Z” as in “Zebra,” “E” as in “Explain to me why five letters are so difficult.” Mine, though. Mine to introduce into mouth after mouth, press against the palette until it hollows out then flings against the teeth, the spit and release of my last three letters.

Your name (clear, respectable, historically referential) kept you first in line, among the “A’s” with the best playground balls, you did not wait and endured no hesitations, no vowel problematic. So now, if I ask you to be mine, may I name you, too? Leave your name for the pure and unbruised maiden it is and put me for always sitting awkward in your mouth? You will defend us both, then, saying it slowly, clearly, again and again.

Fruit

The things
she does all day: room to room,
chest-high in furniture she cannot
move. The descending moment
yesterday on the stairs when
she paused, just that, then
continued down, curling
her hip from the path of the hall
table, the stairwell already
reshaped as itself, the dust
hanging calmly again in the light.

Nothing here
eddies behind her or moves toward
her touch with a will
to please her. But she used to ride
years ago in Turkey, all day
in cars with Ray Charles,
searching out the perfect bodega,
the word for it varied if there were
more melons, more pears. *Best
places I ever sniffed*, Ray said
and she'd run her hands over the soft
skulls of the honeydews. She thought
he might have gotten tired
of the touch of things: he'd never reach
to bruise up the mangoes as she
would. His hands heavy from use.
Or too light to bother, like angel wings –
both steel and feathered, fingers
flexing in and out and thinking
of other things, the notes that scurried
to meet them when they entered a room.

She and Ray would have passed her house,
so heavy and still, like the dozens of markets,
the big bazaar they passed each day. *Sir, Madam,*
there might be fruit. We are stopping? Nah,
man, Ray would say. Wrong smell, the hulk
and heft, the immovableness of it pressing in
from the side of the road. *We stop when the fruit smells*
as sweet as this lady here.

Mojave

The loss of consciousness at thirty thousand feet,
 seatbelt uncaught, swinging in the buckle's weight
 in the aisle. I breathe lightly
 and imagine the desert
 reaches up, displaces
 air to break our suspension, we
 who fly without *gravitas* or irony,
 sleeping through a continent
 of forward motion, grateful for hours
 lost at the other end, the darkness
 of what is still day in the place
 we left behind.

You ask me (climbing now, thirty two thousand feet)
 to explain the difference between *invoke*
 and *evoke*, *evocative*, *provocative*.

I am

certain that *evoke* is brute action, motion
 yawning, open-mouthed to feed
 on reaction. But there is a moment,
 an inhalation to *invoke*, and ever-broadening
 silence, the door set
 ajar and a reverent retreat. *Evocative*
 is carefulness wrapped in a backward
 glance: you do not belong
 to me, but you might, subtly
 lending yourself to me in tiny, opalescent
 pieces. You flirt with *provocative*, nudging
 at what it might be like to twist and pull, seduce
 without remorse. The cabin is so quiet.
 The woman behind me hurtles along
 at the same speed I do, deeply breathing,
 untroubled. I raise the blind
 on the window again.

They ascend,

I say to you.
 Gradations of desire. One
 could cause me to leap
 down to the desert, live there,

never abandon the solidity
of its floor, never mind the sand
in the honest presentation of its own shifting.

You turn. Murmur, "Mmm. How much longer now?"

Cinema

By the middle of this day, we have been
sitting in one place for hours, an outdoor
café where the leaves cast
patterns on arms and move the light
back over brows until the sun is near
to closing down behind us. We have
been reading in the clear air
for so long I start, rattle
the table when you say, *Look*.
And there are birds diving
by the hundreds down the face
of a high, white building. Their shadows
rush, just longer and separate
against the flat of concrete; the birds
arc out at the building's edge
into the dazzling sky, shadows cut
from view like the raw edge
of a film on a screen where the curtains
have been pulled back and back
and back to disappearing.

