*Illusions of Safety: Poems*

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# Abstract

The poems in *Illusions of Safety* bear witness to growing up on a farm in Alabama and how rural life—whether traumatic or romantic—influences a narrator who falls outside of her family's norms. In their attempt to investigate the complexities of the notion of safety, the poems primarily rely on space (and the conflicting ideals of both security and splintering associated with space) by developing the space on the page through form and by juxtaposing city with country, fields with rooms, and the West with the South. The poems seek to understand what *is* safe, what *can be* safe, what *should be* safe, and what happens when those expectations are shattered. This attempt to understand is filtered through different aspects of enclosure: imagery, language, and form.

The critical introduction examines (in both my own poems and others' work) the poetics of enclosure, investigating how writers employ the concept of enclosure through imagery, language, and poetic form as a method of control and independence, how authors utilize enclosure to draw attention to normalizing expectations of society on gender and sexuality, and how authors use enclosure in more redemptive ways, redefining space against these normative effects. The poems and critical introduction investigate who we become when enclosure is imposed on us or when it fails to meet our expectations. The main goal of this project is to argue that while enclosure is often imposed on us (both literally and figuratively) by society or by those closest to us (including ourselves), it can also often be a sanctuary, a place of redemption and rebirth, and breaking from enclosure can be equally redemptive.

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# Engaging Enclosure: A Critical Introduction

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard argues, "The space we love is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed" (53). Enclosure imagery in literature often does open up, usually to fields, skies, or bodies of water, primarily because enclosed space is usually experienced as claustrophobic and stifling. However, "the space we love" comes in many iterations and many times enclosure is imperative to existence. For example, poetry, by its very nature, cannot resist enclosure. All poetry, because of line breaks and the containment of form, is itself a form of enclosure. But that enclosure is complex. While most episodes of enclosure are regarded as negative experiences, and many warrant that, enclosure can serve multifaceted roles in poetry.

The poems in *Illusions of Safety* investigate the concept of enclosure through imagery, language and form. The poems explore how confinement reflects topics such as abuse, mental illness, and violence, primarily through three elements: normalization, setting, and control. However, the poems in the manuscript ultimately bear witness to the fact that enclosure can also be redemptive. The poems deal with childhood and adult traumas, gender and sexuality, and relationships to the "I" by filtering these aspects through the lens of enclosure and through violating formal elements of conventional poetry, especially in the way the poems incorporate and take advantage of white space. The manuscript seeks to communicate not only how enclosure is imposed on us (and on who we become when it is), but also that it can become a sanctuary, a place of liberation, redemption, and rebirth. The enclosure imagery and language of the poems often do refuse to "remain permanently closed"; however, enclosure in poetry is a fixed notion because of form, even for free verse and experimental poetry (Bachelard 53). There is redemption in that fixed notion: many poems are redemptive in their enclosing nature because they make order out of chaos. Others (especially experimental poems) are redemptive in their

attempts to break from enclosure: making chaos out of order (though, I will argue, there is always some element of enclosure when line breaks are intentional). This introduction to the poems will discuss the complications of enclosure by looking first at how authors have employed enclosure in their work through the tropes of normalization, setting, and control, and then by examining how the poems in *Illusions of Safety* fit into this context.

**I. Enclosure and normalization**

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison System*, Michel Foucault explores the history of surveillance and imprisonment in Western society. Foucault argues that discipline "is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology" (215). He finds that prison camps were historically designed "to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control…in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them. Stones can make people docile and knowable" (Foucault 172). Foucault argues that discipline, especially the prison system, established normative judgment throughout society. One of the precursors to the present prison system, the *École Militaire*, effectively exercised over students through surveillance and enclosure "a constant pressure to conform to the same model, so that they might all be subjected to 'subordination, docility, attention in studies and exercises, and to the correct practice of duties and all the parts of discipline.' So that they might all be like one another" (Foucault 182). This same system, carried into society through its replication in schools, hospitals, factories, and modern-day prisons, created normalization (the idea of conformity by

means of "prescription" or "an assessment of normality" "so that [we] might all be like one another") and individualization within society (Foucault 21, 182).

This normalization is present in several aspects of society, but is strongly linked to the power and punishment systems. According to Foucault, "normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age" (184). He tracks the development of normalization, noting, "the marks that once indicated status, privilege and affiliation were increasingly replaced—or at least supplemented—by a whole range of degrees of normality indicating membership of a homogeneous social body but also playing a part in classification, hierarchization and the distribution of rank" (Foucault 184). Foucault goes on to describe how normalization impacts society:

> In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another. It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences. (184)

It is because of the enforcement of measuring gaps that normalization leads to othering of certain groups. According to Foucault:

> It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. That is why, in all the mechanisms of discipline, the examination is highly ritualized. In it are combined the ceremony

> of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth. At the heart of the procedures of discipline, it manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected. (184-185)

Normalization, a product of the medical, education, industrial, and punishment systems, works in society as a means of classification; these classifications can, and usually do, lead to examinations (both literal, as in tests in the medical and education fields, and figurative, as in examinations of people we meet in everyday life) that result in stereotypes, exclusions, banishment, and often violence (physical, emotional, and social) against those who don't fall into these social norms (those who don't "pass the test"). Because of these consequences, normalization can be a problematic aspect of society, especially for people who do not conform to socially accepted norms.

Many authors have employed enclosure or imprisonment imagery and language in order to draw attention to the normalizing expectations of both gender and sexuality and to question those ideals. Chelsey Minnis, for example, addresses the enclosure trope in her poetry collection *Bad Bad*. In her work, she explores the "anxiety of authorship," a term coined by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to explain the woman writer's "radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (Gilbert and Gubar 49). Immediately, the reader notices that Minnis does not write in a traditional poetic form (primarily established by a patriarchy) for the collection, either in terms of the poems or the book itself. She breaks from the enclosure of tradition by writing a book-length poem, which begins with a series of 68 "Preface" poems. The form of the poems attempts to breaks from enclosure, too: most of the lines are sentence length and many end with an ellipsis, which indicates a

continuing or spreading out—the opposite of enclosure. These ellipses grow longer in the body of the longest poem, most often taking up more space than the words and sometimes taking up nearly the entire page. In creating this form, Minnis is breaking from the "stifle" she feels that poetry (especially in form) has historically created ("Preface 3" 2).

Minnis' imprisonment imagery, too, challenges what she considers the stifling nature of a patriarchal poetic academia. She notes in "Preface 3" that she is "trained to write poems much more meaningless than this," and will not write about "asylums, crackhouses, jails" in her work (8). Instead, she chooses, "If I find a piece of rope…I must use it to tie myself to the bedposts…" ("Preface 4" 3). Through these images of enclosure, Minnis insists she will not be imprisoned by patriarchal tradition, but will create her own form (with little fear of never becoming a precursor)—tying herself up instead of having others do so. If she sticks with the patriarchal tradition (the rope), she imprisons herself.

Minnis disparages her relationship with her mentor for his (a significant gender distinction, given Gilbert and Gubar's anxiety of authorship) acceptance of and insistence on the establishment of the poetics industry and his dismissal of her love for him. She repeatedly employs enclosure/imprisonment imagery to describe and define poetry (for example, in "Preface 21," she creates the image of "a remote electronic claw picking up a stuffed bunny rabbit," where we can imagine the poet as the claw, the poem the stuffed rabbit the poet is grasping for, or, conversely, poetry is the claw grasping at the author and reader) and then works to break that imprisonment in the form of her poem (5). She admits throughout the text that even in the act of writing poetry she is participating in the industry, but Minnis is working to create her own enclosure, not have herself (and her work) imprisoned by what she views as a stifling

patriarchal tradition. Minnis challenges enclosure as a trope that signifies only the negative aspects of femininity.

The concept of boundaries is another aspect of enclosure often employed in order to explore normalizing standards. In "Relational Aesthetics and Feminist Poetics," Shira Wolosky argues that because gender "opens the text into the different spaces that gender inhabits," this challenges the "rigid demarcations that have been assigned to women in both social and literary terms" (573). In poetry, "the traditional boundaries of gender are exposed and crossed, not least the boundary of public and private realms" (Wolosky 574). Many poets, especially female poets and poets of non-normative sexuality, violate these rigid demarcations and question the notions of borders and normative expectations. For example, in her poem "moonchild," Lucille Clifton questions societal expectations of victims of sexual abuse and challenges those norms through enclosure imagery and language. She creates an image of enclosure in the first lines: "whatever slid into my mother's room" (an image of something entering an enclosed space) "tapping her great belly, / …summoned me out roundheaded and unsmiling" (1-3). In a most intimate gesture, the narrator imagines her own enclosure in her mother's womb and the summoning of her infant-self from that enclosure. The imagery then moves to the circle shape of the moon, which is likened to the child's "roundhead." The child's moon-like face is repeatedly commented on by the father, who "used to grin, / cradling me" (4-5). The circle shape is one associated with containment; the moon's roundness suggests something contained, which turns out to be the sexual abuse at the hands of her father, which is revealed later in the poem.

The second stanza reiterates the containment image of the moon through repetition: "the moon understands dark places. / the moon has secrets of her own" (suggesting again the secret of her father's abuse), but "she holds what light she can" (7-9). While the secret is obviously

intimate (the narrator has already likened herself to the moon), because Clifton genders the moon ("she" in line nine), the poem shifts from "me" in the first stanza to "she"; the moon now represents any (every) female. The poem reiterates this move in the third stanza where "she" becomes a collective "we girls" who "were ten years old" (10). Here, when "ella bragged, who / is teaching you [to kiss]?", the narrator admits, "how do you say; my father?" (15). While incest is a private act of abuse committed on the narrator as a child, because of the containment image of the moon which is gendered as a collective "she," the abuse has become a political act representing other victims.

The fourth stanza continues the circle image: "the moon is queen of everything. / she rules the oceans, rivers, rain. / when I am asked whose tears these are / I always blame the moon" (16-19). Although the poem moves back to the singular "I" at the end, it is through the moon image and its gender that Clifton shifts the poem from intimate to political. In blaming the moon, the narrator blames herself and the collective "she." Although these girls, these victims of abuse, are "queen of everything," ruling over "the oceans, rivers, rain," they are still the source of the tears—the pain—that the narrator endures. Here, Clifton suggests the misplaced guilt of rape culture, which often refuses to acknowledge sexual abuse by shifting the blame to the victim. The moon (the contained—suggesting her contained secret, contained guilt, the knowledge of abuse contained by the father and society) is a victim, but as so often happens with victims of abuse, the guilt is projected not on the perpetrator, but on the abused. Clifton moves the poem from intimate to political through the use of enclosure image (the moon) by questioning society's propensity to blame the victim.

In her book *Sister Outsider,* Audre Lorde also challenges social norming, especially concepts of identity: "Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex.

