Field Notes for the Magician

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Field Notes for the Magician

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Abstract

*Field Notes for the Magician* is a poetic coming of age story told in three movements. The poems follow a young woman’s struggle to make sense of the tragic loss of her mother, and of the subsequent losses of love and faith she experiences in the process. The critical introduction places the manuscript within the tradition of contemporary American poetry by exploring the influences that can be observed in its thematic concerns and formal innovations.

The first movement, “Evidence of Things Not Seen,” explores the speaker’s traumatic childhood loss of a parent and the resulting changes to her environment. Framed by a sequence of sonnets, this section features a speaker whose gaze turns mostly inward toward the deeply personal. The poems explore the spiritual presence of the speaker’s mother, despite her physical absence.

In “How to Lose,” the second movement of the manuscript, the speaker grapples with a first heartbreak and its accompanying loss of innocence. The poems in this section are more formally experimental, borrowing formal constraints from the sciences and other disciplines. Frequent use of the second person perspective helps these poems to begin considering more universal concerns.

By the time we reach the final movement, “Field Notes for the Magician,” the devoutly faithful speaker of section one has given way to cynical speaker who has begun to question faith as an illusion. This section asks the question: in a closed system, can a life truly be resurrected, or is the hope an afterlife merely a clever illusion?
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Introduction

The law of conservation of energy states that “the total energy of an isolated system is constant; energy can be transformed from one form to another but can be neither created nor destroyed” (First Law of Thermodynamics). The poems in “Field Notes for the Magician” apply this equation to the experience of loss, asking, “In the closed system of life, into what is the energy of the spirit transformed?” In each movement, the speaker tries out a different system of logic to chart the transformation of loss—the uneven conversion of presence into absence—and attempts to answer the question of what is left over after the exchange. This poetic coming of age story unfolds in three movements, each characterized by its voice, formal elements, and imagery. Each movement appeals to a different intended audience and applies a new system of logic to the problem of loss.

The first movement of the manuscript, Evidence of Things Not Seen, explores the speaker’s traumatic childhood loss of a parent and the resulting changes to her environment. This section takes its title from the biblical passage, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (King James Bible, Heb. 11.1). The title resonates throughout the movement as the speaker looks for evidence of her mother’s influence on the world she has left behind. In the opening poem, we find the speaker evaluating what physical traits she has inherited from her mother and falling woefully short. She worries that her hair is “frozen / like twisted / wires around a pale face,” and that the other girls will know she lacks a mother “by the looks of her hair.” Another poem, “Cicada summer,” shows the speaker helping her mother look for signs of life inside the discarded exoskeleton of an insect.

That the poetry and prose of Louise Glück should have influenced these early poems should come as no surprise to a reader of poetry. Glück’s self-acknowledged “famous
detachment” counterbalances her assertion that “we look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory” (Nostos, ll. 23-24). Despite frequently situating her speaker within a childhood memory, the poet manages to achieve profound emotional authority. In her essay “The Forbidden,” Glück describes her strategy for handling sentimentality: “When ambivalence toward the self is missing, the written recreation, no matter how artful, forfeits emotional authority” (Proofs & Theories, 54). Her poem “Snow” begins by grounding the speaker in a moment in childhood: “Late December: my father and I / are going to New York, to the circus. / He holds me / on his shoulders in the bitter wind: / scraps of white paper / blow over the railroad ties” (Snow, ll. 1-6). The emotional impact of the poem develops as the speaker reevaluates the memory from a mature perspective: “I remember / staring straight ahead / into the world my father saw; / I was learning / to absorb its emptiness…” (ll. 10-14). Glück’s approach to sentimentality informs my own navigation of loss and vulnerability.

“Evidence of Things Not Seen” approaches loss through the lens of faith. The speaker in this movement accounts for death as a conversion from physical to spiritual presence. In the poem “Cicada Summer,” the speaker defines absence as the evidence of rebirth, drawing an analogy between the empty exoskeleton of a molted cicada and Christ’s empty tomb. In poems like “Memento” and “Still Life,” she explores the power of memory to preserve her Mother’s spirit. As she considers the role of motherhood and the altered dynamic of her family, the speaker frequently alludes to scripture to explain what she does not understand. In the poem “Tea Ceremony,” for example, the speaker explains her mother’s illness as a consequence of insufficient faith: “faith has made you / whole.” In the poem “Against Such There Is No Law,” the speaker regards her complicated relationship with her family as a test of faith: “When I am purified, / I will come forth as gold.”
The heavy influence of Emily Dickinson can be easily identified in the liberties the speaker takes with her Christian faith in “Evidence of Things Not Seen.” Dickinson’s loose interpretation of foundational religious texts invites my poems to bend Biblical passages in the search for truth. In the first stanza of #573, she distills the Christian gospel: “The Test of Love—is Death—/ Our Lord—"so loved"—it saith—/ What Largest Lover—hath—/ Another—doth—” (573, ll. 1-4). Dickinson’s theology establishes a precedent for utilizing scripture as a poetic device while questioning its veracity. She explains her relationship with the Bible in a letter to Joseph Lyman:

Anybody that knows grammar must admit the surpassing splendor & force of its speech, but the fathomless guls of meaning—those words which He spoke to those most necessary to him, hints about some celestial reunion—yearning for a oneness—has any one fathomed that sea? I know those to whom those words are very near & necessary, I wish they were more so to me, for I see them shedding a serenity quite wonderful & blessed. They are great bars of sunlight in many a shady heart. (Sewall, 695-96)

Despite her reservations, Dickinson’s poems express a fervent belief in the afterlife. Nowhere is this clearer than in poem 215, where she asserts her confidence in her place in the afterlife: “What is—"Paradise"—/ Who live there—/ Are they "Farmers"—/ Do they "hoe"—/ Do they know that this is "Amherst"—/ And that I—am coming—too—” (215, ll. 1-6)

The formal constraints Dickinson employs (her adherence to common meter, her efficiency of language) heighten tension between doubt and faith—an approach that is mimicked in “Evidence of Things Not Seen.” Framed by a crown of sonnets, this movement participates in
a formal tradition dating back to John Donne’s “La Corona” in the 17th Century. The arc of Donne’s sequence traces the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ; in a similar gesture, my own sequence frames the first movement of the manuscript in a narrative arc reflecting on the mother’s death and resurrection. The poem “Ascension” even takes its title from Donne’s sequence.

In keeping with a tradition established the *Holy Sonnets*, the speaker in Donne’s “Corona” directly addresses a figure of the divine. The intimacy between speaker and audience encourages Donne’s sonnets to center around reflection on the speaker’s internal world. In “Evidence of Things Not Seen,” the figure of the divine is replaced by an idealized vision of the mother, and the speaker is consumed by the singular theme of her absence. The romanticized memory of the mother becomes the poet’s “one reader.” The sonnet form is particularly appropriate for this movement because of its argumentative structure. Each poem begins by stating a premise about the absence of the mother but reconsiders this premise by turning inward to look for evidence of the mother’s influence within the speaker herself. The success of the volta in these poems is necessary to transform description into implication of both speaker and reader. Without it, that ambivalence toward the self referred to by Glück as the key component in emotional authority would be absent.

Because the sonnet form is somewhat circular in the way it doubles back on its opening premise, the sequence runs the risk of becoming stagnant. In her essay “You Cannot Rest: Bidart, Lowell, Bishop, and the Sonnet,” Meg Tyler explains how this cyclical form can be used to transform, rather than merely contain, the energy of the poem: “each sonnet is in some respects a reflection—reflection in the physical sense of returning an image or energy, turning it back, and in the sense of mental or spoken thinking on a subject” (Tyler, 377). Nowhere is this
transformation more evident than in Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” Rilke takes a form that is inherently connected to wholeness and uses it to explore a fragmented image. The speaker further dismembers the torso of Apollo by narrowing his gaze immediately to the “legendary head / with eyes like ripening fruit” (Rilke, 67 ll. 1-2). Rilke separates the “placid hips and thighs” from the brilliance glowing from inside the torso by naming them “that dark center where procreation flared” (ll. 7-8). The poem concludes in one of the most dramatic turns in the sonnet tradition: “You must change your life” (l. 14). The sudden shift of focus to the speaker’s spiritual experience unifies the fragmented parts of the statue. Such a turn is attempted in “Memento” as the speaker’s determination to immortalize her mother’s memory swells to a fervor, only to be abandoned after the volta: “Tomorrow, I will show her how / quickly I can age. But morning catches / only hints of chestnut— the strand coiled / like a fishing line suddenly gone slack.” The irony of the turn—what keeps the poem from becoming stagnant—is that by recording her failed attempt to preserve her mother’s memory in a poem, the speaker has succeeded in immortalizing her mother after all.