For Tonight

We will sit in the light
of our friends until we, too, are gone,
the last to see their lights, those exploded
constellations. But you and I
on this night, the stellar bodies
of us, close as two
might be in the hot halo of constant
implosion, on this night
we pull the hurricane
lamp closer.

Our grayed youth
still wanders this house, faint
figures of our love like the ghosts
of long-hanging paintings taken
from the walls. And your son
in the door, the figure of you,
your inked-in ghost, so much like my
twenty-years-gone friend my breath
sucked back, a step
behind me as he went at your word
to find wine and soup. The rise
of fresh-cut scallions and rice, the evening
rain, like our child-mouths
breathing in again: my breath caught
up to me. Tomorrow your beautiful son
will break the parting path for me: hold
the door to your home by one
casual edge and wave me off while you,
deep in the house, clear the stained
glasses from beside the darkened lamp.

“Let’s finish the wine as we used to,”
you said. We’ll talk into the night, down
years made clearer in each
glass we toast. “To our health,”
you say and the time between us is not
the oblivion between two stars,
but the space between my thumb
and forefinger as we watch the night
burn away from your library window.

Table Mesa: Isolated Rain Showers: 34th – 47th Streets

My lungs are convinced there's no oxygen
here at all. Breathable air slides around
in breezes without the moisture to let
me know: Here I am, Oxygen, a vapor
substantial enough to allow Cynthia
to bike one mile to the post office. Sky
tilts vertiginous into the asphalt.
It is my third day at six thousand feet
and I have a letter all blushing, all
debutante, in my back pocket, hurtling,
despite the thin air, with a will of its
own, fiery toward the indiscriminate mouth
of the mail box. I am pulling un-air
through me and the sky opens – the letter:

bloody and defeated against me.

Walking

The somnambulant. Still
recumbent, yet the meditation

does not lie still, paces
her brain as a man

finding marriage or death
in pieces he must kick together for years,

from corner to corner and back
again. She layers

a route of treading the nights,
she thinks, I am a ghost. At least here

I am a ghost with feet. Others are,
perhaps, not so lucky?

I blink rapidly in the day, surely
tomorrow morning I will wake

from walking full-silent rooms. My arms
and legs will shake into the light.

They might rise, dancing me along
until I fall. Surely once more is all there is

left. The final stillness and the blink
that is halved, when I will walk

in the full rooms, sometimes sit
when I grow tired. Others, perhaps,

will not be so lucky.

Abstraction*after George Oppen*

There is no nobility in middle America like the oil rigs.
Each another, even the steel oxidized
Dipping in measures to the ground
Planted, head
And cables strictly part of it
Tight from the quick tools
And the quick farmer's hands.
The arm dives, grazes the field stubble
The base shudders. Once I
Unfocused my eyes
And there for only me, not for others with things to do,
Not even for the farmer
Was riggness. What I've seen
Is all I might have been: another.

Lost Thought*after Charles Wright*

Mid-step in the kitchen and something leaves. One feels a synapse lose its hold.
 Just twenty five. And an easing in the tension
 between lobes,

a slack rope, or a snapped cable of some sort.

Memory ephemeral as Sunlight Soap bubbles.

An easing in the tension, the dash-dot-dash and static of a cut transmission.

One lives in one's mind,

One mind and a memory, memory and one mind.

As though time and its chimings could never sound and part us.

Whenever we look back all is changed, pixilated.

I have a hunger for the lasting,

an unyielding block of empirical knowledge.

I have an itching for recall, for all things linked and unbreaking.

I want to know my life

Where its smaller things have fallen beneath floorboards,

where only I might re-create,

Where the half-lit, half-open windows are shaded; they are just out of reach.

Homecoming

I came through the woods, the back way between
your house and mine those few days you were home
to sort. Nanci Griffith on the hi-fi,
a hawk in a single current, rising
and falling overhead, and you squatting
on the screen porch, fingers in the LP's.

You dragged it all out of the house to sift
on the curling linoleum, and I
could hear Nanci describing the arc of
the summers I loved you, and your father
through the bright doorway with his hand upraised
in his unknowable rage. I held you.
And held you again, quickly, in the light
now, and it was strange, like embracing a stuffed bird.