But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation" (115). Many queer theorists argue that, as Lorde suggests, if we remove the fear and hatred that we are programmed to feel when encountering "the other" and instead recognize differences and scrutinize the stereotypes and misconceptions (results of normalization) associated with those differences, we will begin to view socially accepted ideals about identity (and morality) as problematic. Lorde explores this idea through enclosure image in her poem "Walking Our Boundaries." The enclosure image is intimate: two people are walking the boundaries of their property (and the boundaries of themselves and their relationship), inspecting it for the coming planting season (5). This intimacy is extended in another image of enclosure: the narrator takes the hand of her partner and is "glad to be alive and still / with you," suggesting there has been a close call with death (16-18). The image of handholding is hinted at two more times in the poem through line breaks: the narrator notes, "substance / lies so close at hand / waiting to be held" and again when "your hand / falls off the apple bark" (26-30). Although neither image is actually of the two holding hands, the line breaks at *hand*, *held,* and again *hand* remind us of that image and its intimacy; the repetition of it is another means of containing the intimacy. The poem moves to questioning social norms in the final stanza when the narrator notes that she and her partner's voices, contained in the enclosure of the "small yard," seem "too tentative for women / so in love" (38-40). The poem, filled with enclosure images of the garden and holding hands, provides the image of the enclosure of the yard in order to reveal that the two are lesbians, and the political turmoil associated with gay rights is reflected in the image that follows the revelation: "the siding has come loose in spots" (41). Lorde suggests that the intimacy of the two will overcome society's oppression of their

sexuality because their "footsteps hold this place / together" and their "joint decisions make the possible / whole" (42-46). "Together" and "whole" suggest enclosure, signifying the pair's intimacy will overcome society's need to normalize sexuality; their relationship does not need to be one of exclusively male and female to be whole.

Adrienne Rich also utilizes enclosure imagery in many of her poems to explore gender and sexuality. In her poem "Mother-Right," Rich describes a "Woman and child running / in a field" (1-2). This field is one which "A man planted / on the horizon" (2-3). In an image similar to the enclosed hands of Lorde's poem, Rich portrays, "Two hands  one long, slim  one / small, starlike  clasped / in the razor wind" (4-6, extra spacing Rich's). The woman's hair is "cut short for faster travel" and there is a "hawk-winged cloud  over their heads" (7, 9, extra spacing Rich's). The image of the woman and child running through a field hand-in-hand seems at first safe: a picture of motherhood and childhood in innocence. But the image is complicated first by the language (the "razor wind," suggesting something cutting or harmful, and the need for "faster travel"), and later in the final two stanzas, where we learn:

> The man is walking boundaries
> measuring  He believes in what is his
> the grass  the waters underneath  the air
>
> the air  through which child and mother
> are running  the boy singing
> the woman  eyes sharpened in the light
> heart stumbling  making for the open. (10-16, extra spacing Rich's)

The field is obviously enclosed (they are making for the open, which suggests they are fenced in) and is a place from which the woman and child are fleeing. The possessiveness of the man (he "is walking [his] boundaries," a territorial image, and "he believes in what is his," including the field, what lies beneath, "the air" above it, and, we can assume, he believes the woman and child who are in his field belong to him, since everything above and below are his, too) might be viewed through a normative lens as protective, providing, and loving. But the language of the poem—the "razor wind," the impression of flight in the "hawk-winged cloud" (hawk being a predatory animal), and the woman's "sharpened" eyes and "stumbling" heart that are "making for the open"—suggests something more sinister. There is no outright indication of abuse in the poem, but the language leads us to believe the woman feels she and her child are in some way imprisoned by the man (or even the patriarchal norms of society, if we see the woman as a symbol for women and the man a symbol for men) and needs to break free.

Enclosure imagery is also central to questioning normalization in Rich's portrayal of the descent in "Diving into the Wreck." The poem was written during a volatile time for Rich—she had dedicated herself to social activism, her estranged husband had recently committed suicide, and she would soon come out as lesbian. The descent in Rich's poem is one of a diver descending to a shipwreck—a metaphor for the traumas, concerns, and possibilities in her life. Rich begins the poem "having read the book of myths," suggesting she will either revise or abandon socially constructed myths (norms) (1). After having read the book, she dives down to a shipwreck (enclosed in the water) wearing "the grave and awkward mask," evoking the mask (or myth) othered people put on each day (7). Given Rich's own identity as a lesbian, "we" at the beginning and end of the poem can be presumed to represent women, people of non-normative sexuality, or those who are questioned or othered by social conventions. Rich descends down the

ladder into dark water and enters the "deep element" (43). She descends in order to "explore the wreck…to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail" (52-56). While diving in the water, she finds "the thing I came for: / the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth," suggesting the speaker does not want to make the wreck into a myth (61-63). She dives even further down "into the hold" where she sees the ship's carved mermaid and merman (76). It is in this deepest descent that Rich's personal narrative joins completely with myth (and where gender becomes fluid) as she becomes inseparable from the vessel's carvings: "I am she: I am he" (77). She becomes part of the shipwreck. The "I" becomes inseparable from the othered "we," and the poem closes with the "We are, I am, you are" that "…find our way / back to this scene" of the shipwreck, deep within the ocean, "carrying…a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear" (87, 89-90, 91-94). In becoming the othered *she*, *he*, *I*, *you*, and *we* and then rejecting (or burying in the sea) the book "in which / our names do not appear," Rich subverts the idea of normalization. She creates the images of the containment of the ocean and the ship in order to question these myths—these social norms—and offers a place for others to bury those notions of normalizing and find a place of acceptance.

**II. Enclosure and setting**

Enclosure imagery is often portrayed through setting; this can be represented in images of the home, or in some cases the author turns the setting from the interior to the exterior, exploring land and nature. Setting (especially landscape) is another instance in which the concept of enclosure can be both restraining and redemptive. As Bachelard notes, "we shall see the imagination build 'walls' of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts" (5). Although

houses and buildings are confining images of enclosure, they also "give us back areas of being…and we have the impression that, by living in such images as these, in images that are as stabilizing as these are, we could start a new life, a life that would be our own, that would belong to us in our very depths" (Bachelard 33). There seems to be an argument for redemption in Bachelard's claim, but that notion is complicated by the word "impressions," which suggests that the new life may or may not be grounded in reality. Many poets employ this duality of enclosure in their work. For example, in his book *The End of the West*, Michael Dickman describes child abuse, neglect, and suicide through images of being inside a house; these images are unsettling, but read as though they are grounded in memory. These are images of the narrator's being, of reliving, of making the enclosure and, therefore the story, his own. In his poem "Kings," he describes a mouse "scampering across the kitchen floor in the middle of the night when / we wake up / and want to make a sandwich" (47-49). When the mouse "disappear(s) forever / down a hole in the floor," the narrator wants "to go with [it] // But we can't go // What a motherfucker that is" (50-51, 52-54). Dickman sets up a history of abuse in the poem, all within the enclosure of the "sanctuary" of the home, and even when that enclosure provides some measure of escape (the hole in the floor), the narrator knows he is stuck; not only can he not fit down the hole, but even if he leaves, he cannot escape the torments that he will continually revisit in his memory.

However, the enclosed spaces also become places where the characters in Dickman's book recreate themselves, often for the better. For example, in the book's title poem, the narrator tells his mother, a woman injured by life, that "there was no other life" in younger years, but she remembers:

Childlight everywhere

Cutting across

the newly waxed

1975

linoleum

in the new kitchen: yellow

yellow

yellow (54, 62-69).

His mother recreates herself in the memory of her childhood kitchen; she finds light and happiness, if only for a moment. The narrator "want[s] her to be happy" (because of "The many ways / I've lied to her // My tongue, how / I've tried to hurt her"), so in imagining the space, there is not only a recreation by the mother, but also redemption for the son (36, 30-32).

Although enclosure usually conjures images of houses, prisons, castles, basements, and attics, writers often look away from these and focus on landscapes. While the landscapes themselves may not be agents of enclosure (although they often are), the turn from interior spaces to landscapes complicates the notions of enclosure, suggesting that we should distinguish enclosure within prisons and houses from those of plantations, reservations, homesteads, and cities. The Romantic poets, for example, associated nature landscape with innocence—something one has to break with in order to obtain experience. For William Wordsworth, this change from nature is both terrifying and devastating, and that anxiety influences much of his work. Although he primarily focuses on individuals/small families in the context of his landscapes, Wordsworth was probably influenced by the succession of British Enclosure Acts that were passed during the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries to collect and enclose

farmland in order to make farming more efficient. These acts created cultural and political issues, pitting landowners against small farmers and peasants, often resulting in worsening conditions for the poor—evictions, dispossessions, lower wages, and a loss of self-subsistence, for example (a topic J. M. Neeson discusses in depth in his book *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure, and Social Change in England, 1700-1820*). The Enclosure Acts led to properties being fenced off, which created a grid of fields. Although during Wordsworth's life these acts were aimed primarily at villages south of his own, the very idea of open land with no fencing moving to enclosed parcels of land would have been quite alarming, especially to a poet such as Wordsworth who was accustomed to roaming the open landscape. His disconcertion is present throughout his work; in "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," for example, Wordsworth turns his attention from the interior space of the title (the abbey) and focuses solely on the landscape. Tintern Abbey is not described in the poem; it is in the title (a pillaged, rundown abbey where poor people congregated; eighteenth-century English people certainly knew it), but he does not talk about it, virtually ignoring the question of possession and politics. Instead, he emphasizes the landscape which lightens "the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world" and gives him hope (41-42, 68). But, while nature provided what he needed in his youth, he now hears, "The still, sad music of humanity" (94). Although this music is "Not harsh nor grating," but is "sublime," for Wordsworth, the open, outdoor space of nature provides "The anchor of my purest thoughts," an echo of innocence which is now wrestling with his experience—experience that he found among people in the more enclosed spaces of "lonely rooms, and 'mid the din / Of towns and cities" (98, 112, 27-28).

This notion of the outside as a place of innocence is often complicated in poetry, though; we see this in the representation of landscapes when queering literature. As discussed earlier,

enclosure imagery is often used to draw attention to normalization. But people who are of non-normative sexuality are often discussed in actual terms of enclosure imagery; they are, for example, "in the closet" or have "come out of the closet" (an enclosure that Eve Sedgwick describes as "the defining structure for gay oppression" in the twentieth century) (67, 71). Joseph A. Boone argues that the twentieth century urban landscape (turning away from the single enclosure) provides a space in which "depictions of queer identity and community unfold" (244). Boone argues that the urban grid creates containment for queerness because inherent in its shape (a radial axis in many European countries, right angles in the U.S., or, more commonly, both), pockets of difference are encouraged (253-254). These pockets are "forgotten" spaces in which "'invisible' subcultures [such as queer societies] first take root and flourish" (Boone 255). He argues that because people of all types move into and out of these spaces, and because the people who make up these subcultures move into and out of all spaces, "the idea that there is a distinct 'inside' or 'outside' to 'gay life' (an idea that has served to police the hetero/homo divide) begins to lose its descriptive force" (Boone 263).