The formal constraints of the Shakespearean sonnet, however—the iambic pentameter and strict rhyme scheme—prove to be too sophisticated for the child-speaker of “Evidence of Things Not Seen.” Robert Lowell frequently encountered a similar problem with the form, complaining of its tendency toward broadening the scope of the poem’s vision too far: “My meter, fourteen-line unrhymed blank verse sections, is fairly strict at first and elsewhere, but often corrupts in single lines to the freedom of prose. Even with this license, I fear I have failed to avoid the themes and gigantism of the sonnet” (Notebooks 1967-8, 160). Lowell said of Life Studies: “I began to have a certain disrespect for the tight forms. If you could make it easier by adding syllables, why not? And then when I was writing Life Studies, a good number of the
poems were started in very strict meter, and I found that, more than the rhymes, the regular beat was what I didn’t want” (Lowell, 243) In each of the first two lines of History, Lowell breaks the order of iambic cadence by beginning with a stressed syllable. He sticks to the ten-syllable suggestion of iambic pentameter, but the substitution of trochaic feet disrupts the expected sonnet meter. As a result, the idealized depiction of the object of History is thrown into conflict with the accurate reflection of the speaker that emerges.

Following his mentor’s lead, Frank Bidart leans in toward the sonnet form in 14-line poems, two of which appear in his collection Watching the Spring Festival. Comprised of seven couplets, “You Cannot Rest” toys with line-spacing, repetition, and rhyme scheme. The poem hinges on Elizabeth Bishop’s, “North Haven,” an elegy written for Lowell that ends: “Sad friend, you cannot change” (l. 24). If an echo of Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo” is detected by the reader—the echo of his dramatic proclamation “You must change your life” (Rilke, l. 14) this is surely no coincidence. Bishop anchors her confidante’s work within the same elite poetic tradition as Rilke, Donne, and Shakespeare before them.

Bidart’s poem is reminiscent of the sonnet crown only in that it opens with the final line of Bishop’s piece. “You Cannot Rest” bucks traditional meter, but the argumentative structure—the doubling back at the volta to reflect on the poem’s object—is present. Bishop’s own elegy more strictly follows the sonnet structure by which her friend was so perplexed, but with a playful melancholy he almost certainly would have appreciated. Lines 19-20 of “North Haven” fall into perfect iambics with the repetition of “repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise, revise”; the poem is at its most operative as a sonnet when the least new information is generated. In the penultimate line, Bishop asserts: “Nature repeats herself, or almost does” (l. 19.) The substitution of a trochee for the first foot causes the speaker’s assertion to function mimetically: the poet
establishes a familiar pattern, but the recreation of that pattern is flawed. Bidart’s response to Bishop is more concerned with repetition, line-spacing, and above all, rhyme scheme in its modification of the sonnet form. Bidart teases the reader with what scans as a rhyme visually, but fails to rhyme audibly: “Like lightning across an open field / I he said / wound the ground” (Bidart, ll. 10-12). “Wound” and “ground” function as near rhymes but subvert our expectations of a reliable pattern.

The series of sonnets that frames “Evidence of Things Not Seen” abandons rhyme scheme altogether, straddling the iambic pentameter line with an approximation of ten syllables often made up of trochees or anapestic feet. Fumbling for boundaries, the poems fail to contain or order the themes of loss and grief. They formally mimic the childlike speaker’s own limited capacity to comprehend or contain the absence of her mother. The result is the cultivation of a third-person narrator with a limited point of view.

When we think of form and rhyme scheme contributing to a childlike voice in contemporary poetry, we might naturally be inclined to think first of Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz.” The insertion of an additional syllable in every other line interrupts waltz meter—the ¾ time of iambic trimeter—causing the reader to stumble in the same way the speaker’s father stumbles across the kitchen floor. Due to the awkwardness of the near-rhyme “dizzy” with “easy” we get the impression that the speaker is limited in his vocabulary, and subsequently, his ability to accurately recreate events of the poem. Yet, in the second stanza, we encounter a more evolved vocabulary with words like “countenance.” As a result of this contrast, the speaker is grounded in a single memory from his childhood, but we understand that he revisits this memory from an adult perspective.
The implementation of this approach can be plainly observed in my sonnet “After Father Tenderly Carved an Idol.” While two opening iambic feet may lead the reader to expect the poem will follow iambic pentameter, substitution of a trochee for the third foot quickly causes it to give way to accentual-syllabic verse. The reader is forced to pause unexpectedly in the middle of the first line, and in the second line, single stressed syllables “god” and “squat” cause the line to stutter. All the sonnets in “Evidence of Things Not Seen” are unrhymed, but the internal rhyming in “After Father Tenderly Carved an Idol” is perhaps the most pronounced in the sonnet sequence. The playfulness of rhyming homophones “rows” and “rose,” the repetitive rhyming of “teeth” with “teeth,” echo the childlike voice of the speaker.

As the speaker matures throughout the movement, however (perhaps due to her contemplation of the loss of her mother and her own shifting role in the family), a shift in perspective is initiated that will continue through both the second and final movements of the manuscript. Gradually, the speaker’s voice moves closer to something resembling free indirect speech by hovering with one foot in childhood and one in young adulthood.

A masterful precedent for the multiplicity of voices in poetry is set by Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy.” Plath combines techniques examined previously in connection with the sonnet tradition. Though she rejects the formal tradition in favor of free-verse, Plath’s fragmentation of the speaker’s father behaves similarly to Rilke’s fragmentation of the torso of Apollo. Through fragmentation, she communicates that fatherhood, a role intended to provide structure and wholeness to the family unit, has been shattered for her speaker. Not only has the father been fragmented, but he also becomes defamiliarized to the point of losing humanity through the metaphors chosen: “a bag full of God,” “Ghastly statue with one gray toe” and “a head in the freakish Atlantic” (Plath, 8-11).
Plath pairs the nursery-rhyme cadence and repetition of “You do not do, you do not do,” with the allusion to the old woman who lived in a shoe: “black shoe /In which I have lived like a foot /For thirty years” (ll. 2-4). The rhyme scheme is simple and inconsistent, suggesting a speaker so overcome with rage she has regressed to a less developed grasp language. In the opening stanza, Plath rhymes monosyllabic words like “you,” “shoe,” and “Achoo,” and forces a near-rhyme from “white” and “foot.” Yet, the poem’s content gives us details about the speaker’s adult life, too. The speaker maps out the duration of her conflicted relationship with her father: “I was ten when they buried you. / At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you” (ll. 61-63). In the second stanza, the speaker explains that she has already gained a new perspective childhood when she says, “Daddy, I have had to kill you” (l. 6). Consequentially, the speaker is both limited to details available to the child speaker within the frame of several specific memories and has access to a mature understanding of those memories.

Rather than shifting sharply from childlike voice to adult contemplation, the voice is permitted to gradually mature throughout the manuscript. To handle this transition, we might look to James Joyce’s experimentation with perspective in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The third-person narrator of the novel is limited to Stephen’s knowledge as a young man; rather striking an omniscient stance, the speaker’s perspective is innately linked with what Stephen observes. The narrator matches his style and diction to Stephen’s development. Though he stays objective in most passages, he sometimes takes on Stephen’s consciousness, for which he uses a separate set of narrative techniques. Joyce’s shift to first-person narrative in the final chapter for Stephen’s diary entries may suggest that that Stephen’s character has matured enough to adopt his own voice, and that he no longer needs to steep himself in the experiences of others.
The transformation of voice from speaker to poet or narrator to novelist serves as another kind of conversion of energy in “Evidence of Things Not Seen.” While the mother is lost from the closed system of the speaker’s life, the influence of this event on the speaker results in a more complex version of the speaker. We see the speaker grappling with this transformation in poems like “Orpheus’s Apology,” where she speaks through a persona to worry what will happen to his transformation by grief if his beloved suddenly returns: “Her sudden return / would mean a denial / of the way grief had shaped me…”

In the second movement of the manuscript, “How to Lose,” we see the speaker focus on this transformation much more closely, looking specifically at what happens to love when it vanishes from the closed system of a relationship. The speaker weighs the ingredients, adding up the component parts that have gone into building her relationship with a first love and looking for how those parts have been distributed between them afterward. One main ingredient the speaker laments losing is her innocence. “How to Lose” takes its title from the first in a series of prose poems borrowing the form of entries in an instruction manual, “How to Lose [Her].” In the title poem, the speaker imagines what holistic ingredients might be necessary to heal the heartbreak of giving up a maternal future for her lover.¹

What keeps the speaker’s elevated perception of her own innocence from becoming one-dimensional in this movement is a gradual realization reminiscent of William Blake that the transformation from innocence to experience is an imperfect one. In much the same way that the speaker in the first movement is unable to accurately recreate vivid moments from childhood memory without the help of an adult perspective, the speaker of “How to Lose” could not mourn the absence of innocence without coming to understand its value by acquiring experience.

¹ The pronoun “her” is bracketed here to reflect that the thing being lost is a possibility, rather than an actual physical being.
Therefore, in the closed system between speaker and lover, experience is gained as innocence is lost, causing the energy to remain constant. Because the speaker is sullied by her own experience, she knows this must necessarily stain her memory of innocence.