Table Mesa: Airport

We will leave Dallas like this: up, up, up,
shake once, twice, like your mother's finger warned
us. It will be eerie. The mermaid guts
of a blue and gold night city, the farms
then, and then black Texas – the deep like deep
sea and space. Up the same. Down the same. This
scares the shit out of me. I must be weak,
having left this place before the blankness
became solid or beautiful. When I was
six, I stood in the middle of the flat
world, the earth as flat-green as the flat crows'
black wings against the sky, and I did not
know how it could swing 'round, leaving Dallas
below us, above us, all things lawless.

Three-Day Sister

I.

When the cicadas came in 1970, my father was twelve, and old enough to know better. But then, old enough to know how to take a cicada by the leg and whip-stitch it quick to a curtain in the dark dinning room, his small brother looking on in awe. *You have to hold the legs together, hold it to the curtain, like this,* the needle over-under in one movement, so the cicada hummed angrily and twitched in the fold of fabric but could not escape. They were going to die anyway, all of them in a week or two, *and this way we can see them do it*, crack through their own skins and slide, slick and iridescent, down the gold velvet drape. With luck, sliming the soft knap with a wetness like birth. Less beautiful than a moth breaking its chrysalis, eerie and irregular with the smell of new bodies. To paint one wall of the house with that smell was a crime, a secret, speaking in a whisper of that-which-must-not-be-spoken-of: the forever-small sister, come on a Monday, early in the mosquito netting and gone again, not yet having reached the heat of the day in mid-week.

II.

Your three-day sister lay behind the house, The family well again, you and your mother, your older sister, brothers, went to a wedding in a village. Your mother held your young brother firmly on a hip and spoke to the bride about hope and the health of your family, your siblings eddying around her feet like the promise of new marriage, like *good-bye* could shoulder its literal translation: in the bride's language, *I'm coming*.

In 1987, the cicadas rose again
from the ground, wet and epileptic
in their flutterings, as if they'd
spent seventeen years in flailing
desperation deep in the earth.
As they wiggled, each from its
own small sarcophagus, you
thought of holding one, cupped
safely in the hollow of your meeting
palms, watching it release itself
and then wrapping your porch
in mosquito netting, furnishing
the cage with all a cicada
might desire, a shrine to that which was
lost and found and lost again, the reincarnation.

Dear John

Dear John

I have to begin by telling you, Rick,
my postman, didn't speak to me all week
after you sent the pineapple. It split
partly and juiced the val-pacs completely.
He was pretty mad, pal, so no more fruit
with stamps? Also the egg. That really crossed
the line, John. That you intuited it
should be hard-boiled, I thank you, but Rick lost
it in the post truck and had to park down-
wind of his deliveries for days. (Nut-
shell) he appreciates the postcards. Dawn
launch tomorrow, buddy. I'm in a rut.
So sorry about the flowers, the church,
everything. I did love you so much.

II. John: Mid-November

... everything. I did love you so much.
Without you, dear, the farmers' market slides
vertiginous into the street; I lurch
about and clutch the tourists with their ripe
melons for support. I managed to buy
that pineapple, but it wasn't the same
without you. Ditto the egg. So the sky
was slipping around again, please don't blame
me: my balance hung, well, in the... So I
found some stamps, swam to the box, wrote your name.
It worked for a while, the walk home at least.
Apologies to Rick about the dried
fish. My darling, you allow me to love
you in no other way...

Not at my best,

John.

III. Rick: Early November

Her, in no other way... Not at my best,
certainly not with pineapple juice leaked
over everything in the truck. Dressed
to kill, that woman was. I'm weak
for a gal can look that good with a dead
fish in her hand, but a critical mass
is mounting here. I have to admit dread
fills my heart as I sort the mail. I pass
her standing in the farmers' market, her
hands in slow motion over the melons,
and I want to buy them all. The murder
by mail of goat cheese, flank steaks: the felon.
My love is seasoned with the rot of fruit.
Neither snow nor rain nor lust; I am mute.