These landscapes in which queer subcultures unfold, but also in which the distinct borders of subcultures are blurred, are especially evident in American literature of the last century. For example, in his poem "Howl," Allen Ginsberg discovers "the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" (1). He depicts the characters in his poem in the urban landscape of New York through images of enclosure ("dragging themselves through the negro streets," "listening to the Terror through the wall" of "unshaven rooms," "chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx," and so on) (2, 8, 7, 12). Ginsberg spotlights these "forgotten" spaces where the subcultures (subcultures based on race, sexuality, class, mental health issues, and drug use) flourish, but he also moves the members of these

subcultures out into conventional spaces (the West Coast, Mexico, and Harvard), blurring the boundaries that differentiate cultural differences. In Ginsberg's poem, private (and non-normative) actions of these people (sex, drugs, crying, vomiting) are brought out into public spaces.

The urban landscape of Part I of "Howl" is then juxtaposed against industrial, claustrophobic spaces referred to as aspects of "Moloch" in Part II. Ginsberg suggests this demon Moloch (a civilization also described in enclosure imagery: "the incomprehensible prison…the crossbone soulless jailhouse… / whose ear is a smoking tomb… / whose eyes are a thousand blind windows") is responsible for the deterioration of the minds of those peopling the poem—Moloch has, in fact, "bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imaginations" (84-90, 79). It is the landscape's enclosures (created and owned by people) with its "Robot apartments! invisible suburbs!... / invincible madhouses!" that torture and steal the brains and imaginations of the artists (85-86). Still, Ginsberg complicates these landscapes in the footnote, asserting, "everywhere is holy!", even "the solitudes of skyscrapers and pavements…the cafeterias filled with the millions…the mysterious rivers of tears under the streets" (115, 121-122). In his portrayal of the landscape, Ginsberg complicates notions of enclosure, questioning what happens when prosperity and ownership of property push into different cultures and subcultures. Unlike the Romantic poets who position the landscapes against or alongside the intimate, Ginsberg explores the relationships of specific cultures and subcultures with the landscapes, redefining the idea of enclosure against that landscape. In both instances, the concept of enclosure can be at once redemptive and distressing.

**III. Enclosure as control**

Like normalization, enclosure imagery, language, and form are often employed as a means of control; this control is sometimes more closely associated with subject and other times more closely in line with form (though the two do influence each other). In Victoria Chang's poetry collection *Circle*, for example, the narrator's enclosure imagery and language is a means to enact control over her own life, but also a means to control (however minimally) her perceptions of those whom she loves. In the poem "The Laws of the Garden," Chang creates a narrator for whom the enclosure image of a garden reflects her insecurities about herself. As a youth, the narrator hears a classmate call her the "*ugliest* / *thing*" (10-11, emphasis Chang's). The narrator then states, "I believed him…. After that, I never left the garden" (10-12). The narrator then comments on watching her father, who "never saw that / day after day, I never left the yard" (17-18). By enclosing her in the yard (garden), Chang suggests the narrator creates not only physical, but also emotional and social isolation from others due to her perceptions of herself. The garden becomes a means to control: she never wants to hear the abuse from her classmate again. By suggesting enclosure, Chang implies that the narrator feels the comments from the classmate and the lack of attention from her father as a determining factor in how she sees herself. The force of these people's opinions creates pressure or a smothering that plays a role in who this narrator becomes.

The concept of control is in itself a type of enclosure, meaning anyone who controls or wishes to control a situation narrows or encloses resources and, some would say, possibilities. Chang incorporates this imagery in her poems "Preparations" and "Five Year Plan." In "Preparations," the narrator, speaking of a beloved who is unfaithful, states:

I've always known the answers

to my own questions—cumin, curry,

mixed with spit, of what to say,

the *how to* of control, the *where were you*,

upon his return. But my tongue

always hung in its dark cave, like cement.

And I didn't know how to break it. (18-24, emphasis Chang's)

By imparting the idea of control into the situation, Chang gives the narrator a sense of enclosure, of narrowing options, in a situation where she ultimately reveals (in the line "And I didn't know how to break it") that she really feels she has no control.

Like "Preparations," "Five Year Plan" deals with the enclosure image of control. In this poem, Chang explores the role of the Asian-American housewife. Like every other role in her poems, Chang refuses to pass judgment on these women, instead choosing to comment more on the pressures and ideals (normalizing) set on them by society. In doing so, Chang discusses the social requirements of "A good Chinese American housewife," finally stating, "All knew I would 'make it,' or / at least control it / to a strangle so that the throat only brings in half the air" (1, 31-33). Not only does Chang address the level of control Asian-American women are expected by family and society to have, but she pushes the enclosure image further by suggesting this control "strangle[s] so that the throat only brings in half the air." This reflects what the narrator must feel she is doing to those around her through this act of controlling, as well as the effects these pressures are having on her mentally and emotionally.

Chang also engages enclosure as a means of control through stitches imagery. Stitches enclose or mend many items in her work, including stitching the heart, clothes, and even bowls. The poem "To Want" begins:

> To wait is to want more.
>
> Or to *think* you want more.
>
> Take a look backyard for the stitches
>
> that seam everything together.
>
> It's unruly back there, yes, but
>
> when there is time, weeds
>
> *want and want* . . .. (1-7, emphasis Chang's)

Chang echoes the not-so-necessary desires of people in the desires of the weeds by suggesting the weeds, and therefore the desires or wants of people, are the stitches holding life together, controlling everything. Chang extends the stitching metaphor even further in the poem "On Quitting"; she begins the poem, "How many times will I quit you, / how many times will you amend / me, stitch, and mend me again?" (1-3). Here, the stitching image conveys the confining that the narrator feels when her beloved seeks to constantly try to change (control) her. She develops the image throughout the poem to not only give a sense of enclosure within the relationship, but to also show how the narrator moves farther and farther away from the controlling partner—an attempt at maintaining her own control. By stitching her, tearing her apart, and re-stitching her, the partner is not accepting her; he is attempting to normalize her.

Form is also a means of enclosure that enacts control; conventional forms often create enclosure through their use of repeated lines, rhythms, and rhymes. For example, the sonnet with its strict fourteen lines and distinct rhyme scheme (*abbaabba cdecde* in the Petrarchan and *abab cdcd efef gg* in the Shakespearean) creates a compact space for a conflict and resolution or conclusion. Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland, in *The Making of a Sonnet*, even describe the form in terms of enclosure: "The power of the sonnet is in the way meaning is developed and determined by its strategies, its *formal constraints*" and "the sonnet is a *small vessel* capable of plunging tremendous depths. It is one of the enabling forms of human *inwardness*" (35, 39, emphasis mine). Similarly, the heroic couplet is a form that reflects aspects of enclosure in any given era. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, in *The Making of a Poem,* also describe this form in terms of enclosure, arguing that the order imposed by the rhyme pattern of the heroic couplet models aims of the Augustan Age: "*closed-in*, certain, attractive to the reason, and finally reassuring to the limits of [the] elegant world"; yet, "It's fashionable, *tight enclosure of sense and sensibility* became an emblem" for the eighteenth century and beyond (122-23, emphasis mine).

One of the most intricate forms in poetry, the villanelle, can also be considered through the lens of enclosure. Its repeated lines and rhyme scheme are derivative of the rustic songs that influenced the form's origins. The complex pattern of repetition and rhyme creates a circular tone similar to songs sung in the round. As Strand and Boland note, the form "circles around and around, refusing to go forward in any kind of linear development," resisting narrative (8). The repetition and rhyme create containment within the poem (as most fixed forms do), but because of the complex pattern, this form is especially adept for representing enclosure. The stanzas also work to create a sense of enclosure with the repeated three-line length of the five stanzas. In one

example, Kate Northrop's villanelle "The Place Above the River," the form acts as a means to explore the enclosure space of a rundown house near a river, a representation of the often-stifling nature of being a young girl in a world of rules and expectations. Northrop follows the form in repeating the first and third lines and in using the *aba* rhyme scheme. The repeated lines, "the house is empty and girls go in" and "across the river, music begins," enact the enclosure of the house both in their repetition and in their context (the girls go *in* the empty house and the music begins across the river—floating *in* to where the girls sit), as does the image of the house sitting enclosed in the woods (1, 3). The enclosure is also enacted in the rhyme: the primary rhyme in the poem is "in" (*in, begins, open, listen, thin, gin, then*) suggesting the girls are enclosed in the house.

But Northrop creates a sense of liberation in the poem, too, reflecting through imagery the girls challenging society's imposed expectations. In her poem, the "closed homes open" (we can see Bachelard's argument here—the space refuses to remain closed); the girls "lean from where the windows were" in the house, pushing out from the enclosure; and the music from across the river "will part waves of air" (4, 14, 16). But the freedom from enclosure is most prominently enacted in Northrop's writing against the form and style of the villanelle. Although Strand and Bolan believe the form resists narrative, Northrop's villanelle successfully *tells a story*, liberating the formal properties of the poem enough to tell a narrative. Robert Hass writes, "Repetition makes us feel secure and variation makes us feel free" (115). Although he was describing rhythm, the same can be applied to form. While Northrop adheres to the repetition and rhyme schemes, the repeated lines subtly change ("The house is empty. Girls go in" instead of the original "The house is empty and girls go in," for example) and the rhymes are often slant ("scarves" with "were") (19, 1, 11, 14). By subtly changing the patterns of the poem, Northrop

pokes holes in the enclosure, letting light and air into the form. This freedom is even more enacted in the line enjambments. If the poem is read aloud, the line endings easily disappear and the rhyme becomes embedded in the sentence structure. In fact, if the poem is read aloud based on sentence structure (instead of line endings), it is difficult to tell the poem is a villanelle except by the repeated lines. This violation of the enclosure of the line breaks suggests the form, or writing against it, is more than just containment. The form enacts control, but so do Northrop's variations.

In varying the form, Northrop controls the liberation from enclosure, and it is this liberation from the villanelle form that allows her to create a narrative (one that itself is a form of enclosure). The poem tells a story about the girls who go to the house where they "light their lovely cigarettes" and "swallow vodka, or gin," waiting anxiously to get caught (7, 13). In the last stanza, we see the narrative move forward when the music parts "waves of air. *Now*. *Then*" and the poem ends with the two repeated lines (16, emphasis Northrop's). The suggestion in the song lyrics ("*Now*. *Then*.") and the repetition of "The house is empty. Girls go in. / Across the river, music begins" is that the narrative itself is in the round; the girls are not the first to visit this house, this type of situation, and a new generation of girls will enter the house once these girls leave (18-19).