The obvious blueprint for this thematic arc is William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, in which the poet addresses the challenge of the artistic representation of innocence by creating a deliberately damaged innocence, followed by a more authentic representation of experience. The opening poems for each section depict Blake’s “Piper” and “Bard,” an analogy for the poet’s dual lyrical and narrative obligations. The lyric tradition, with its address to the idealized object of affection—in this case, innocence—is represented by the Piper, while the persona of the Bard symbolizes the more realistic, narrative mode.

If we recall the approach used by Plath to unify the childlike speaker with the voice of the poet herself by shifting gradually from a limited first-person perspective to a more omniscient third-person, we might apply our knowledge of the gradual maturation of Plath’s speaker to the gradual corrupting of the speaker in *Songs of Innocence*. In the introduction, for example, the lines between Piper and Bard become blurred as the Piper moves from instrumentalist to vocal performer to writer. Blake alludes to the pastoral world established by Spenser in *The Shephearde’s Calender*, with the piper, much like Colin Clout, reluctantly becoming both the subject of the poem and the poet, shifting from a passive conduit of song to an active composer thereof (Blake, Introduction).

When dealing in so subjective an abstraction as love or innocence, the duality of speaker and poet is almost necessary to establish any trust between poem and reader; even the most well-meaning of speakers is likely to report inaccurately on the story of her own heartbreak. To lend authority to the subjective speaker of this movement, the poems borrow structural conventions,
language, and images from other disciplines. “Key to the Freshwater Fishes of Maryland,” for instance, hides in the form of a dichotomous key to examine a tender moment without sensationalizing it, while poems like “How to Cauterize” rely on the language of the instruction manual to make the speaker’s personal suffering more universal.

“How to Lose” does on a small scale what Anne Carson has done on a much larger scale with *The Beauty of the Husband*, which she has labeled “a fictional essay in 29 tangos.” *The Beauty of the Husband* explores in minutia the speaker’s first deep love and diagnoses its collapse. Although the speaker places a majority of the blame on the husband, the reader is not only interested in the speaker’s version of events, but also gets the sense that she is being fair. Carson builds on the authenticity of the account by “transcribing” letters between the speaker and her husband. Poem titles in the collection supplement the speaker’s intimate thoughts with allusions to famous texts, as if giving the speaker’s feelings more legitimacy. The fourth poem, for example, is titled “He She We They You You You I Her So Pronouns Begin The Dance Called Washing Whose Name Derives From An Alchemical Fact That After A Small Stillness There Is A Small Stir After Great Stillness A Great Stir,” alluding to a Taoist precept: “the deeper the power of stillness and stabilization, the greater the effect of stirring, which means movement of energy” (Cleary, 33).

The speaker revisits a letter sent by the husband from Rio de Janeiro, indenting the transcribed text to indicate where his words begin, the writing style of which— the preoccupation with linguistics—is so reminiscent of the speaker herself, the reader must actively suspend disbelief in its authorship. The opening stanza of the letter-within-the-poem reads: “I don’t understand this business with linguistics. / Make me cry. / Don’t make me cry. / I cry. You cry. We make ourselves cry” (ll. 10-13). My series of how-to poems similarly avoids dwelling
oppressively on the speaker’s heartbreak by utilizing the form to make the speaker’s emotions hypothetical, as in “How to Keep [Him]” where the speaker instructs, “If he wakes to a blanket damp with tears, tell him he’s only wet the bed.” The melodrama of the image is dampened by its distance from the speaker.

Melodrama and sentimentality are also controlled by the application of scientific reasoning to the problem of loss in the movement. The speaker examines the cause-and-effect relationships that lead to her loneliness and seeks to identify the characteristics of organisms to find the source of her pain. In the title poem, the speaker lists the exact ingredients necessary to generate the reaction, loss of [her]: tansy; black cohosh; scalding water; boxed wine; vitamin tablets; add heat; add prayer; add soft-spoken words. When combined, the reaction of these ingredients, we are told, should be “safe passage,” a biproduct of which might be peace. In “Key to the Freshwater Fishes of Maryland,” a dichotomous key is used to help the speaker find the source of an old heartache, with the poem finally ending “in here, in here.”

Kimiko Hahn’s book Toxiflora provides a roadmap for use of scientific fact as a platform for leaps of imagination; the collection includes many poems inspired by articles in Science Times. The title poem, “Toxic Flora,” begins with a clinical chronicling of scientific names and facts: “There is something vital / about the Passiflora auriculate, // which over a million years varied its cyanogens // to discourage feasting insects…” (ll. 1-4). Reliance on scientific details allows the speaker to make assertions about childhood that might otherwise read as sentimental or prejudicial.

It may seem counterintuitive that the manuscript’s most pragmatic poems should be its most romantic, but the formulaic approach to sentiment has long been an established part of poetic tradition. The aubade, for example, takes the tender moment of parting and constrains it
thematically. John Donne’s contributions to the genre most notably demonstrate the balancing of logical thought and emotion. The speaker in “The Sun Rising,” for example, tries to bargain with the sun for more time with his lover by convincing him his job will be easier: “Thou, sun, art half as happy as we, / In that the world's contracted thus. / Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be / To warm the world, that's done in warming us. / Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere; / This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere” (ll. 25-30). In a similar gesture, the speaker of “How to Lose” uses logic to argue with an absent lover what might have been gained by staying. “Aubade with Risk Assessment,” for example, attempts to frame the speaker as a worthwhile risk in a series of inevitable risks, rather than a uniquely dangerous influence.

Repeated use of the Aubade form in “How to Lose” catalyzes a shift from the stifling interiority of “Evidence of Things Not Seen” to a more external focus. The poems in “How to Lose” are addressed to the beloved, or to a version of the self, whether it be the grieving self or a personification of mania. These poems are still concerned with the personal, but the use of an imperative second-person opens the door for a secondary audience. In poems like “Speak to Me Again, Annunciating Angel,” the implied imperative “you” in “[you] Remember / when you told me, Blessed are the poor / in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom?” implicates the reader in the speaker’s act of memory.

Inspired by Blake’s delusions of visiting angels, the Annunciating Angel poems mimic the interaction between piper and cherub in Songs of Innocence and Experience. In the introduction, the cherub acts as a filter, controlling the way the piper experiences his music: “On a cloud I saw a child. / And he laughing said to me. / Pipe a song about a Lamb; / So I piped with merry cheer” (ll. 1-4). The Annunciating Angel and the speaker have a similar relationship, though the angel in “How to Lose” is far less deliberate with his commands: “What came out
was, *Let’s go down to the train-yard and / skip stones off speeding freight cars. Let’s play Chicken / between the tracks. Let’s fall in love with strangers / like a finger falls in love with an open socket.*” Use of second-person pronouns allows for a duality of meaning in which the angel might also be a personification of the more universal figure, the muse.

The imperative second-person not only invites the audience to participate in the construction of the speaker’s memory, but also in the deconstruction of the poem’s language and syntax. The prosaic line in the how-to poems draws attention to the function of each part of speech, emphasizing the inadequacy of language to contain the loss of love. In the closed system of the poem, the language of loss—the symbols that represent loss—are not equal to the speaker’s emotions. We see this in “How to Lose [Her],” a poem the opens with a fragment. While the reader can piece together the intentionality behind the fragment—that it is meant to respond to the title through the connective tissue of an implied imperative such as “How to lose [her]: do it with a tincture of tansy and black cohosh”—the opening line seems immediately incomplete. The feeling of brokenness, of fragmentation, continues to develop with the inversion of figures of speech. For example, one simile is delivered: “note how like tiny white slippers pinned in pairs along a clothesline are the blossoms of King Solomon’s Seal.” The simile is constructed backwards, with the analogy preceding the image, but the speaker is commanding the reader to process the image in this way. The bracketing of “Her” in the title and the third prose stanza further taxes the capacity of language, as it raises the question of which pronoun should be used to label the unrealized possibility of a life.

Poet Lyn Hejinian describes the prose poem’s resistance to containing grief as a rejection of closure. In an essay by the same name, “The Rejection of Closure,” examines the importance of form as an organizing agent and discusses the inadequacy of language to describe the
“vastness and uncertainty” that characterize our life experience. She concludes that while a truly open text would be impossible: “the incapacity of language to match the world allows us to distinguish our ideas and ourselves from the world and things in it from each other” (Rejection of Closure, 56).

In its original publication, Hejinian’s *My Life* consists of 37 prose sections, each made up of 37 sentences, to commemorate the poet’s age at the time of publication. Despite this autobiographical move, the book questions the nature of autobiography and questions the concept of memoir, reevaluating what it means to call a piece of writing a “life.” Instead, it defines identity by fragmentation. We see the fragmentation of the speaker’s past in snippets of narrative like “My father had filled an old apothecary jar with what he called ‘sea glass,’ bits of old bottles rounded and textured by the sea, so abundant on beaches,” and “My mother had climbed into the garbage can in order to stamp down the accumulated trash, but the can was knocked off balance, and when she fell she broke her arm” (My Life, 14-15) Both pieces of narrative are delivered in a short space within a single poem, yet they lack any indicator of what time period they come from or how closely related they might be. Separating these two narrative sentences are two sentences which make up an aphorism: “There is no solitude. It buries itself in veracity.” While “There is no solitude” is a logical enough statement, “It buries itself in veracity” evades interpretation (14-15).