IV. Rick: Late November

Neither snow, nor rain, nor lust; I am mute
and maybe I am not meant for kindness,
so silence is best. People substitute
what attitude they will (postalworkerness)
for who I am, who I might be. Who might
I be to her? She makes me into _____ ()
as I stand in her doorway, egg bits light
yellow and broken white in my hands. Cut
me open and see my hard-boiled, balled-tight
center. I want to give her _____ (), to put
something into her hands. It will mean more
than fruit, than fish, than the crumbling bits of bright
egg in my palm. Would she love me then? But
I turn away, wipe my hands. She shuts the door.

Intermezzo: Clostridium Perfringens

- A food poisoning bacteria found in soil, vegetables and meat

In the beginning, they would plan for hours on end, making lists and consulting cookbooks. She would perch on a corner of the table in the middle of the kitchen, pull her knees up to her chest, and study the charts of herbs and seasonings. One year, after intense sessions with an old Italian man who had come highly recommended, they pressed their own olive oil from olives grown on an ancient tree in her mother's backyard. But the summer they tried pickling cucumbers was different. She was up to her right elbow in brine one morning when suddenly she said, "John, I'm tired. Also, this smells terrible." And he felt something snap, the taut wire that connected her to him, attached somewhere below his rib cage. That was where it began. One evening in mid-July, she put down her delicately grilled sweet corn half-eaten and frowned, vaguely, as though she had realized she'd forgotten the salt. But it wasn't salt, or basil, or star anise, or even the fact that the Missouri yellow corn would have complemented the lobster more appropriately.

V. John: Late November

He turns away, wipes his hands. She shuts the door
and I wish I were he: reasonable
postman, beleaguered by produce. Implore
her to have it stopped, unseasonable
tangerines, treasonable nectarines.
Plead with her, for reliability's
sake, for love of the P.S., for the means
by which we clutch deniability,
oh please, stop this madman! Let the mail run
on time! I've stopped. Rick, I will no longer
be abusing your services. The fun
is finished, disappoint the fishmonger
though it may. Here I stay to claim her, mine
again. Mine. My head clear. Clear, clear now. Fine.

VI. Her: Late November

Again mine, my head clear. Again clear, fine
like the day in September when I left
John holding the bag, the note of decline
from the caterer, actually. Shift
away from that scene and pan back to life,
my life, new and clear and fine, remember?
Mine. Mine only. The postman: does his wife
know that throughout the month of November
the poor man has endured my strange mail, rife
with the stink of rotting things – dismembered
star fruit and cheese of every description?
Rotten love delivered complete with staph
infection. And John, the sad wanderer,
waxing prosaic in his affliction.

Intermezzo: Syneresis

-The squeezing out of liquid from an over cooked protein

It ended quickly. She burnt a steak to charcoal one night. How could he not know? He stopped eating almost entirely after she left, buying only those things he would address to her. Eventually, the food was not enough, so he drove miles and miles, eating at truck stops to remind himself of the weight and repercussions of his love. He sat across the street, watching the postman, crumbled white and yellow egg cradled so carefully in his large hands.

VII. John: December

Waxing prosaic in his affliction,
she would say, and she would be right. I know
I need to acclimate, that the friction
in my brain might set me on fire. In no
way, she will say, *are you acknowledging
the boundaries of reality.* She
will be right. She will be right alleging
fish and fruit describe nothing but valleys
and peaks: garnish beside love, the edging
rind of our molten-hot fondue. The cheese
grown on the sweet, milky face of liquid
passion. Must love leave you so begrudging?
Think you this mere prose, dear? My poetry:
the succulence of sustenance – rabid.