Free verse poetry (including experimental poetry) also still employs control, even in its attempts to break from the enclosure of conventional forms. In his essay "Projective Verse," Charles Olson argues that the "too set feet of the old line" must be "broken open" and

> The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem, must be handled as a

> series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being. (21, 20, emphasis Olson's)

In other words, Olson argues that free verse, too, is a form of control. Olson argues that space is one aspect of that control, noting, "If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time. If he suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line…he means that time to pass that it takes the eye—that hair of time suspended—to pick up the next line" (22-23). In this way, even the spacing between lines (and words) becomes an act of control.

Some poets use white space as a means of control, as a way to violate the conventions of traditional poetry. In her book *Inside the Yellow Dress*, for example, Mary Ann Samyn employs white space and fragmented lines to suggest (and challenge) the enclosure of language. The book's title is an enactment of enclosure—*inside* the dress. The dress is a metaphor for language that occurs on the page (the title poem, which is the first poem in the collection, begins "—It got worse and worse until I couldn't put two words together") (1). The title poem represents the dress as an intact object and is the most compact poem in the book; it is a prose poem with only 7 lines. This dress (the language), however, is split open, cut up, shredded through Samyn's use of white space in the proceeding poems, often a result of fragmented and indented lines and extra space between stanzas. The title poem suggests this release (from the enclosure of the dress and traditional poetic form), as well as in the image of a pair of scissors "which lay on the dresser, admiring themselves in the mirror" (7). This white space where the language has been cut up (and often cut away) is a space that is now open—an emptiness—waiting to be filled. But that

emptiness is immediately questioned (filled) by the rhythm created by the poem; the white space is inherently part of that rhythm (in the form of silence and breath) and is filled by silence, breath, and the reader's expectations. Although the poem is not written within the confines of a conventional form, enclosure (and writing against it) is still a means of control in the work.

**IV. Enclosure in *Illusions of Safety***

The poems in *Illusions of Safety* explore the artifice of security through subjects such as trauma (both childhood and adult), infertility, gender, and sexuality; these areas manifest in the work through enclosure language and imagery and through form (specifically, challenging conventional form by expanding the white space). The work employs enclosure as a means to investigate the illusions of safety and can be examined through the previously discussed agents: enclosure language as normalizing, setting or landscape, and control. Many of the poems that make up the manuscript explore enclosure in houses, bedrooms, basements, and fenced-in fields. Some of the poems are set inside, some turn to the exterior, some question the idea of the home as sanctuary, and some find confinement comforting and redemptive.

Normalizing, especially in regard to gender and sexuality, is a common theme in the poems. For example, the role of motherhood (including the absence of motherhood) is investigated through enclosure language and imagery. In the poem "On Surfacing, a Mother's Voice," a mother contemplates her son's life—the mask he shows to others and her conviction that the mask is who he actually is—by using the image of a catfish pond (an enclosure that appears in several of the poems). The pond, which becomes the focus for the son, contains hundreds of lives that the son is responsible for (when he doesn't feed the fish, "the fish… eat each other / between feedings"), similar to the way the mother was at one time responsible for

the son (10-11). But the poem questions this responsibility when the son repeatedly forgets to feed the fish, resulting in the fish eating each other when he neglects them. While the mother seems to accept at face value anything her son says, by the end of the poem, she imagines her son reveling in the act of feeding, an act of nourishment normally reserved for women. She imagines her son in the role of the mother and in this way, finds redemption in him despite his inconsistency in being responsible.

Another poem, "Games," also explores notions of motherhood, this time through an abusive situation. The speaker recalls as a child being hospitalized—a place of surveillance and enclosure that Foucault reminds us is an establishment of normative judgment. Her only visitor to the hospital is "a chiropractor who for years, / while my parents sat in the waiting room of his office, / locked me in an exam room / and said he had things to teach me" (10-13). The speaker leaves her mother's lap, a place of safety, for a hospital room, a space that should be safe but is breached by her abuser. But even after the abuser invades the space, the speaker longs to stay there, to wait out the ghost visitors and silence she has been forced into—an act of normalization enacted not only by society, but also by her mother, as seen in a later poem, "Mother Summaries."

"Mother Summaries" expands the manuscript's study of safety, motherhood, and normalization. The poem begins inside a train car where a performance—a shootout between actors portraying a husband and wife—is taking place. However, the speaker, a child, doesn't realize the events taking place are for entertainment and is frightened. She looks to her mother for comfort, but the mother doesn't notice her. The child's expectations—that her mother will protect her—are not met. In a later scene, the child brings to her mother's attention the abuse she has experienced at the hands of the chiropractor, but once again the mother does not protect the

child; instead, she continues to allow the speaker to be left alone with the chiropractor in the enclosure of the exam room where the abuse goes on, now with the mother's full knowledge. The poem then presents the speaker as an adult, married, and attempting to have children of her own. In the manuscript, abuse and infertility are connected through motherhood—the speaker's frustration at the mother's failure to protect her is manifest in the narrator's attempts to have her own child and to keep that child safe. However, the daughter's wavering between her desire to have a child to fill the "hollowed stone" of her womb and the notion that being a mother herself may be a "cure" for her feelings of insecurity suggests she has concerns about her abilities to mother, as well (51, 55). Once she realizes her desire to have a child is primarily an act in which she can make right her mother's mistakes by keeping her own child safe, she accepts and finds some measure of relief in her infertility—not a popular notion with most of society. By the end of the poem, the speaker wonders if her inability to have a relationship with her mother and to ultimately take care of her in her old age will cause her overwhelming guilt. The poem culminates in a dream in which the mother is dying from a heart attack inside a hotel room, the daughter is trapped in the hotel garage, and a child (a boy who in every way other than gender mirrors the speaker) who has been sent for help "gets lost / … / lies down in the twisted weeds / beside an overpass, exhausted," suggesting the daughter feels locked out of her relationship with her mother and exhausted by her attempts (65-68). She interrogates the social norms that require a daughter to accept her mother at whatever cost. Society, represented in the poem as a 911 operator, questions the speaker's knowledge: how well does she know herself? How well does she know her mother? How well does she know the situation? The speaker's confidence wavers once she realizes she does not meet society's norms for being a daughter.

The forms of both "Games" and "Mother Summaries" are enclosures that investigate normalization. Both poems create redemption through enclosure because they make order and song out of the chaos of the abuse. The order in "Games" is compact (the poem is only twenty-one lines long), and the poem is bookended with lines that reflect the results of the abuse. The beginning line, "When the pediatrician told my mother," echoes both the authority of a doctor (a power that was wielded against the speaker when she was a child) and the act of speaking (which the speaker attempts when telling her mother about the abuse); the final line, "unspeakable quiet," echoes the silence imposed by a normalizing society and the speaker's mother (1, 21). "Mother Summaries" is told in vignettes: a form that challenges normalization because each short section refuses to tell the entire story of the period of time to which it pertains. Like "Games," the poem is bookended with lines that echo the speaker's abuse. "Mother Summaries" begins with "I am five when you take me"—a line that is directed at the mother, but which also speaks to the chiropractor who began the abuse of the narrator when she was five (1). Although she is referring to the mother taking her on the train, the line clearly implicates the mother in the abuse as well. However, the poem ends wondering, "why the boy gave away everything" (72). The suggestion here is twofold: why couldn't the speaker (represented by the boy) make her relationship with her mother work and why did she give away so much to her abusers? The notion of "everything" is a social norm here—the value is placed on both the speaker's relationship with her mother (who is she if she can't appreciate her mother?) and her body as a sexual entity (who is she if her body "belongs" to the abuser?).

Motherhood and abuse themes culminate in the poem "Instinct," which further explores the narrator's struggles with infertility and safety. The poem begins with a violent image of a dog crushing a baby bird in its mouth. The speaker is reminded of a dream in which she is a mother

bird, sitting with her baby in a nest in a tree. When a hawk tried to snatch the baby, "a community / of birds surrounded it," driving the predator off (6-7). The mother, however, "only watched" and "didn't join in stopping it" (8-9). After the danger was over, the mother "turned to [the] newborn" and wished she "had never had a child" (11, 13). Shaken back to reality, the narrator throws the crushed baby bird away, then looks up at the night sky, watching for planes, and considers that despite the fact "the people in a plane could be looking down," should any harm come to her, the plane would be "impossible to stop, but close enough…to see…to call out to" (19-20). For the speaker, a sense of safety is always just out of grasp, locked in an enclosed space (the airplane). She knows that if she were to have children, she couldn't (or wouldn't) protect them from harm, and eventually resigns herself to a perceived sense of safety in her infertility.

The work not only examines gender normalization but also sexuality normalization through the concept of enclosure. Where Lorde creates the enclosure of boundaries in her poem "Walking our Boundaries" to express that her relationship with her partner creates wholeness despite social conventions insisting that their homosexual relationship is abnormal, my own poems suggest something more like Rich's "Diving into the Wreck"; they create enclosure spaces that express a fragmenting of wholeness—a gap between those who are accepted and those who aren't. In the poem "Basements: After We Come Out," for example, the narrator descends into the enclosed basement: a metaphor for having to keep her bisexuality a secret from her family. The poem compares her parents' basement with one that belonged to a childhood friend—a gay friend who has come out to his family. While the friend's basement has "tan carpet, a thermostat" which controls the temperature of the enclosure, and windows "fresh cleaned by [his] mother," the narrator's basement is cold, flooded with water, the windows have

not been washed "in forty-seven years," and when she ventures into the basement, "demons [press] / against [her] back" (15, 21, 2, 5-6). The enclosure image of the friend's basement is one of security and warmth, reflecting the acceptance of his sexuality by his parents. The narrator's enclosure image, however, is cold, wet, and dark, reflecting the narrator's perceived rejection and demonization by her family if she revealed her sexual identity to them.

This same basement appears in "Restorations: Begin with the Basement," a poem that gives an account of the time after the family has sold the farm to a subdivision developer. The basement, previously

> …a mess
> of water running under
> the basement door, down the cement walls—
> the mold
> and snakes that followed,

is cleaned up by the new owners and is used as a proper tornado shelter (4-8). This suggests that the enclosures that serve as elements of control—safe havens of comfort—for others cannot serve the same purpose for the narrator, no matter how hard she tries to make it so. There are times when the memories in the poems suggest the safety of enclosure space (often reminiscent of the womb), but also these memories are a way of breaking out. In her retelling (the poems are from a first person perspective), the narrator chooses what parts of the memories to keep, which to change, which to get rid of, and in doing so creates the story for herself.