In this poem, we also see the poet’s mind at work in the process of creating images. This is because the speaker allows us a glimpse into the poet’s criticism of her own writing process. For example, the image “At the circus only the elephants were greater than anything I could have imagined” is immediately followed by, “The egg of Columbus, landscape and grammar.” We
understand that the elephants at the circus are the landscape, and the conditional verb phrase “I could have imagined” is the grammar (Hejinian, 14-15).

The deconstruction of systems of symbols ultimately leads us to the third movement of the manuscript, “Field Notes for the Magician.” By the time we reach this movement, the devoutly faithful speaker of section one has given way to cynical speaker who has begun to question faith as an illusion. This section asks the question: in a closed system, can a life truly be resurrected, or is the hope an afterlife merely a clever illusion? The speaker investigates motives that might drive a loving God to allow his children to suffer grief. In poems like “Field Notes for the Magician,” the speaker questions acts of cruelty from a merciful deity: “You put a pin through its heart. The crowd said, / shake out your sleeves, so you shook / out your sleeves, but / that wasn’t how the trick worked.”

The system of logic utilized by the speaker of “Field Notes” is that of magical thinking, curbed by a paranoid realism. Whatever defies explanation is attributed to magic, or to tricks of light; sleight of hand; smoke and mirrors. The speaker’s magical thinking is primarily communicated through the defamiliarization and fragmentation of common images. In the title poem, for example, face and body parts are obscure, as in the scene where the father’s face appears covered in bees. The obfuscation of the face occurs in three steps. First, the face disappears: “Father can make his whole face disappear / behind a hive of honeybees any time…” Next, a beard obscures the face when “he tucks the queen inside his beard,” and in addition, the expression on his face is an unfamiliar one: we watch / the features of his face contort. Finally, a simile is used to make stranger the distortion: “through a sea of fuzzy yellow, like watching with infrared vision.”
The poems of “Field Notes for the Magician” learn their defamiliarizing of images from Brigit Pegeen Kelly, whose darkly magical poems create their own mythology. Her poem “The Dragon” plants itself in the mythmaking tradition by borrowing language and images from the Biblical book of Revelations. Echoes of Kelly’s “The Dragon” can be heard in the image of the father’s face covered in bees, especially when considering the following passage:

The bees came out of the junipers, two small swarms
The size of melons; and golden, too, like melons,
They hung next to each other, at the height of a deer’s breast
Above the wet black compost. And because
The light was very bright it was hard to see them
And harder still to see what hung between them (ll. 1-6).

By rendering the images of everyday life mysterious, the speaker is forced to look outward to solutions for her deeply internal crisis of faith.

In an essay on James Wright, the poet Robert Hass writes about a similar outward turn, “Over and over again in American writing, this theme or discovery, that the inner life has no place, that it makes outlaws of us” (Hass, 36). Hass argues that Wright’s images “let go of their known configurations so that they can look inward and try to name the agency of transformation” (36) and that as a result, “the style that is to make transformation possible keeps waiting to be the end, the transformation itself” (36). We see this in Wright’s poem “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island Minnesota,” in which all the poem’s minutely detailed imagery adds up to the declaration, “I have wasted my life” (l. 13).²

² Vaguely suggesting the modified sonnet form with its 13 lines, this poem’s jarring final declaration resonates with Rilke’s unsettling “You must change your life,” from “Archaic Torso of Apollo. While the speaker in Rilke’s sonnet
Another name that might be given to this structure is the concessional poem, a structure which builds up a list of doubts before finally making an assertion of certainty. The concessional poem focuses its energy inward to concede the flaws in the speaker’s claim before pushing suddenly outward to make that very claim. The poems in “Field Notes for the Magician” utilize the concessional structure to question the reliability of the speaker’s view of the world before finally asserting this perspective has led her to a discovery she would not otherwise have made. The concessional structure is what allows the speaker’s relationship with the character of the magician, who functions as a stand-in for God, to work. Without the framework of concessions, contradicting the magician might make the speaker seem self-important.

Because the speaker concedes to the magician in the series of “Field Notes” poems, we understand the series regards this character as its intended audience or “one reader.” These poems have received permission to personify God as a magician, and to speak for that magician, from Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*. *Autobiography of Red* retells the myth of Geryon and Hercules, setting it sometime after the 1930s, and personifies the mythical figures as two young men questioning their sexuality. In chapter “XXXIII. Fast Forward,” Carson further complicates the relationships between characters by adding the perspective of the poet beneath the perspective of the insecure young man beneath the perspective of the Greek demigod: “‘Of course,’ said Geryon. He was trying to fit this Herakles onto the one he knew. ‘On my volcano grows the grass,’ Herakles went on, ‘is one of [Dickinson’s] poems’” (Carson, 108).

Carson’s use of personification gives authority to her complicated speaker, as does her experimentation with form. In “Appendix C: Clearing Up the Question of Stesichoros’s Blinding By Helen,” the speaker solves a series of proofs for the motives behind the story of Stesichoros’s

is propelled by imagery to make an inspiring discovery, Wright’s speaker discovers hopelessness from an otherwise uplifting set of images.
blinding: “1. Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not. / If Stesichoros was a blind man
either his blindness was a temporary condition or it was permanent” (Carson, 18).

In an identical gesture, the poems of “Field Notes to the Magician,” which incorporate
illustrations from a Victorian magic book titled Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects, and
Trick Photography (Hopkins), include a poem whose logic operates in proofs. The piece, “Field
Notes for the Magician: Inventory of Illusions,” works out a proof for the existence of an
afterlife using excerpts from instructions explaining the phenomenon of the vanishing lady:

"Given: an object reflected from a mirror appears behind the latter at a distance
equal to that which separates it from us. The object is closer than it appears.

Given: In the center of the stage is a young girl’s head, the neck of which starts
from a satin collar."

The found form helps the speaker to say the unspeakable about the loss of her
mother and its effect on her relationship with God.

Both the wildly experimental forms of these poems, and the direct address to the divine,
are also influenced by Maurice Manning’s Lawrence Booth’s Book of Visions. In this book,
Manning balances the imaginative with a strict narrative chronicling Lawrence Booth’s life,
preventing his radical formal experimentation from overwhelming his readers. In “Envoy,” he
borrows the form of the newspaper personal ad, one of which even calls for, “a woman cast out
from society” (Manning, 10). In “Proof,” Booth attempts to prove “the existence of Hell,” at the
same time giving the reader a glimpse into the financial hardship experienced by his family:
“The slope of Mad Daddy’s money clip is zero” (18). At its most experimental, Manning even
borrows a fictitious Circuit Court document for a case against Booth for crashing a meeting of
the Daughters of the Confederacy. These poems allow the speaker to investigate Booth’s emotions while avoiding sentimentality. They allow a third-person speaker to say what is unsayable to the first-person speaker of Lawrence Booth.

In “Field Notes for the Magician” a third-person description of the magician similarly works in tandem with an intimate first-person perspective to explore the speaker’s wavering faith without becoming overly sentimental. The balance between the internal reflection and external discovery in the final movement shows how the speaker of “Evidence of Things Not Seen” has matured over the course of the manuscript. In her quest to account for the phenomenon of loss—getting nothing from something despite the law of conservation’s mandate that nothing can be created or destroyed—the speaker’s growth is the solution to the equation she hopes to solve.

In the first movement, the speaker is able to equate the death of the physical being with the influence of the spiritual—an influence that alters the speaker’s perspective and improves the quality of her life. The second movement seeks to document what happens to love when it vanishes from the closed system of a romantic relationship, yet the speaker discovers love can only be transferred, never lost. Ultimately, the speaker finds that the energy she believed to be destroyed has, in fact, fueled her own transformation.
I. Evidence of Things Not Seen
Evidence of Things Not Seen: Cicada Summer

Late summer, cicadas came, descending
on trees and all growing things, shaking earth
with waves of shrill vibrato. Mother held
a skeleton (discarded) to my eye
and I peered through the corpse as if looking
into a sugar egg—an Easter toy
decorated like hollow stone, except
when tilted toward the light. I waited for
some secret to appear—collage angels
perhaps, with scrolls inscribed, “He is risen—”
but only the outline of folded wings
against empty amber thorax suggests:
“He is not here.” Mother said Absence, like
faith, is the evidence of things not seen.
Locks

In father’s workshop:
A row of Barbies hanging
from hooks by their hair, tiny shirts
painted with epoxy
to their filed-down plastic chests.

- 

A row of perfect
pony-tails and one jumble
of curls, frozen
like twisted
wires around a pale face—

at the bus stop,
you can tell which girls lack mothers
by the looks of their hair.

- 

Mothers bless
their husbands’ feet in basins
of warm water, their locks
spilling onto the floor,
down the aisles of the church.
The Eucharist keels
on the bitter river of my tongue.

- 

Heavy rains. Bits
of broken China and other things forgotten
float to the surface
of our fallow field.