How You Are Going to Save the World

Daily

I am stealing my downstairs neighbor's heat,
in this middle season; it's getting to be not quite
enough, the mornings dip lower, clear
and sharp, the sun pushed to a distance
that blinds but does not warm. My students
will meet me this afternoon, one by one,
in a café a block from campus, wandering
by the small sign on the sidewalk, bundled against
the still-surprising fall wind, passing the door
and doubling back, hesitant about the suggestion
of meeting me where I eat, write, will not address them
with a chalk board from the far planet of a large desk.
In the prime of the lunar
eclipse tonight, I will sit with their papers
ranging out from a list of their names, boxes
plotted in beside Jacobs, M., Nguyen, L.
and try to bring up each face as I mark
check, check plus, check minus. Were the moon
in a different flux, the sun moving
closer, not its steady backwards winter
glide, I might check plus them all, call
my students one by one and invite them here,
to my table cleared of their undergraduate struggles,
where I live, sleep, warm my feet in heat
coming through from the apartment below.
That they might know this earlier:
childhood presses back from them,
urgently now and ungently.

Ars Poetica for Jen, Whose Day Was Worse Than Mine

I am not
a mother, not a protester, not
a cancer survivor. I am not a man
beaten for his glittering
shirt in an alley in the hours
before dawn. And the experience
I don't have is exhausting, with the life
I must live standing
over me. I watch, in awe anticipated
and impatience for the things which will
prove me. I watch the sky
darken now over the red roof
of the train station and the way
my friend carries tomatoes
and a yellow pepper in both hands
as she crosses from the farmers' market
and back through the door of her café.
She wears a scarf in the colors
of the fruit and the shape of her
is darker but sharp against the deepening
sky. She is so young
and beautiful; the pepper glows
in the dim light like a jewel.

How You Are Going to Save the World

In the interest of all things
 drying up, I submit
 for your immediate use: receding
 lakes, rivers running to nothing
 but the final sweat of rocks, the family
 Holstein in bones
 and a slack cow-coat and, finally,
 your uncapped pen, oxidizing
 ink in the elements. Things are nearly
 spent with your idling and last week
 you stood too near a whole, dead
 fish under glass in the deli
 and a man looked at the pair
 of you, you and the fish; he was
 thinking you might be dead, too. Wide,
 dead trout eyes. *Help! I can't*
blink, you thought. It's all drying up!
 Is this what the fish thought? As he was
 plucked from his puddle to set
 out flaking in a desert of beached
 seafood? But here's some
 news: It's not too late. For you,
 for the cow (perhaps it is
 for the fish), the river, the lakes, the man
 (who found himself wondering if
 he noticed you entirely because he felt
 like the fish, too) and, finally, the smooth,
 cool, gorgeous barrel of your abandoned
 pen. The wild, arid world
 will spring to flooding under
 your kind hand. The rocks will
 weep and the cow will leap the pasture
 fence toward the sea, grow
 fins and teach the fish
 civil disobedience. All this because
 of you, the scratch of your pen again quietly
 sounding the clean, wet rasp of invention. Now
 is the tenth hour at least. Were it the eleventh,
 I wouldn't bother to say.

Ars Poetica, or How It Can Happen to You Too

I heard you were still
reading, and it was a calming
thought; I stood very still
and cupped my hands around it:
you, hunched and intent,
your marginalia wandering
the pages, exclaiming and expounding.
It hurries itself to spill out the edge
of one retreating page into the next.
As if it is a race. As if, of necessity,
hidden deep in one book, there might
turn whitely a page holding nothing.
A 407 with its breath held,
catching you unawares, before you
can gather to fear it. It might be
then that your hand will strike, forced
more by gravity than by will, to scrawl
you out clean, each stroke a self-referent,
a laborer bearing nothing but his own
weight, at the end of a long day
on a storm-scoured road.

Inheritance

From one grain elevator town
to the next the news read, *too much*
rain expected tomorrow – pull in
what wheat you can. And, then, the unprintable
things, quietly: *West.* Press further from this
dying place. Leave the thresher, its blades
kicked up and still, the oil
rig stiff-necked and high-
headed. And move.