Normalization is also part of "Rehearsal," a poem in which the speaker and her girlfriend keep their relationship ("the part we keep for ourselves") secret (15). The two meet at night in an abandoned parking lot where she suspects if they were seen, the response would be "no, no"

(24). The two refuse to be on display for others, yet the speaker is lost without her beloved. The speaker finds comfort in the enclosure of night (though the fact that the two are outside rather than inside is also significant), but she admits that she will be at a loss once her beloved "drive[s] away" (37). The form challenges the "no's" that punctuate the poem: the white space and fragmented lines echo the speaker's resistance to being apart from and her inability to hold on to (enclose) the beloved when they are separate. This is further enforced in the first and last lines of the poem, both of which end with dashes, suggesting the speaker is at a loss. The form, even in its fragmentation, is still a gathering, though. It makes order out of the speaker's confusion, which ultimately is an act of redemption. But "Rehearsal" also explores normalization through setting. The lovers' encounter is set in a parking lot, a bit akin to Boone's "forgotten" spaces where their private act is brought into a public space. Instead of the enclosure of a room or building (private space), the two are out in the open, but still under the dark cover of night.

Many of the poems in the manuscript create similar settings of enclosure that explore trauma and illusions of safety. Several poems, for example, address a drive-by shooting that occurred at the narrator's house; the result of that shooting, and the ATSD that follows, is an attempt to close herself up in the house—she finds safety being enclosed in the very space in which the trauma occurred—where she eventually descends into isolation and depression. The speaker buys into Bachelard's theory that walls "give us back areas of being…and we have the impression that, by living in such images as these, in images that are as stabilizing as these are, we could start a new life…" (5). However, the depression and ATSD manifest in anxiety within the walls of the house, which becomes obvious in the poem "After the Shooting":

> Tonight, while you sleep,
>
> I listen for pre-dawn birds to awaken.

The slam

of a car door takes the shape

of someone's fist

thudding against the side of the house.

A broken window will follow

and we will fall to defending ourselves—

sleeping,

sleepless,

and intruder. (6-16)

The image of the narrator—enclosed in her bedroom, within the walls of her house—is juxtaposed with the sounds outside the house, sounds that aren't, but could be, a violence waiting to happen. The narrator believes the enclosure of her house is a means of protection, but in reality it is perhaps more traumatizing, creating an environment in which she hallucinates and, as seen in the poem "Bullet II," develops an "obsession, / waiting for the break / of a window / or the click of a pistol cock," and in which she "hold[s her] breath at night / so it won't drown / out warning signs" (73-76, 77-79). While the narrator attempts to utilize this enclosure as an admittedly ineffective means of control, the poem reflects the futility of seeking safety in the home's enclosure through form, using white space and fragmented, staggered lines to suggest the anxiety of remaining in the house. In both poems, the breaking of the window also shatters the protection of the four walls. Even when the window is open (a voluntary liberation from the enclosed room), as it is in the poem "Packing," the narrator barely "resists(s) the urge to close the window // to tighten the space around [her]," showing her desire for (obsession with) the

comfort of the enclosed space (18-19). She does resist the urge to enclose the space even more by shutting the window, however, because she knows that the rupturing of the enclosed space is pushing her back out into the world:

> Tomorrow
> is a hand
> pressed in the small
> of my back,
> moving me
> through the left-behind
> debris. (24-30)

The open window, a metaphor for the coming days and breaking out of the room in which the illusion of safety and comfort contain the narrator, is both a release and a burden: she has to constantly resist the temptation to remain inside.

A similar reaction occurs when the character discusses her experiences with child abuse; she looks for safety in the family home and farm, but those notions of home and farm question the expectations for safety. For example, in the title poem "Illusions of Safety," the narrator and her younger sister experience episodes of fear in their home. These episodes reflect the anxiety of the home. The narrator remembers the sisters sitting in their bedroom watching "a man walking / down the one-lane road—a road with no visible / neighbors. There was moon enough to see / we didn't know him" (8-11). Although the man, who "walked past / and kept walking," is outside the house, the anxieties of the home perpetuate fear—a fear the man may return—so the sisters sleep with their legs intertwined (another image of enclosure) because, as the narrator notes, "Your leg against mine / was a promise / that if someone took one of us, / the other would

know" (12-13, 39-42). This fear and anxiety also manifest in the narrator's dreams, dreams that include collapsing walls, a "face in the window" when she turns "away from the door of our room," and a "tractor on fire" rolling past the bedroom window (22, 21, 29). Eventually the fears (of both the abusive parents and the potential kidnappers) result in the sisters repeatedly "pack[ing] their bags" but only making it "to the door" before realizing they can't actually leave their parents' protection (even though that protection is only an illusion) (32, 33). Ultimately, this anxiety proves real when in the last line of the poem, the narrator's sister has gone missing for over a year, removed not just from the house and farm, but from the narrator's life.

Those fears and anxieties are explored through setting in other poems, as well. In the poem "Wrapped Tight," which turns from the enclosing interior of the home to the fields, the narrator recalls an image of her father baling hay, the enclosed "bales of hay wrapped tightly, lined / in clean rows behind him, waiting / to be hauled in" (23-25). In this image, within the enclosure of the field of grass which is enclosed on the family farm, which houses the family secrets and ensures no one else knows of them, the narrator finds order and control. Like Wordsworth, for whom nature was a place that provided "The anchor of my purest thoughts," the speaker turns to the landscape to make order out of chaos (112). But this image of order and control is immediately destabilized (and the abuse reflected) by her father who, each day, "handed [the bales] over to the hungry cows gathering / around his truck in the pasture, / waiting for him to cut the string / and let loose the dry grass" (31-34). Because the father is one source of abuse in the narrator's life, he becomes the agent for breaking open the predictable, ordered enclosure of the bales of hay (a symbol for the nurturing of home). As with the breaking window in the bullet poems, an attempt to find control in the imagery of enclosure is scattered in breaking apart the hay.

The notions of land are complicated in the portrayal of the farm. The fields would normally be considered an open area—the opposite of enclosure. As noted earlier, however, the fields are fenced in so that even when the narrator leaves the enclosure of her house for the more open fields, she is still enclosed on the farm, not allowed to move outside of the parameters of the family's land which holds the family's secrets. In the poem "Harvest," for example, the family is harvesting a crop of corn, moving

> …through rows,
> deep hampers at the end
> of each one
> filled with ears
> of sweet white corn. (1-5)

The tall stalks of corn enclose the family within as they move through them, gathering the ears and placing them inside hampers. While the image of harvesting is often romanticized as an act of sustenance (and often one of meditation and peace), the enclosed rows hold something more sinister for the narrator:

> I don't mention the itch,
> the tiny hairs on the leaves
> that leave scratches on my skin.
> I slide my hand
> down the length of green;
> the ridges draw blood.
>
> What I should say

is that as I walk,

they brush against my face

and when I swat them down,

the leaves fly back,

cutting the lips of my mouth. (9-20)

The leaves in this case are a metaphor for the abuse the narrator has experienced; the leaves, a seemingly harmless aspect of nature, create an environment of anxiety, fear, and violence. The unexpected violence against the mouth is especially important, as the narrator eventually "learned / …to keep my mouth closed— / my hands pulled into my sleeves— / to wear sleeves" (27-30). The suggestion is that she learned to keep quiet in her home and to keep her injuries hidden from those outside the home—an act of normalization. While the house itself is a place in which safety is often an illusion, the fields, too, are not what they seem.

The poems also create enclosure settings that explore notions of gender; motherhood and infertility are explored through setting in several poems. The poem "Falling," for example, begins with the narrator and her partner in "salt caves," which are cold and so dark, "a person hallucinates" (1, 9). These dark caves are metaphors for the narrator's empty womb; the infertility is acknowledged in the second stanza when the narrator admits, "children are an option we will never have" (8). In the following stanzas, the narrator's partner drives into a moonless night "for the sake of driving" (15). Just as the narrator attempts to escape into the fields of her childhood home in other poems, her partner drives into the open night in an attempt to escape the disappointment of not having children. The speaker, however, can "feel [his] fingers / wrap around the steering wheel," suggesting the partner doesn't find the solace in the openness that he expected (19-20). Later in the poem, the narrator and her partner visit a nighttime fall festival at

a school football stadium—another enclosed space—where the narrator notices "each child's hand / on the edge of a thin / parachute that is all colors" and when the children "circle, / circle, / circle" with the parachute, the narrator wants "to be / the delicate parachute/ holding the children" (25-27, 29-31, 32-34). As with "Rehearsal," the night imagery is another form of enclosure because the darkness enfolds the couple throughout the poem, prohibiting them from being able to see anything beyond their immediate pain. The circling of the children with the parachute is hypnotic, causing the narrator to become absorbed in her own dreams of having (and holding) children. But her infertility is fully realized in the last image of the poem in which "the children bend to the ground, / the parachute in the center / forming a dome of air" (39-41). The dome shape of the air-filled parachute suggests the narrator's empty and barren womb—a feature that leaves her feeling isolated and unfulfilled.

Setting is its most redemptive in "An Excavation," a poem in which the speaker watches her dogs dig every day at the edges of "the shed in the back yard" (2). The dogs, trying to unearth a family of rabbits underneath (an act of unburying), are relentless in their pursuit. The speaker begins to imagine the dogs digging until

> …the shed sinks,
>
> disappears,
>
> …the house is gone,
>
> the cars,
>
> the neighborhood,
>
> …[until] the world turns
>
> inside out…. (19-25)

At this point, the speaker discovers "a blessing / waiting: / starting over, / silent, whole, and full" (26-29). In this poem, it isn't the walls that give the speaker the impression she can start a new life; it is the open landscape—the world turned inside out. It is in this complete inversion of enclosure and landscape that the speaker gains control.

Because form itself is enclosure through a means of control, the poems in the manuscript complicate enclosure through the use of sparse language, extensive white space, and severely fragmented lines. This works with the subject material in exploring enclosure and space as a trope that is both safe and freeing, but also detrimental and stifling. In the poem "Concert," each line is a complete sentence. While this seems ordered (safe), when read aloud, the repetitive end-stops make each line its own island, it's own poem. This creates a feeling of isolation that echoes the poems subject: the death of a friend who suffered from mental illness. On the page, the form of this poem is controlled—enclosed within five neat stanzas of precise sentences.