For a handful
of mud-caked, cats-eye marbles,
I let the boys
spit in my braids.

- 

In science class, an older boy
plucks a single strand from my scalp.
Under the microscope, the follicle appears a slender blossom, petals sheathed in larger petals opening, opening.
Hades to Demeter

The truth is, you’ve always had an eye
for potential—
a fallow field, a fragile stalk of corn.
You like to see how much a thing can bear,
how the weight of fruit can bend it
to the ground.
I’ve watched you, bowing before the fireplace,
tipping the infant prince into the embers,
tempering mortality—molding him.
Each night, you leave him a little longer
beneath the grate.
When I saw Persephone playing
among the poppies you painted together,
I wanted to possess innocence,
forever preserved from the living world.
I don’t need to know
what grief could make of her.
Ghost Plant

From hollows of rotting logs,
our sallow stems, at last, pierce through
the wreathes of fallen pine
needles that mark our shallow graves:
a classroom of corpses, our brittle arms
raise for a drink of sunlight, a taste of rain.

Look! Even in the absence of wind, we give
the suggestion of movement, heads
bowed, petals unfurling
against neighboring stems—
a host of sentinels bent
beneath the weight of this unraveling,
ethereal shroud.

We stand single-file, stalk-to-stalk
one waxen bulb opening onto
the next—think stalactites,
melting together,
forming a single ghostly sculpture
from a cavern roof—
not one of us in any way unique.

A gentle breeze: the skyward tug
of gossamer against stalks.
Already, we are unwinding,
dissipating,
which is the price of living
at once in two worlds.
Evidence of Things Not Seen: Jack-in-the-Pulpit

Mother crawls along the raw forest earth searching for some elusive plant to press—Pink Lady’s Slipper, Shepherd’s Purse, perhaps Jack-in-the-Pulpit, with its fluorescent pitcher folding open to collect dew.

She peels back leaves around a single stem and shows me how the male and female parts—pistol and stamen—fastened together

*Like man and wife,* she says, *they are one flesh.* But I see petals curling back, wilting, leaving the pitcher’s tender mouth exposed.

When Mother sleeps in father’s arms, does she wake twisting away at the torso, or is she enveloped in his heavy sprawl.
The Dugout

The boys cleared the field of corn stalks, fallen walnuts, and built a brush pile behind the shed that served as their dugout. Limping from shrapnel lodged in his hip, Pop showed them where to lay out Mother’s fancy placemats to mark bases. In the bed of his pickup truck, he loaded broken church pews that would become player’s benches. They’d buried treasures all summer in the packed dirt floor of the lean-to—Lucky Strikes in squeezing cellophane, hole-punched decks of cards, brown bottles wrapped in paper bags. Around the walls that sometimes shelved canned peaches and pickled peppers, they’d tacked centerfolds stolen from Playboys Pop kept under his mattress, pages torn from Mother’s National Geographic. Like flags, they marked each brother’s place on the bench: Plump Pinup, Slender Blonde, Two Native Women Practice Throat Singing. Now, as the farmhouse lights flicked off, they left boy-shaped lumps of blankets in their beds, crept down to the dugout, struck a match to the brush pile, divvied up the beer. The crack of the whiffle bat against green walnuts echoed in the crisp, night air, and the hiss of tobacco spit hitting the fire reminded them of the hiss of Pop’s cattle brand against the youngest brother’s skin. How bravely he’d hung from the barbed-wire they’d chased him through, his arm split open like a popped balloon dangling from a ceiling fan, and when they’d tried to cauterize the wound, how quiet he’d kept. The pig-skin graft puckering the length of his forearm—scrawny, ugly now—marked him for a scapegoat if Pop caught them here.

He’d take the blame for anything except the truth: he was surprised not to have cried when the doctor said he wouldn’t play piano anymore. Looking up from the ball field
to the window of his mother’s music room—
where stacks of magazines described the pulsing song
two women would make, mouths pressed together,
filling each other’s vocal cords with air—
he sometimes longed to strike out,
go behind the barn where Pop
strung up the butchered pigs, and, kneeling,
blow into their nostrils until they swelled
like bagpipes with sound.
Evidence of Things Not Seen: Piano Practice

Because I couldn’t reach an octave yet, 
Father arranged nocturnes for small fingers. 
His calloused hands closed gently over mine, 
filling in missing parts of complex chords 
while Mother, in the kitchen, folded squares 
of paper into origami swans. 
Listening to the persistent, ticking 
metronome, I wished I were beside her 
learning to pull wings from hidden creases. 
Overwhelmed by 6/8 time, I pictured 
Father fumbling in the ball field, gazing at 
the window of his mother’s music room, 
knowing which parent he wanted to please 
and which one he wanted to resemble.
Tenderness

Sunday mornings: I loved
moments when mother spread a handkerchief
across my lap, the Chiclets I’d earned by sitting still—
a nest of tiny speckled eggs between my knees.

Sometimes, Mathew shared my secret
from another pew, his fingers glistening
with spit between his lips.
Once, at this hour, my mother unfurled a chain
of paper dolls. I held them out
where green light streamed
through the stained glass
of a picture window.
Mathew held them too, with his gaze,
the way I minded him in Sunday School
while the other children
taunted him to look for the airplane—
a word that bellowed from his broken mouth.

Memory blurs like a migraine,
even Mother’s hand behind the soft flesh
of my ears, pinching me awake, the light
suddenly bursting behind my eyelids.
Maybe I never ached
for Mathew, who could not envy,
but rocked all morning between his parents
while tiny speckled shapes vanished
from the nest between my knees.

If only his hands had been deformed,
his fingers fused together like talons,
I might have stroked the strange flesh
with a softness born of repulsion—
might have hidden
the stub inside my own whole hand
until we fused together, figures
dancing in a sea of tinted light.
Evidence of Things Not Seen: Midwinter, Before the Thaw

Mother bundles me in my winter coat, secures my mittens to keep out frostbite, adjusts my mask—my face still paralyzed from Bell’s palsy—and takes me for a walk. At the bottom of a ditch, my boot taps something soft, glinting in the reflection of sunlight on snow: a garter snake, lies frozen—body poised as if to strike. It must have darted from its hole, confused by the sudden shifting of familiar ground. Mother cradles its litheness, pressing my fingers against its slick scales, happy to pity something whose recovery can’t be impaired by too much compassion.
Buttercup

From the moment I awoke
there was sunlight and warmth.
Is it any wonder my delight
is in reflection?
The softness of your skin
is as good a place as any
to resonate.
When you hold me to your chin
all I throw back at you is light.
What you project onto me
has rendered me a symbol.
Cristina’s World

She sprawls in the field in her pink dress,
limp legs dragging behind her
like the curled end of a dry leaf.
Her hand hovers above the ground,
ready to find a stronghold
among the roots, or to beckon for help
from the barn on the hill,
but the wild sea of weeds
swallows up the gesture.
Born sixty years from now, she
might have loved the smells of permanent ink
and gasoline straight from the pump,
might have trembled at the heat
of paper fresh from the copier,
might have chuckled at the catcalls
from two cubicles down as she rolled
to her desk in her wheelchair.
Alone, does she drag herself
over the crest of the knoll—
pulling herself to the house
where the farmer’s rough hands
tremble each night on the curves
of her broken body?
Or does she prefer the perspective
of the field, where one possibility
always lurks beyond another—
wagon tracks narrowing into rows
of wheat, the shadow of a barn roof
sloping to meet a cloudbank—
where the wind spinning the weathervane
is the same wind whipping hair across her face.
Soon, she will reach the homestead,
and when her farmer returns from town,
she will have supper waiting, warm.
Evidence of Things Not Seen: Red Rover

Something has been crashing through the bushes behind the stop, leaving feathers strewn on trampled grass and trails of spit-like froth, as if two stray dogs, fighting, rolled drooling in the weeds. Waiting for the school bus, girls in raincoats fling themselves against the locked arms of older boys who shout *Red Rover*—fling themselves until bruises bloom purple around their necks and, slipping, stumbling one falls beside a seed pod nestled in foam, its seam like teeth meeting in a grimace fusing its swollen sides, and from the top she watches the hooked green bodies of infant praying mantises pour out of a tiny crack.
Tea Ceremony

We move away
from the shop counter, where knives
clack against cutting boards, cleaving spines
from carp, stripping scales from white flesh
like coin purses being turned inside out,
to the back room, where garlands of garlic
hang up to dry.

On an empty shelf
he keeps it—a glass pitcher
bound shut with twine
and cheese cloth.

Across its neck
a mushroom has grown— thick,
like the head of a jellyfish— and floats there
in a bath of black tea: a brew to cure
the liver spot growing on his cheek.