To move west is to rise, to take
breath again. My grandfather in that decade,
in this place, is matching his feet
in the parallel lines. The center of him
pointing towards the falling sun like a divining
rod, seeking the vanishing
point of every horizon. He left
farms in the wake of each new ruining
season: the rain, hail, heat, wind. He marked
its beginning: a great swath of abandoning
moving the country out to its edges.
The deadland lying like a wall, nearly
as wide as long between the oceans. My
grandfather pulled the deepening expanse
behind him, his duty to rise
one morning again and again
and leave the fallow acreage, the threatening
sky. *Too much rain tomorrow. Pull up*
what life you have.

Mother Takes to Her Bed

Mother and her rows of purses, dozens
and dozens of them, marching back
and back into the closet, so neatly
rimmed in the perfect settling of dust,
the way it drapes evenly, all things
equal in its wake where nothing moves.

"Scott was a drunk," says Mother as she moves
toward the bureau. "Six of one, half dozen
of the other, but no one burned him down, everything
tied up in ballet shoes, way back
in that locked room. Sad. Ashes to ashes and all that. Dust.
Swept that poor woman up with a push broom, all neat

and tidy, done. Scott was at happy hour - scotch neat."
She's worn the wood shiny between there and the bed, moving
back and forth for hairbrushes and hand mirrors, the dust
in a suspension all around her. A dozen
women from the ladies' auxiliary relay back
and forth the week long and Mother ails, divulges nothing.

"When he kicked at long last, no one came but that brash thing
Mrs. Parker (she wasn't really a commie), looking neat
as a pin, and she squinted hard, glanced back
at one hundred empty chairs and said, 'the poor son of a bitch.'" Mother moves
back to the bed. She's taken less than a dozen
steps today, but she hates when we count. The dust

motes sway around her and are still. No one has dusted
the bureau in ages. "'The poor son of a bitch,' but, thing
is, no one claimed that woman either. She sat a dozen
years on some shelf with the other burnt, unwanted souls, neat
and tidy, swept up like Zelda. No one made a move
to save either one of those girls. And no one can take it back

now." There is a moon up over the back-
yard. Mother is asleep. In the light her skin falls in dusty
lines, dry and fragile. Someone, one of us, began to move
things a few days ago. Moving them out, out of the way, the things
she will never need again, cannot remember any longer to ask for: the neat,
long rows of purses. Her weeks here now, an even dozen.

She knows her dust is gathering itself, the way things
move, the way fire or alcohol or time make small, neat
piles of all of us. My life, too, measured in purses by the dozen.

The Graduate Student, Mourning
after August Kleinzahler

The way the pigeons lounged
 on the windowsill, you'd think nothing
 had happened at all, an avenue
 over and fifty seven streets down.
 The comparative literature student and his
 undergrad girlfriend were inside. He had
 been trying to talk to her about *oh*
the Edward Said of it all, but she said,
shhhh! The Xerox repair guy,
 his utility belt presenting
 his groin in a frame of well-placed
 tools, had just arrived. He was going
 to adjust the busy executive assistant's mechanism.

The Graduate student was a Deconstructionist,
 really. But today, with the pigeons acting so casual
 and all, and the attractive twenty-somethings drinking
 Coke in every commercial the whole morning...
 Actually, he wasn't sure there had been
 commercials. It felt as if he had
 seen them, a cacophony of swirly red
 cans against the news anchors' somber,
 bobbing heads, the dust-covered survivors.

One text can only comment
upon the other by virtue of their being
in context of one another... oh, hell,
 he thought. He stuck his head out
 the window and sent the pigeons flailing off.