A majority of the poems, however, are not written in a compact, neat form. The act of making order out of chaos is redemptive, but many of the poems in *Illusions of Safety* complicate this notion by reflecting the initial chaos in their fragmented and spacious forms. Even so, the lines are carefully crafted, which is, again, an act of control (the poem, the lines, as Charles Olson reminds us, "must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being") (20). Influenced by Mary Ann Samyn and C.D. Wright's work, I, too, push the lines of many of my poems farther and farther from each other, using the white space as a method of control—as part of the rhythm and experience of the poem (considering, again, Olson's claim that "If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held,

by the breath, an equal length of time. If he suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line…he means that time to pass that it takes the eye—that hair of time suspended—to pick up the next line") (22-23). The space is deliberately amplified in these poems, becoming a primary aspect of the form. The form of these poems challenges conventional forms in that the lines and sentences often look broken or ripped open and pressed across and down the page. For example, in "Music City," a poem that begins by examining the results of a devastating flood on the homeless community in Nashville, Tennessee, white space and fragmentation suggest the destruction and empty space left once the river receded. The poem transitions into the narrator reflecting on how she and her beloved (the "you" could also be read as society in general) prepare for the worst in their own lives, but by the end they realize they will never be able to hold on to what is around them, especially their cherished city. This loss is in one way enacted in the expansive white space in the poem (the space is empty). However, the white space also acts as a buffer for the loss—a place where the narrator and her beloved still perform the motions of preparing, where they rely on each other and on their city.

Most of the poems that consider the notion of safety take advantage of this extensive white space; many only have 15 or 20 lines that extend from the top to the bottom of the page, and most contain lines that are not flush with the left margin (creating a staggered, fragmentation to the poems). This white space disrupts the expectations of enclosure (and, therefore, safety) in poetry. As Olson notes, "form is never more than an extension of content" (16). Since the poems in *Illusions of Safety* are challenging notions of safety, the form is an extension of that. The white space and fragmentation create a sense of unease that mirrors the content. Olson also argues that poetic line comes "from the breath" (19). But the space in the poems can also *indicate* breath. In Olson's explanation that line comes from breath, he establishes that the breath belongs to the

writer and reader. I would argue that since "form is never more than an extension of content," the breath belongs to the narrator as well (Olson 16). The lines in poems such as "Illusions of Safety" and "3:00am, Knoxville," in their fragmentation and suspension, often suggest the holding of one's breath or the shallow breathing of someone under anxiety. As noted earlier, the narrator in "Illusions of Safety," on finding her sister missing for over a year, relays the episodes of danger that she and her sister experienced together. These episodes are described in short, fragmented lines that mirror the narrator's breathe in each situation. At times a single word is a line, and if the reader practices the pause from that line to the next, the effect is of holding one's breath—a common reaction in situations of trauma and anxiety.

Form, especially in the exploitation of white space, also mirrors content in the poem "3:00am, Knoxville." The poem begins with the speaker expressing nostalgia for her time out west. The first lines of the poem are spaced across the page, echoing the narrator's longing:

> Songbirds chirrup through the night. I miss
> the silence of the west the clear sky
> where one or two birds pass over in a single afternoon. There,
> birds are never warblers, but predators looking for a carcass
> or cat to snatch from a yard.
> The loneliness of the bare rocks
> is sharpening hollowing. (1-7)

The poem then turns to the narrator's current back yard, where her dogs have found "a buried bag of cocaine" which she imagines belonged to "the previous renters" (8, 9). For the speaker, the cocaine is a symbol of the dangers she feels in the house where she no longer feels safe. Instead, the speaker looks to the landscape—the wide-open land of the west—for reassurance.

She then recalls a scene from her childhood in which she sits on a swing set—again looking to an outdoor space—wondering if she could eat the candy-like blossoms from a nearby tree. Once she is called back to reality, she wonders if something does happen to her, if "hands through the window…take [her] violently," is she "substantial enough to leave?" (26-27, 28). The poem ends with a sentiment similar to that of "Mother Summaries" (her confidence in who she is and where she belongs wavering), but unlike "Mother Summaries," which is written in small, tight vignettes, "3:00am, Knoxville" stretches the lines across the page, fragmenting the narrative through its form. There is not only extra white space between each line, but within each line there is often extra space between words and phrases. This causes a pause in the diction, but not quite the extended pause that occurs in poems such as "Music City" or "Illusions of Safety" where the white space occurs predominantly at the beginning and end of lines (which suggests someone holding their breath in "Illusions of Safety"). This gives "3:00am, Knoxville" a fractured pace, but a swifter one, filled with quick breathes (as opposed to the held breath in "Illusions of Safety") that mirror the narrator's panicked stream of conscience reflection in which she looks for a safer mental space. Each time, though, she still encounters danger: the birds of prey in the west and the possibility that the blossoms from her childhood were poison and "would send [her] body / into seizures, or worse / [she] would die quietly in [her] sleep, soothed" (22-24). The white space between the words and phrases of each reflect the speaker's anxiety, but serve as a method of control for the author; without this form, the poem wouldn't work to make sense out of the chaos.

In violating the forms of conventional poetry (usually tightly held lines whose white space primarily comes from the margins and stanza breaks), the poems in *Illusions of Safety* ask the reader to move outside of the traditional forms—a request that echoes the fragmented form's

uncomfortable suggestion that safety (whether in enclosed spaces or not) is an illusion. Much of the content of the poems focuses on the illusion of safety within enclosed spaces, and the form reflects the content. But the form of the poems also suggests freedom and redemption: complicating and challenging conventional form is liberating and the white space allows time to wonder, process, and anticipate. The white space also offers more room for the recreation or remaking of life through imagination and images (the interruption and suspension caused by the space emphasize the images, giving the audience more time to consider them). Because of this, the space allows the narrator to remake the story for herself, no matter how fractured. Even in this fracturing, she is in control; she decides what to tell and how to tell it—these are her walls. Through "living in such images as these" (and, I would argue, the white space), the enclosure imagery, language and form become redemptive and allow her to, as Bachelard suggests, "start a new life" (33).

*Poems*

## Photo Negative

*Chances are you won't even recognize me when I return.* –David Shumate

After I left, my mother and father switched
places. So far, it's working.
My mother reads utility meters,
brings home a check. My father watches
soaps and pulls the vacuum.

Since moving, I haven't spoken
to my mother. She sends cards.
My father, though,
calls every week. He knows our time is short
and he will soon resume
the role of the one who doesn't care.

When the weather here turns
and the shape of things grows clean,
when the snow is cast unbelievably
in the colors of whatever I'm wearing,
I miss the lavender and yellow
of irises, the length of road
to no neighbor's house. I remember
the sound of leaves
collecting
on the front porch. I remember
standing in an open field,
watching the night set and rise.

## Packing

Puzzle making, puzzle

solving

goes on for days.

No sounds

but the wadding newspaper

and sliding boxes.

Emptying out

is a flood,

water moving

over everything,

leaving behind

something, too—

sticks, mud,

scrap metal,

nerves.

I hear

a sudden mower,

resist the urge to close the window,

to tighten the space around me.

The cut

grass blades fly,

land in a rhythm

similar to breathing.

Tomorrow

is a hand

pressed in the small

of my back,

moving me

through the left-behind

debris.

What to do

with the stones

I collected at the river?

If I pack them,

they are heavy.

If I leave them, unnecessary.

## On Surfacing, a Mother's Voice

The way he was born,

he pressed into my bones.

He bore there,

then slipped away.

Who's to say he has to feed

the catfish in the pond behind the house.

He does, though not every day, every other day,

or every week—

the fish could eat each other

(the fish do eat each other)

between feedings—

When he remembers he flings handfuls of pellets

which resemble dog food

across the water

with a flick of his wrist that looks like he is planting seed—

tiny ripples where the pellets land

then bursts of mouths taking them in.

He says the scar on his wrist

is not what it seems.

Everyone knows

he is telling the truth.

On most days

he pulls change from his pockets,

leaves clean stacks on the table.

When he doesn't,

he remembers after he is asleep.

He wakes, rises, stacks the change

then lies awake. Maybe

he is thinking of the mouths.

## Wrapped Tight

Even winter nights,

my father asked for help

with his coveralls—

stuck tight

from the sweat

soaking his clothes and body.

I pulled the sleeve one way

while he leaned the other.

Then he sat,

put his feet up

for me to tug at his boots.

The laces were hard,

taut, smelled of wet leather

and dirt,

his socks damp and faded black

from the dye of the shoes.

He loved the fields,

no house nearby.

No one yelling, swearing,

pulling him in another direction.

Above him, crow-specked sky.

The finished product, too—

bales of hay wrapped tightly, lined

in clean rows behind him, waiting

to be hauled in.

Those winter nights,

the smell stayed

on him, on the coveralls,

after hay season,

when he pulled the bales from the barn,

handed them over to the hungry cows gathering

around his truck in the pasture

waiting for him to cut the string

and let the dry grass loose.

## Arson

Tomorrow we will find footprints behind the barn leading away.

Tonight, my mother's call wakes us:
*he's trying*
*to get the tractors out*
*before the barn burns down*.

When we drive up, orange fog so thick the trees disappear
clings deep in our lungs.

The barn is almost ground level,
flames still beating the stars,
all that hay—3 am—New Year's—

my father sits in a chair beside the house,
watching—

in the field beside the catfish pond,
two tractors at sudden rest.

## Illusions of Safety

*-for T., my younger sister, kidnapped and missing*

*Murderers*, you said, *won't come out*

*during a storm.*

Those lightning-bleached nights,

we were safest.

Once, in the calm,

we saw

from our bedroom window

a man walking

down the one-lane road—a road with no visible

neighbors. There was moon enough to see

we didn't know him.

He walked past

and kept walking.

That night, your leg against mine

put me to sleep.

*

I dream of tornadoes—

my back

against a collapsing wall.

I taste metal, sweat.

I wonder why.

I turn away from the door of our room.

A face in the window

wakes me.

*

Another dream:

I move a chair

underneath the window, stand

on the seat

to look out.

A tractor on fire

rolls slowly past.

*

How many times

did we pack our bags and make it

to the door.

How many times did you say

my name,

look to me to protect you.

*

I watch the moonflowers open

beneath our bedroom window.

Your leg against mine

was a promise

that if someone took one of us,

the other would know.

A year now, and I cannot find you.

## Counterpoint

Benchmarks: a girl
who wants to
say *yes*, a church aisle—
red and ending.
My first
love was a youth leader
at Vacation Bible School. He was
my mother's, too.
She brought
us cups of cherry Kool-Aid,
chocolate chip
coconut cookies. When
he smiled, she touched
the side of her face,
while I
climbed on his back, begging a ride.

## Bullet I

Two weeks after the barn fire,
they slept dimly—

my parents in their separate
rooms—the pond

in back clearly visible with the barn
gone. A car on the road slowed

to a near halt. The shots filled only
my father's room. When my cousin

went to jail, he refused to give
a reason. He escaped, changed his name,

does not know who I am anymore. He is not
who I think of when a bullet splinters

our living room window today. He is not who
I will think of for another week or two

after. Or that pond full of catfish—
burying themselves in the mud bottom.

## Operations and Advances

My grandfather used hay string

to hang hollowed gourds

so he could watch cardinals

and blue birds

from his porch.