Once, I watched my mother sprawl
across a missionary’s kitchen table, her naked
scalp swathed in scarves, silk, vibrant, the tumor
a globe inside her swollen womb.
Even then, the gesture of empty hands
the incantation faith has made you
whole, seemed, to me, a game.
Now, as he
fishes out the fungus with tongs,
letting its warm, slimy weight fall
into my open palms, its creases nip my fingers the way I imagine the mouths of minnows would
should I run a hand through the tank
at the store’s front, should I allow myself
to believe in the subtle throbbing
of tissue against skin.
Orpheus’ Apology

In the nightmares that woke me
sweat-slicked and shuddering,
I’d made a mistake—the viper struck
at a passing rodent, his fangs caught
in Eurydice’s hem, or it was only a vine
that tripped her.
Someone applied a poultice,
and the swelling went down.
Come to mourn, my friends
would find her hanging
out laundry, or sweeping the floor.
How could I explain myself?
Her sudden return
would mean a denial
of the way grief had shaped me.
In the end, my grief
was what I loved the most--
preferring to give up forever
what was gone already
than to lose the gift of reflection.
Evidence of Things Not Seen: Because it Would Have Been Dusk Soon Anyway

I left my toys coiled in the grapevines—
my Teddy bear, a rabbit stuffed with beans—
and moved in-doors to play with Barbie dolls
on an older child’s floor. While couples
on television got dressed and undressed
and shot each other, I forgot pretending,
forgot stuffed animals left overnight
to gather dew. Later, watching Father
carve blocks of wood into dollhouse tables
I felt the heavy weight of my secret:
that I was refined, somehow—not grown up
like I’d expected, only discontent,
unmoved by wood shavings chipping away,
bit by bit, to yield a chest of drawers.
Fable

You told me how you used to catch fireflies, 
to stuff them into jars 
so the chorus of their frantic signals 
made a lantern bright enough to read by. 
And though I knew this story belonged 
not to you, but to every boy 
fascinated by the capture of insects, 
I allowed myself to be moved 
by your telling of it.

Perhaps it was the guilt 
with which that little boy 
must have emptied a hundred 
delicate corpses into the garden.

After, did he lie 
between the weeds, the curve 
of an empty bell jar cool 
against the crook of his neck?

More likely, I envied 
your eye for detail—
how you could make out pairs 
of wings from spheres of light 
refracted by the concaved glass—
uninhibited by my attachment 
to the facts. 
In some species, only one sex 
lights up and, often, the male will fly 
while females wait, indifferent, in the trees.
Evidence of Things Not Seen: Ascension

Maybe it was the tweed-capped detective
in a noir novel who first told you a proper breast
should fill out the bowl of a Bordeaux glass.
Your own, you’d measured out in pudding cups

and once, the citrus-press your parents kept
beneath the sink. You couldn’t ask Mother—
you’d seen the way they’d Xed off swollen sections
of her flesh like drafting plays for invasive

surgery. At the drugstore, you watched girls
palm pearlescent tubes of lip gloss. Your own sleeves
crackled with packs of Ex-Lax. You imagined
the fabric of your dress was the patchwork

of an air balloon—how that fabric, filled with heat,
grew taut and round like a droplet of blown glass.
Against Such There Is No Law

Longsuffering

Father sings, L is for the way you look at me, while doctors scan my paralyzed eye.

At home we are learning the names of virtue—L is for Love and Longsuffering. Father thinks Longsuffering shouldn’t mean a man suffers for a long time.

In the hospital, Father sings

\[E \text{ is even more than any father can endure.}\]

Love

It was not Grandpa’s wrinkled hand beneath the waistband of my pink pants. Was it Grandma’s nearby bustle? The clatter of fishes against sink, the clink of spoons on glass—a chorus of noises crying,

\[\text{Love may bear all things; It chooses not to believe all things.}\]

Faithfulness

Anglerfish mate for life. Fastened to their mates as tumorous attachments, they cannot possibly bait and switch.

Gentleness

Mother tucks me into bed with a Psalm to ward off nightmares:

\[\text{When the wicked, even my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh,}\]
they stumbled and fell.

Meekness

Now the man Moses was very humble,  
above all the men  
which were upon the face of the earth

And he looked this way and that  
and when he saw that there was no man,  
he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand.

Peace

Fat on finches we fed last winter  
The cat dozes  
on the front porch.

Rabbits graze  
in open clover.

Goodness

Stopping to feed  
a homeless man  
Mother cautions,

Strangers may be angels  
in disguise.  
Later, we find the cat  
cold and limp  
in a ribbon of red,  
leg lacerated, sinew  
torn from bone.

A gift from our  
strange angel?

Joy

Midwinter, the gnarled  
branches of trees  
set about their mournful creaking.

In the sanctuary’s chill air, a voice pulses:
We shall go out with joy
and be led forth with peace
and all the trees of the field
shall clap their hands.

Temperance

Worried the ugly swirl dividing
my stomach in halves is a seam

waiting to split,
Mother scrubs

My birthmark with Brillo pads.
When I am purified,

I will come forth as gold
After the Discovery I Could Not Save the World

On the stove-top,
a wasp grows swollen on caramel
and beaten cream, and sinks
into the warm surface
with the faintest buzzing
like tiny brushes on the head of a drum.

In a dream, you teach me
how the Aborigines prove guilt
using a speckled egg, cupped between the palms—
how hard it is to lie with fingers
flexing against the fragile
axis of the shell.

You are naming truths
as if picking out constellations
on a clear night.

The egg
trembles in my hands.
Evidence of Things Not Seen: After Father Tenderly Carved an Idol

The xylophone wants to be held—little
god, squat, with rows of crooked rosewood teeth
bound together by twine—it wants to be
crossed, like a swinging rope-bridge, to feel feet
bouncing from the surface of its strange grin.
The xylophone wants to have its hollow
teeth struck with tiny mallets, wants to sing
hollow, teeth-chattering songs and summon
spirits. It does not want to be worshipped
atop the file cabinet, delicate
invention, exercise in self-control.
The xylophone wants to haunt somebody,
wood on wood, and Mother shaking with envy—
Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
Honeycombs

Like lanterns, they lined the window ledge—
translucent wicks
glowing golden, or fading
to embers in the sunlight that slanted in,
each jar sealed tight, each tiny tunnel unexplored.
What ornaments the hive
had left behind, I’d never know; when flecks of wax fell through honey, they rained like cinders from the rafters of a burning house.

Sometimes, posing
in my mother’s mirror, I’d slip
a hand inside an alligator glove
and practice the bashful
pursing of her lips, the flutter
of her armored wrist across the grocer’s counter: Oh! Put them back.
I couldn’t possibly. Oh, please.

Done up in butcher’s-paper wrapping— a souvenir to ease the blow of charity—honey jars rattled between our knees in the rusty wagon
Mother packed with groceries while Father was away.
Past doorsteps,
where laundry-soap smells lingered like a peppermint on some other child’s tongue,
Mother hauled us home
to our neglected stove, still spilling smoke through tattered window screens.

How gingerly she unwrapped them, then,
the way she would a Christmas candle brought down from the attic, set them just beyond our reach, a network of hidden passages,
to keep her confidence.
The Swan Princess

After the curse was lifted, the king saw his mistake. Eleven swans became eleven angry in-laws. How quick they were to remind him of the incident with their sister and the burning-stake.

How could he turn them away? In the great hall, they shouted—they’d lost their indoor voices. The one with the wing was always bumping into things, catching the corners of elegant urns, Ming vases, dropping feathers into the soup. He couldn’t take them hunting—they were sensitive, they empathized with the wild boar.

Even his bride was not what he’d hoped. Once a blank slate, her wide eyes suggesting innocence, now, her voice grated against his ear at night, replacing mystery with fact.

It had pleased him to imagine her delight at the first feather pillow, the splendor of silks and lace, the taste of chocolates on her wild tongue. He learned she was accustomed to a life of luxury, having grown up in a castle more magnificent than his own. Silks she found tedious—a reminder of months wasted weaving nettles into tiny jackets.

Of course he was disappointed. Ever in his mind was an image of the princess, how she’d looked shivering in the mouth of a cave, face smudged, red hands swollen with stings.
How much he’d had to give her, then;
how handsome he’d been.
Lot’s Wife

Listen: in the courtyard was a ram
with round eyes the color of dates
and hooves that clacked like bones
rattling in the sack slung over my shoulder
on my journey to Gomorrah.
His bleating behind us sounded
like a baby waking—like the daughters
that used to bleat at my breasts in the night—
or like a thousand palm fronds
shaking against the tents of my homeland.
He must have lapped sulfur from brimstone
the way he’d licked smooth
every pebble in the marketplace.
The taste of salt was already
on my tongue, too.
What could I do but turn back?
Maybe, my footsteps had always
fallen heavier, like halite,
in this strange land.
Evidence of Things Not Seen: God Commands Me to Build Him an Altar

in the brook behind the house, with red clay stones, with pine boughs, thatched, but water pours in between crevices, dislodging mud and sediment, sweeping them away.

Warm afternoons Mother tied back her hair, scoured the corners of the coal bin, scraping out beds of ash stuck beneath the furnace grate, while each upstairs footfall sent soot flakes snowing from the rafters. Once, stirring up the embers, charred altar, She caught a flicker of hell reflected in the poker’s iron handle. In my dream,

I cry unto the Lord, why don’t you show me where you hid the ram, tangled by its horns.
Mother Gothel

From this tower window, I can hear you, grumbling in my garden where you’ve crept these past nights, in search of vegetables to satiate your fevered wife—grumbling how it is always the forbidden with women and gardens.