Upon Reading "Looking West from Laguna Beach at Night"

Charles Wright looked west
from Laguna at night, as I did,
but knew something more, as I should
have expected. Lovely man, usually
in his verdant backyard facing
eastern mountains. He knows the whys
of so many things I do not, including
the flashes over the waves in Laguna.
They are oil rigs, I know now.
It was a sneaky disappointment
I sustained, sitting here, enriching
my sense of the small among Wright's
quiet, staring deer and pony skin
ottomans. How dare he? You
and I crept down the craggy path
and stood with our hands
entwined, and then: the light
that froze the waves just before
cresting. Laguna's shimmering cliff-top
mansions fell to dust
at our backs and also, apologies,
the high, white house from which Charles
Wright stared. I love you, you said.
You make light appear
over the pacific waves of my mind,
I said. And then you put me
on a plane, and I pushed
time ahead of me toward those calm,
eastern mountains. I began to read
Charles Wright and you had known
about the oil rigs all along. But I am still
angry. The deer and ottomans
are not enough for me. The Poet's yard
is too still, too green, his view
over Laguna so cool
and knowing. I was there
on the rocks, that light like the offered-up
prayer of a pacific evensong.

Villanelle for G.S.W.

There is a photograph of you, somewhat awkward,
 against the south railing of the Brooklyn Bridge,
 body and head at directional odds. Which way is forward

on that bridge with Manhattan hauling at your collar
 while Brooklyn looks you in the eye? It hums an old, old man's funeral dirge.
 There is a photograph of you, somewhat awkward.

Your mother thought of the war:
 you, walking through desert nights and days, but you chose instead this more subtle
 edge,
 the body and head at directional odds: which way forward?

There are more like this from years ago. Now an avatar
 of the child you were, you stand again on the ledge:
 These photographs of you, so awkward.

I framed you up here, moving backward
 to fit your grasp on the pylon's worn ridge,
 body and head at directional odds. Which way is forward

in this round world?
 Stilled, mid-life on the Brooklyn Bridge,
 there is a photograph of you, somewhat awkward.
 Body and head at directional odds, which way forward?

Take the F Train

Firmly entrenched in Brooklyn, I am not
in love. But lucky, it might

be said. I wrote
you a letter. It was beautiful. Leaping

words inside, your name
blackened in astride your street,

the same, and green all over behind,
like the leaning summer annuals forcing

on the window. The leaves are
coming in tight, oval out-spiralings,

refuse, refuse, refuse. The blossoms
demure entirely.

I missed
my train this morning, intending

it in my drowsy rising, complicit
with the fast forward clack clack

departure tiles, train 91, 10:36. When
the postman walked by and took

your letter: click, chug, crash.
Under-buzz among the just-high

buildings of the District and out
into Virginia without me.

There is a sin of omission committed
here, that I am not

jerking in slow surges through the mid-

Atlantic, the postman will find you

in a few days to explain. I am
the lucky one, sending letters, huddled down

in Brooklyn where all the trains are
local and I might never have

to leave.

She Finished Reading, and There Was Silence

I think of marrying you some
nights, and it seems wonderful
to me, like a dream where we dance
and smile so much that our faces
get used to it and are not
strained. I think of this
during a poetry workshop while a woman
sits silently and listens
to what we think of her
writing: "There is a narrative
wanting her," "This change
would be more in keeping with the tone
of your poem," "The contrast
in point of view might be useful
and *so* immediate consolidated in one
stanza." She makes quiet
notes on her copy as she nods,
and says, "Thank you" when we are
through. "No, I don't
have anything to say."

The Writer

after Muldoon's "The Bishop"

The night before they were to be hanged
He packed his white suit and a tie from Bergdorf's
And started out for the middle of nowhere,
To the wheat field of his dreams

Where he had found more than he thought
He might endure. He would climb
The courthouse steps.
He held tight to Nell's arm.

There were the telegrams that arrived,
Begging, just then, and then. His editor
Would call him, one morning deep in his depression
To say the appeal was denied.

The years were heavy. He talked at parties.
The hangers-on bought him drinks
And asked stupid questions.
He told them he was a fount of brilliance.

He smiled in the stark room. Will you
Watch as they drop me
Through the floor? Your amigo?
Please, watch.

VITA

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Cynthia teaches Freshman English with relish and enthusiasm most days and can be found staring off into space on her front balcony when she is not molding young minds in class.