He calmed

a birthing cow

with words soft

in her ear

and smooth strokes of his hand

down her side.

He walked through fields

of rye grass

and could tell by taste

whether the crop was ready to cut

or if he should wait another day.

I should say:

in an album,

between pictures of his daughter wearing a graduation cap

and my father at two, standing beside a tractor,

he kept a sepia-colored photo—

the man's eyes

were closed

and he was lying on a downed

barbwire fence,

a bullet hole through his forehead.

Written below the picture:

*Jap, WWII*. He never spoke of it,

except to say the moon on the water

made him homesick,

even though his wife

had packed the car with everything

before his feet touched the sand.

## Marking the Body

*-for my mother*

Lines—faintly blue, pink, pearl—

line your belly.

You say

I did this to you,

these thin stretches of skin,

and if I touch them,

they will tear.

Blue is almost honest.

Blue is the place where I moved through sulfur-

water and the sound of mice

scattering from underneath my bed

as my feet hit the floor.

*

The apple scent of shampoo

before I fall asleep—  this is when I think

I know you.

Almost as gently

as the flowers alongside our house

opening at night.

In Russia,

mothers swim with their babies

in frigid water.

They bounce them

in and out of the cold

and the babies laugh until their lips turn blue

and their hands curl into fists.

*

I can never tell you

about the stretch of blue cedars

behind my house—  how

they look like you,

over

and over,

until you become small

and shapeless—

how the clothesline strung between the first two

is just loose enough to quiver.

## Games

When the pediatrician told my mother
*her saliva is as thick as jelly*,
I knew without being told
something painful was coming.
I climbed onto my mother's lap,
begged her to take me home.
At the hospital, a nurse brought
a wagon of games—Candy Land,
Simon Says, Sorry. The only visitor
was a chiropractor who for years,
while my parents sat in the waiting room of his office,
locked me in an exam room
and said he had things to teach me.
*This is love*, I thought.
After a few days,
I didn't want to leave
the hospital. It was summer. I wanted
the wagon of games,
to wait for someone else
to visit, a room to myself,
unspeakable quiet.

## Distortions

In light from a friend's garage, two skinned elk carcasses

hang from rope looped over the rafters.

Their skins are piled

in garbage bags at the curb.

Leaves scatter soundlessly,

remarkably,

around the bags. Blood pools

on the garage floor—

spills into the yard. The dogs

press their noses to the ground for days trying to figure out

what has happened.

The scent

in the air heightens their senses; the scent in the ground

causes them a second's pause,

the way a sneeze seizes the heart.

But he says he prefers fishing.

Raised on Elk River in a tarpaper

house by his mother and endless dogs,

he can skin

and gut a catfish in under a minute. His mother

took him every week to the bootlegger's—

a bar on the riverside—

dropped him at the back door

where he knocked twice,

and waited.

He married, and once

I sat with his wife

(we had the same name)

in their living room.

Their toddler children played in the floor.

The television reported Princess Diana's

most recent visit. There was only meat on the table—

chops, steaks, ribs—

a bowl of sweet relish, a plate of soft, sliced tomatoes.

And after his wife died in a car wreck—

her blood full of crack and with a man no one

knew—he called every night.

He kept seeing her

mangled body—although he had not seen her body—pass through

the window, folded in a field off the side of the road.

Through each call

he repeated our name,

Stephanie, Stephanie—

a futile talisman.

## Restorations, Begin with the Basement

In all that time

we never thought of it.

There was no way to clean up

such a mess

of water running under

the basement door, down the cement walls—

the mold

and snakes that followed.

Now,

there are new owners, new drywall,

new steps on which to stand

and peer out of the grass-level window

at tornadoes

skimming the tops of houses.

My sister asks *Do you want to stop?*

*Do you want to go inside?*

## Mother Summaries

I am five when you take me
to Silver Dollar City, our first
train ride. The ride—a performance,
but you don't tell me,
or maybe you do and I forget.
The husband and wife a few rows
ahead argue. She stands,
her hair in curlers and a cigarette
slipping from her mouth,
stumbles down the aisle. The husband
looks back at us, asks the unknown
man sitting beside me
*can you believe this?—*
takes out his pistol, shoots her.
I cry out, look over
at you. You sit laughing
at the woman crumpled on the floor.
The man beside me
picks me up, holds me in one arm,
tucks my face into his chest
with the other.

*

After my bath, as you dry
my bare body, you ask
*Who's been playing with those?*

I tell you.

How the chiropractor we visit twice a week
places his hands firm
on my chest. How
he presses me against the exam table, pushes
his tongue into my mouth,
finds his way to the snap
of my jeans.
From you I expect
fury, that we will stop going,
but when I next see him
he says our secret is ours

and if I tell again—

*

The chiropractor will show
at my apartment a year after
I marry. I will be washing my car.

From across the parking lot,
I will watch him knock and wait,
standing there,
expecting an answer.

*

My husband and I will try
for 12 years to conceive, to prove
what safe can be. We, too, will be missteps.

*

I will never breast-feed.
I will never carry you
in the shape of my back,
in the share of this hollowed stone.
I will not pull myself out
of a bath and steam my way
past children collecting in the dining room.

For a while, this is a cure.

*

A dream: at a hotel, you
are having a heart attack. I try
to get the car

but the parking garage
is closed.  I call
for an ambulance. The operator asks
*Is this another shooting*
and  *how do you know it's a heart attack.*
I have no aspirin; no one does.
I send a child to buy a bottle. He gets lost,
gives the money to the homeless,
lies down in the twisted weeds
beside an overpass, exhausted. You aren't
dead, but one day I'll wonder
why I couldn't get the phone to dial faster,
why I didn't think of the aspirin sooner,
why the boy gave away everything.

## Call and Response

This is how I learned to drive:

my father never said my name,
whistled between two fingers,

sang the theme of *Star Trek*
as though it were an opera—
loud and melodic—
with words he made up.

He played guitar, pushed
a glass tube onto his ring finger.

(He called it slide, though it sounded
more like the hum of his gospel voice.)

I held my breath as long as I could count—

and thought of the cow that bawled
as he pulled on the birthing calf's head,

the legs stuck inside.
*You shouldn't be watching this*, he said.

At night, under a flickering security lamp,
he flipped a bucket for me to sit on,
stripped silver skin from a live fish,

ran a boning knife

from head to tail, removed the insides
with one scoop

and fed them to the cats.

The fish's eye moved back and forth
until the head was gone.

He said I drove like my toddler brother—
I moved the steering wheel
steadily between 10 and 2.

The steering wheel was loose,
I remember.
It slid back each time I let go.

## Harvest

We moved through rows,

deep hampers at the end
of each one
filled with ears
of sweet white corn.

And later, the smell of blue exhaust,
the whisper sound of the steering wheel
moving through my father's hands.

In the field, I don't mention the itch,
the tiny hairs on the leaves
that leave scratches on my skin.
I slide my hand
down the length of green;
the ridges draw blood.

What I should say
is that as I walk,
they brush against my face
and when I swat them down,
the leaves fly back,
cutting the lips of my mouth.

But the smell of fresh corn at dusk—

What I understand

is the unmistakable sound
of husk pulled away from the ear,
        why I should have learned to pull
        the silk in one motion.
                What I learned
then was to keep my mouth closed—
my hands pulled into my sleeves—
        to wear sleeves.

## Basements, Our Coming Out

Mine: Clouds collected, but I wouldn't
have known. In forty-seven years
those windows were never washed.
Water ran between my feet. I ran
up the stairs, demons pressing
against my back.

You asked a dozen times to see.
*It couldn't be that bad.*

I watched my father, needing to get
to the attic, crawl his way
up the walls—the box of space above the stairs
that lead down to the basement—
his back pressed against one wall, his feet pressed
against the other. There were no stairs leading up.

Yours: Tan carpet, a thermostat. You suggested we not go
up and down the stairs, that we stay away
from your parents. There was a closet, perfect
for seven minutes in heaven. Nothing ever happened.

This was all before your father swore you were sick.

It must be bright down there—the windows topping
grass, the glass fresh cleaned by your mother.
She is so happy to have you back, safe and sound.

## Leaving Home

After the flood, only the top bars
of soccer goals are visible—fragments
        of borders in the field.
                Round bales across the road
ferment in the standing water.
Sand bags
        stacked along the shoulder of the interstate
        anticipate more rise.

*

The day I left,
my mother asked why
        can't we be like we used to be?

                That morning
I saw an Amish farmer
pull his buggy into the turning lane
                of a major highway.

*

On my way west

there is new

water. Missouri and Nebraska

flood days after Tennessee.

Ahead of the rain,

lightning

bugs hover above rows of beans,

anticipating dark. A storm

sets them off—

flashes as far back

as the edge of the field.

*

The horse was tentative, wanted

to cross to the shoulder.

The farmer held the reins

tight in his hands,

waited for cars to pass

before giving the *click, click*

that started the horse

across the pavement.

## Certainty

*-in memory*

He was baptized in a basement.
And calls it a lost art.
They gave him a certificate so he wouldn't forget.
He chews on his fingers when he wants to be sentimental.
His sister is young, married, far away.

He has a yellow parakeet. The parakeet sits on his wrist.
He scrapes his thumbnail against his teeth to say *Yes, I want to*.
He built a circle of stones.
The stones were all the same color.
The stones were many different colors.
After a month, they made him tear it down.

He practices writing numbers with both hands.
His hands are long and thin.
His nails clipped close.
He says God speaks to him through a box.
He opens the box and yells inside.
*Can you hear me?*

He buried his bird in the worn spot near the house.
The spot where he throws his scraps each night.
Dogs eat the scraps and the grass will not grow back.

He knows Icarus did not fall into the water.
Just before he hit, his arms spread and he skimmed the water.
He skimmed the water with his fingers, with his knees.

## Distance

*-for Denise*

Last night you sent me longing. Then I couldn't
sleep. I remembered a campfire, someone burning
a finger, the smell of wood in my clothes. I'm afraid
to wash them—afraid the smell is what protects me
from burning myself.

I turned in bed until the sheets came off. You,
twelve hundred miles away, must have slept a deeper sleep—
your house now hollow space, an emptier place where sound bounces
and lights carefully on the bed, boxes of books, stacked
totes. It's a place I'll never see again. For that I am not grateful.

I don't remember our last day together. I'm sure it involved
a restaurant, driving around in the almost-morning, you laughing,
me saying I want to stay with you. Even now, from here,
I beg you to come with me.

Last night, I'm sure you said *you're doing the right thing*,
by which I'm sure you meant *I'll be there soon*. I told you how
my grandfather tried to grow a banana tree in Alabama.
The tree never got above five feet and the bananas
grew green—never bigger than my hand.