Am I not a woman, too? I’ve tended the rows of radish heads as if they were a hundred perfect infants, washed the mud from their bright pink flesh.

What’s forbidden to me is the glow of your tiny hearth, the brush that glides through your wife’s cascade of unpinned curls. Do you think I’ve never been sick with wanting what someone else has grown?

If you left your daughter in the shadow of my wall, I’d know what to do. I’d tuck her away in a wooden box with a hot water bottle, and a ticking clock.
It Is Not That I Have Become the Mother

It is not the maternal that urges me,
driving between the office you clean
and the rusted signpost behind the liquor store,
to wipe the sticky smudges
from your cheeks, your dark hands— broad enough
to span a man’s face—
diminished
by a bag of cherry jelly hearts.

In the red glow of a stoplight, I stare
too long at your toothless gums
and look away too quickly
and blush too hard on your behalf. I offer you
flattened nickels from the bottom of a cup—
for bus fare, or cigarettes,
whatever you want. I am giddy with the power
of my compassion.

Folded crisply in my lap, white hands
like paper cranes against the fabric of my skirt—
I watch you vanish behind the sliding bus door,
your tattered rucksack dragging behind you,
shoulders slumped inside your grass stained shirt.
Still Life

On the side of the bed that used to be hers,
stacks of family photos spill
out of boxes, an accidental collage
caked with clumps of dust,
untidy as Father’s covers are pristine.

In the corner, an oxygen tank
leans against the wall—
more useless
than ever, but still wearing its leash,
a pair of construction paper ears.

Hormone tablets and morphine pills
swirl in the shapes of her favorite constellations.
Plastic cases, marking out days
like tiny measuring cups, lie
overturned on the bureau.
An unfinished painting-- empty outlines,
a wash of cerulean, propped
against the mirror.

This crumpled sheet of loose-leaf
affirms two shaky lines:
*Remember when we planted a garden?*
*How hard we strained*
*to overturn those chunks of frozen earth?*
Evidence of Things Not Seen: Memento

After chemo, Mother’s hair faded, fell like dandelions in late summer, tufts blowing away through open car windows or clinging to the back of her rocker. Catching a single stray curl, I fold it inside a locket—I must have wanted that piece of her others had forgotten to collect. Bending over the bathroom sink, I pluck a silver strand from my scalp and tuck it between pages of a book, thinking, Tomorrow, I will show her how quickly I can age. But morning catches only hints of chestnut—the strand coiled like a fishing line suddenly gone slack.
II. How to Lose
How to Keep [Him]

Build him like a scarecrow on the kitchen floor with the clothes he leaves behind; measure his absence in checkered sleeves and empty jeans.

Wait for him on the stoop of your rowhouse. Try not to count gumdrop lights winking on in bedroom windows—matchbox cars left out in yards, marking a path back home. If god is a wicked witch, he’s the one eating children in a gingerbread house.

For night terrors: draughts of valerian, kava root, pills the dentist gave you when you lost a tooth. Rise to cool your face against the freezer door. Don’t let him catch you, fingers capped in olive hats and sticky with coconut cake.

Ignore the names he calls you in his sleep. Ignore the names he’s testing like the creases of a paper hat folded to fit a ghost. Let the sections of nectarines be stencils for his twitching lips. If he wakes to a blanket damp with tears, tell him he’s only wet the bed.
Aubade with Winter Vegetables

I wake to the whisper of your morning Heineken hissing open. In the glow of the fridge-light, your bottom

is like two suns cresting a horizon, or the shiny copper pot in that still-life with collard greens by Francois Bonvin. When your body

lingers in the door, letting all the cold air out while you eye up my horde of rutabagas, I count every notch in your

crooked spine. Once, in the Museum of Medical Mysteries, we witnessed a breakup by the enlarged hearts display,

and you wanted to know why I couldn’t be romantic like that. I could have argued that the artichoke

is a heart I prepare for you from a cookbook for picky eaters. Can I help it if a butternut nestles

in the crook of my arm with the heft of a newborn baby? I could have told you that Bonvin, too, was a Realist,

and grew up underfed, and painted a dozen arrangements of winter vegetables, by which I would mean,

Forgive me. I just wanted you to live forever.
Key to the Freshwater Fishes of Maryland

KEY TO FAMILIES

1. We get off the bus, our tracksuit bottoms Swickswickswicking down the hill to the boathouse where freshwater fish float in basins of ice-water and formaldehyde, waiting to be identified. The shimmering bodies weigh slimy and cold against our open palms, our fingers fumbling between the accordion folds of pelvic fins to count spines and soft rays.

2. Sophomore boys snicker as they feel for the fleshy oviducal sheath around the anal fin in the female mudminnow. From across the boathouse I see a boy named Kyle mouth Show me on the model where she let you—

Family: Catostomidae
See Suckers

KEY TO THE SUCKERS

3. Genus: Carpiodes
Park rangers dressed in reflective vests hand out flimsy clipboards with dichotomous keys. I tick the boxes next to each characteristic like performing an autopsy on my chances with a boy like Kyle: mouth inferior, relatively small, lips fleshy, body naked except for minute prickles, belly round and keel-like.

4. Carpiodes cyprinus, quillback
Through the boathouse windows we watch the sunrise blush across the sky. The wind chops foamy crests into the still surface of Lake Habeeb. Outside, tire tracks in mud mark all the places
cars have idled on the bank,
tangled pairs of teenagers inside.

5. Genus: *Moxostoma*
Sometimes, Danny, who drives down after class at community college to teach us marimba in the marching-band room— who makes me put down newspaper on his new leather seats— will let me sit with a hand inside his pants for a whole sunset, or all of that Eagles song, *Hole in the World.*

6. *Moxostoma erythrurum*, golden redhorse
In the boathouse, Kyle is mouthing *Show me on the minnow where you want to be touched.* If anyone had asked me, I might have hooked a finger through the specimen’s open gill, past the pink petal of the gas-bladder, past the capillaries and the bulbous arteriosus, down to the to the velvet ventricle of a tiny heart, *In here, in here.*
How to Lose [Her]

With a tincture of tansy and black cohosh, scalding baths and boxed wine, and too many vitamin tablets. Light a votive to set afloat at the helm of a paper boat—something made of newsprint will do. Something folded up, like Curious George taught you in Miss Nickel’s kindergarten class.

Consult your field-guide to abortifacient flowers. Trace the outline of stamen and pistol; take note how like tiny white slippers pinned in pairs along a clothesline are the blossoms of King Solomon’s Seal.

Speak softly to still-taut drum of tummy. It is important to persuade [her]. Speak softly to yourself.

After the rains, you may find the body of a fish washed up, pumpkin-gold scales angled to catch the sun, and glinting in its mouth, a small brass button, like the button of a child’s military jacket. If god is a mobster, this is how he reminds you of your debts.

Plant the button in the garden of your childhood, as if laying a coin over a tiny mouth in the earth: say a prayer for safe passage.
Aubade With Angel Wings

The mockingbird on your windowsill
knows all the songs for wooing
firetrucks and car alarms. It is
beyond him, that he should find himself alone.

You wake to his impression of a jackhammer,
your skin glistening with sweat
and jeweled with the pocket-change you lost
between the sheets. A pair of brightly colored
wings appears—the kind angels wear in church windows
with sunlight streaming through them—in the smudges
of body paint we rubbed off against the wall.
*You should put that in a poem,* you said,

but the metaphor was too precious.
Oh, my love, come back to bed. The mockingbird
is playing our favorite ringtone
and my laundry money is still sticking to your butt.
Prayer to the Annunciating Angel

I remember the way you plummeted to Earth
and landed in the gravel lot of Starlite Skate Rink, where we scuffed hearts into the dust with toe-stops and pinched glo-sticks

between our teeth, pretending they were cigarettes.
Little wonder Blake once confused your face
for cherry blossoms. You meant to say blessed art thou

among women, or O ye dry bones, I will cover you
with skin. You must have forgotten your proclamation
in the fall, your golden scroll burned up in the sun.

What came out was, Let’s go down to the train-yard and

skip stones off speeding freight cars. Let’s play Chicken
between the tracks. Let’s fall in love with strangers
like a finger falls in love with an open socket. Let’s

drink our weight in wine, and order rhinestone-studded
gadgets off QVC, and grow heavy at the bottom
like rotting pears. You wanted to race escalators,

to cut our hair with garden shears, to drive
until we ran out of road, Sometimes, I would catch you
wheeling around empty shopping-malls like a gull

mistaking asphalt for untroubled seas; your wingspan
cast a shadow wider than a thunderhead—
wherever you perched was darkness.
How to Cauterize

Pack with clove oil and minced garlic. Dress with poultices of peppermint, a tincture of myrrh. Count the beats of your pulse with the underside of your tongue pressed against the opening; count the seconds since he went.

Let stale air whistle through cracks, like the tooth you chipped on embroidery needles that night you patched pants to wear on a first date.