Today, I'll step in front of a class, go back to my office
to map out the rest of the week, go home and make dinner. You
will ask how it's going and I'll tell you *fine*. When I ask you,
I know what the answer will be—single-file, almost done, unbearable.

## Either Way You're Done

A bolt of lightning moving down the sky
        is enough.  The plastic smell
of conditioned air
  and the *tick-tick* of my dog drawing
breath beside me—
                                I was not always this persistent.

A grizzly in Yellowstone
  digs under rocks to find
        brown miller moths—spots like still eyes.
The moths fly up when disturbed,
        land in swarms on the bear's arms.
He licks them from his fur        the dust of their wings
covering his tongue.
                He watches squirrels stash pine nuts
so he can steal them just before hibernating.

After waking, the diet is elk calf,
then salmon, the moths,        and finally the nuts.

                There are few inconsistencies here.

I imagine what it would be like,

decide I want to be ripped open

—to know you. You worry

this might not be normal.  I say

you risk burning

when you breathe that hard.

## Bullet II

Tomorrow fall begins

and I haven't lost

anything:

a few days, boxes,

cans of tomato that were stacked

in the pantry

when we moved out.

There are

three fans blowing in this room.

Heat still simmers

around the baseboards,

doors, windows.

I could hang a crucifix

no one believes.

When we were young,

my sister and I thought

the mice hurrying in the walls,

were demons sent

to possess our bodies.

*

A pop of glass,

the smell of burning

metal.

We were eating

clementines

and watching Food Network.

Light pressed through

a clean hole in each curtain

—in through one window,

out through

another.

We didn't

hear the car slow,

the gun fire,

tires screech.

I don't remember

turning off the television,

but the room

fell silent.

*

A dream:

I sit talking with my sister.

A man comes to the door.

He stands looking through

the glass at no one in particular.

He doesn't knock. I know

something is wrong.

He walks in and pulls a gun. My sister

doesn't see him even though she looks at him.

She keeps talking.

I hold a pillow to my head

as he shoots,

feel the bullet enter my brain.

My sister

keeps talking.

He walks to her.

I feel paralysis,

death

washing warm over me

and cannot

remember to surface.

*

Cats climb their way

over the neighborhood.

They run

under cars,

scatter from the backyard

like mice

under a kitchen sink.

There is a hollow whisper of repentance

in the trees.

As cars slow in front of our house

to miss the hole in the road,

I think

*What's next*?

This is obsession:

waiting for the break

of a window,

click of a pistol cock.

I hold my breath at night

so it won't drown

out warning signs,  listen

to branches

scrape the bedroom window.

## 3:00am, Knoxville

Songbirds chirrup through the night. I miss
the silence of the west the clear sky
where one or two birds pass over in a single afternoon. There,
birds are never warblers, but predators looking for a carcass
or cat to snatch from a yard.
The loneliness of the bare rocks
is sharpening hollowing.
Here, the dogs uncovered a buried bag of cocaine behind our house.
I imagined the previous renters
sitting around a fire paranoid
about the sirens blasting from the nearby interstate.
But it was more likely kids after all,
hiding the stash from nosing parents.

I hunted for more,
dozens of small holes dug in the grass. I was looking
for consistency.

When I was young
I searched for hunger. The tulip tree beside the swing
shed its yellow and orange blossoms until the ground became candy,
tempting me to nibble the petals when I played homeless.

But I was afraid of poison,

afraid the blooms would send my body

into seizures or worse

I would die quietly in my sleep, soothed.

Now I lie awake

listening for hands through the window hands

that will take me violently from this room. I wonder

if I'm substantial enough to leave.

# Falling

I.

Here in the salt caves

it is cold.

It is not yet November.

For $4 more we could have taken

the lantern tour,

been given light.

Children aren't allowed on the lantern tour—

but children are an option we will never have.

In cave dark, a person hallucinates,

begins to lose her mind.

You ask *Why aren't blind people crazy?*

In the middle of the night

the roads are salted.

You decide you should drive

for the sake of driving.

I will go with you. Because I'm afraid

there is no moon.

Because

I feel your fingers

wrap around the steering wheel.

II.

Next week we will watch children

gather at night on the football field for Fall

Festival. They will stand,

music playing on the loudspeakers,

each child's hand

on the edge of a thin

parachute that is all color,

and they will

circle,

circle,

circle,

until I want to be

the delicate parachute

holding the children.

But you don't accept this.

You believe the lights

shining in the stadium

will fill us,

as the children bend to the ground,

the parachute in the center

forming a dome of air.

## Faithful

The night sky  relentlessly changes,  turns.

Each new evening

the stars have shifted slightly.

This is not what I thought  as a child.

The sky seemed fixed,

dependable.

If I brush

along the baseboards,

I find nails embedded deep

to keep us from feeling.

And what about  you?

Why  don't I see you

when I'm weeding,  biking,

picking through the recycling?

Only at night,

and you're there so often, no

questions, no assuming I have anything

that resembles guilt.

That night in the park,

I was thinking about leaving,

about what I had gotten myself into.

But of course you knew that,

of course you knew.

You saw it all over my face.

## Concert

This was our performance: sitting in a half moon, looking through rows of heads at each other.
I waited for breaths.
I knew if I stopped playing I would hear you over everyone else.
Sometimes I did.
Underneath the lights, the thrum, the hard reality of rests, you were trumpet, firefighter's uniform, the knife you used on your arms and thighs, the phone line between us each night.
And in a dream—a sterling catfish gasping for water.
We once considered what it would be like to become the ending.
You picked up your hat. Gathered yourself up the stairs.
I don't know what I should have said.
The click-clack of a metronome on the piano.
The loudest sound in the room.
There are pictures of you holding both my wrists in one hand.
I am laughing. Then it is over.

—John Sterling Hancock (1976-2006)

## Rehearsal

The smell of asphalt

underneath parking lot lights tonight—

the day burned off black tar,

bottoms of our shoes

sticky

with melt.

I didn't know there were bats,

but here they dart

above us,

dark as shadows,

quick

as the ends of your hair

grazing my face when you bend toward me.

This thick air knows us—

the part we keep for ourselves.

Yet here,

outside,

you first say my name,

here, where I lay my hand

in the slight of your waist, where you press

my back against the car door,

press your breasts against mine.

Someone watching would say

*no, no*.

We bury ourselves

against each other,

listen to the sonar pitch

of humidity,

carry on

as though we've been practicing

for years.

Your hand

moving against my thigh,

I know

what comes next.

It's after,

after you drive away—

## An Excavation

*Even now I can hardly sit here*. –Marie Howe

The dogs dig

at the shed in the back yard,

pulling the earth

from around the edges of the building,

hoping the rabbit underneath

will dart out.

This is every

day practice.

Eventually,

there will be a hole

big enough to curl into,

to hide a sweaty soul,

a sofa, a living

room.

And when they keep

digging,

keep flinging

the dirt into the open,

after the shed sinks,

disappears,

after the house is gone,

the cars,

the neighborhood,

after the world turns

inside out—

there is a blessing

waiting:

starting over,

silent, whole, and full.

## After the Shooting

You insist we aren't blessed

until we lie awake

full of silence that presses our bodies

until we beg for hunger,

a thunderstorm, war.

Tonight, while you sleep,

I listen for pre-dawn birds to awaken.

The slam

of a car door takes the shape

of someone's fist

thudding against the side of the house.

A broken window will follow

and we will fall to defending ourselves—

sleeping,

sleepless,

and intruder.

In my daydreams,

I do not beg for mercy.

## Mid-August Meteor Shower, Vedauwoo, WY

We pile blankets and sleeping bags
on the slope of a mountain,

the Perseids strewn
across the sky. A fire would steal

the dark and our view.
We set a target of more

than the fifty-seven Leonids we saw

in November, the hour and a half
we were able to stand

the wind. An hour in and you

are sleeping beside me. I count
out loud so I don't lose

our place. A fire
would keep away mountain lions.

I listen and think I hear
the faint swish of tails

from streaks I've seen so far—
the constancy, the stars blooming

this sky. You wake,

the ground grown
too cold. As we pack

to leave, I consider the sudden
reds and golds of the Tennessee autumn

we will miss this year. But back home,

in bed, it will be the night this close.

## Sunburn

My skin sheds in layers. The pink
underneath is tender to the breeze
of the ceiling fan, hot
to the hand. Inside I can't get
warm; outside
the tide is coming in, washing up
only sand. I tell you to go,
but you won't be by yourself
in the water. I take a mango
from the refrigerator,  its pulp mush.
*It's a bad texture* you say,
but the sweet is undeniable.
Tonight
I sit in the sand—salt air on the burn
—you swim when we aren't supposed to,
ill-advised,
the stars quiet
in their symptoms. You say
there is nothing to do. I ask for the night
to be as long as the day.

## Instinct

The dog approaches,  a baby bird in her mouth.

Impossible to tell

if it drowned  in its nest in the gutter  during the rainstorm last night

or if it fell out  and she found it alive.

I dreamt this, or something like it:  my husband and I parents

to a newborn redbird. A hawk swooped in  a community

of birds surrounded it  drove it from the nest  in a cloud of frantic wings.

I only watched

enamored by the hawk's desire to eat something so small  so new.

I didn't join in stopping it.

When the hawk was gone, I turned to my newborn  lying wrapped in a blanket

nestled

in a crib high up.  I wished I had never had a child.

But throwing its body

in the trash  to avoid the dog choking on hollow bones  was not this dream.  Nor

the crunch  of her trying to keep it from me.

There are nights I set up the telescope,

watch the sky for planes  knowing if I am attacked  beaten, shot,

raped  the people in a plane could be looking down,

impossible to stop, but close enough for me to see  for me to call out to.

## Music City

Someone left

a piano beside the river,

under the Hermitage Avenue bridge

where homeless had assembled Tent City—

a community on five acres

with its own security guards,

rules against drug use,

monthly meetings.

*Music changes things*, you said.

The river flooded,

washed away the interstate,

the capital, the boundaries.

New tents were raised in a farming field—

donated by the church we left

three years before

when we were curious,

obsessed with enchantment.

We proofread our rescues,

find the flaws,

replay them over and over.

We pretend the world will end,

stock up on essentials: drinking water,

bandages, flashlight, can opener.

Call this diligence.

We are prepared

for each other,

for guardianship and bluster.

We replay the same songs, too. The songs

that belonged to us after we met.

Watching our history

in the evening river,

we catch

those notes and the city's season.

Notes:

Pg. 43, “Chances are you won’t even recognize me when I return” is from David Shumate’s “A Thousand Miles from Nowhere.”

Pg. 99, “Even now I can hardly sit here” is from Marie Howe’s “Prayer.”

Pg. 74 and 105, “Leaving Home” and “Music City” refer to the 1000-year flood that decimated Nashville, Tennessee, May 1-2, 2010.

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# Vita

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