Try to forget the taste of powdered bone and fluoride, drill bit between your lips. Ask the god-who-is-dentist: won’t you reach inside my skull and make me sparkly again?

Count the parts of the skeleton you can clean. Tilt your head beneath spigot of sink—drink. Drink and drink.
Love Poem with Sea Creatures

1. We paddle out
to the place where sea-brine
turns the waters of the Potomac brackish—
where ospreys circle
banks of tributaries, keeping a lookout
for their young, and clouds of jellyfish
tangle on our oars like toilet-paper
draped over late-autumn branches.

We steady our kayaks with our hips,
leaning and rocking with waves
kicked up by Jon-boats. You point out
migratory patterns of birds of prey
and that cove
where you found the algae-slicked body
of a missing person.

Because genetic mutation decided
some species of flatfish didn’t need
to look their predators head on,
the flounder fossils
we overturn with paddle blades
look like flattened novelty pennies,
like you could flip me for eyes or tails.

I tell you, Rilke says everything
that frightens us
is something helpless
that wants our love. You tell me
to stick an arm in the water—
see if those jellyfish
don’t want to love me.

2. We know the sea otters in the Monterey Bay area
have been observed violently raping seal pups,
but the pair at the aquarium naps
holding paws to keep from floating apart,
so we elect them
as a kind of mascot for our affection.
In the seahorse tank, leafy seadragons
swim with noses touching
and tails linked. This time of year,
all the males are pregnant, or bloated
with internal gas bubble disease.
Watching them slow-dance between 
blades of seagrass, I remind you 
when we met, I told you I was from that town 
in Footloose, and how my mother 
knitted tube-scarves 
for frozen garter snakes found 
beneath our fellowship hall.

A placard 
posted in the hall of invertebrates 
reports: some species of jellyfish 
can age backward in a crisis, 
transforming their cells 
to a younger state.

When you were young 
4 snapping turtles appeared, 
one summer, in your parents’ pond. 
You brought them pizza rolls 
after school, and tried to teach them 
backflips, until one day, they wouldn’t 
turn over, and your father 
made them into soup.

If we could go back—
could transdifferentiate our cells—
I’d want you to be the grain of sand 
trapped inside the mantle of my shell. 
I’d cover you with mother-of-pearl 
until all your jagged edges 
were smooth and iridescent.
Aubade for the Morning After

Something has been tearing
through the garbage again—
leaving bins dented,
overturned. The slice
of moon—or maybe it was
a cantaloupe—that I brought
home for you between my teeth
is sticking to a paper napkin
by the sink. The nick
in the tip of my tongue
tastes of aluminum
and limes; I test the edges
and try to remember the name
of the can I must have cut it on.
In another room—or maybe
in my head—the needle
scratches and scratches
at the vinyl surface
of a record left spinning. My hands
find the ridges of your spine
curving away from me beneath the sheets
like a bad dog finds
a bone scythe
at an archeological dig.
For days, we’ll discover gnawed rinds
and scattered bread crusts
on our lawn—a vulture
stopping traffic to pick
at roadkilled possum.
I’ll sleep away the afternoon
and wake up hungry.
How to Prepare

Butterfly.

Pack the cavity with horse chestnuts and deadly nightshade— with lidocaine and liquor. Truss with laces of black licorice.

Jam mandrake apple between teeth.

Covet the other glistening bodies on Inskip Street: shirtless husbands, hoses blasting mud-caked hubcaps, the potbellied pig playing on a neighbor’s porch, skinned knees draped over bicycle seats.

If god is an enchantress, she’s the one licking her lips at lifeboats dragged across the Colchys shore. Let snowdrop draughts guard against her delusions.

Let his whisper recede to wind in the trees—let children’s laughter be the caws of grackles.
Ode to the Jogger Who Jumped Me Last Summer

On the patio where I first saw you staggering,
a woman who must be your mother
trains clematis vines to climb a battered
drainpipe, her head haloed from every angle

by the dishes of a dozen Christian
satellites. At night, does she lay her hands
against the outline of the televangelist’s,
sparks of static dancing on her fingertips

like flames on the heads of apostles? Sundays,
does she ask you to bow before the other boys,
basin of warm water trembling in your lap, feet
cupped between your palms? When your hands

closed around my hips on the greenway, did you
walk in the valley of the shadow—does your cup run over?
Speak to Me Again, Annunciating Angel

through the incline meter of the NordicTrack
c900 pro whose gentle valleys and sudden peaks sketch shapes
like clenched fists flipping
middle fingers at my effort. Fill

my shopping cart with so many cabbage
heads the right one must come home
with us this time. Maybe he'll tell us again how we can always
make gallons of coleslaw. Teach me to count
my blessings the way Roethke counted

antique typewriters in the bed of his
pickup truck. Wait for me in the creak
of the second step; I’ll leave him in the valley our bodies have made
together in the mattress. Let’s stay up
licking the flaps of envelopes and writing

love letters to movie stars. I’ll draw
all the blinds the way he hates when he asks
us wouldn’t this place look better in a little sunlight? Remember
when you told me, *Blessed are the poor
in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom?*

What ever happened to your famous
meddling? Didn’t the Father command
you *give wine to those with heavy hearts?* Won’t you teach me
to map the Morse code dripping
from a leaky faucet, to parse out

S.O.S. drumming against drain. Have
mercy on me, for I am weak; my bones
are vexed. Convince me the shadows of branches on blinds have
followed me home. To be alone
is better than to be without you.
Let Us Praise Another Harvest Moon

Midnight on the I95
and the moon is a thumbworn,
sticky nickel in a pocket of cloud—
and the moon is an ice chip
caught in my throat. Depress
my tongue, Oh Moon;
let Midnight search my mouth
for cavities, the way
he searched me.
Split me, like a pumpkin
dropped at a roadside
fruit-stand, and hollow
my hunger like seeds.
Glint at me from the lids
of rest-stop trashcans
the way you caught me,
once before, pawing for scraps
with the possums—the way
you glint off Saturn’s skin
in that painting by Goya. Choke
me on my hunger,
the way Saturn
chokes on his child,
eyes fixed to the horizon watching
for some other god
to intervene and knowing
this time no one
is coming to stop him.
How to Build [Him]

Build him like a golem out of ice and twigs and snow. Build him in the drifts that gather beneath windows left open over holidays. Build him with carrots and bits of coal. Tell him to smile around the stem of a corncob pipe—the kind your father smoked when you were young.

Look for him on the ice rink outside the National Gallery, behind statues in the sculpture garden. Picture him on the K-street Bridge, wrapped in a trench coat and carrying Christmas oranges. Count the leotards of toy soldiers and sugarplum fairies.

Count the shiny copper kettle drums wheeling through the doors to the Hall of Nations. Tell him you used to be a xylophonist.

Duck beneath the eaves of nearby houses and pluck down an icicle spear. Carve out the cavity of his heart—the buttonholes of his invisible coat. Wrap him up in your warmest scarf. Don’t tell him how quickly he’s melting.
Summer Lingers in East Tennessee

And everything is too humid—
even the dragonflies have stopped
sipping from the swimming pool
outside my window.
On the radio, the international timekeepers
are adding a leap second to a long year. I am reading
in a history of Nostradamus
a recipe for jam made from shavings
of cypress wood and four hundred black orchids
when the timekeepers announce
the year will end at 11:60 pm.
I am reading from the recipe
to cure plague, I saw a woman sewing herself
unaided into her own shroud,
starting with the feet. The voice
on the radio counts
victims in the newest shooting—
lucky the year will be long enough
to contain them. I am reading
a recipe for love, made from mandrake apples,
verbena leaves, the blood of seven
male sparrows.
Aubade with Risk Assessment

For Matthew

The night my mouth
closed around the broken
filter of a Marlboro salvaged
from a busy sidewalk,
you measured me
in micromorts— how
I multiplied your mortality—
1.4 per cigarette, .5 for every
glass of wine. The way your lips
quivered on the O
in Rose, you must have
suspected even my name
was a unit of risk.
Over dinner, you cite
statistics for the half-life
of infatuation— give us
18-24 months— and I want
to remind you this
is the gestation period
of an Asian Elephant.
Later, I’ll hear
how you lay awake,
after your father’s heart attack,
feeling for your own
heartbeat. Some nights,
you couldn’t find a pulse
thrumming beneath fingers
pressed against your throat.
I practice breathing on
the offbeat of
that metronome ticking
inside your chest. You calculate
all the arcs and rays our bodies
make. In the dark, your
fingers find mine
like an electrocardiogram
finds a calcified valve.
We know, from science-based observation, the flock of microscopic magic carpets floating between blades of eelgrass in the lower Chesapeake will soon fence each other for the entitlement of being left unpenetrated, the tips of their shafts smacking together like rapiers. This is how the transgender species guarantees its diversity: the vulnerable worm is injected with sperm, carries a fetus, becomes mother; each father will continue to parry other partners until inseminated. We watch for evidence—base labels around levels of aggression—let womanhood mean wounded ones. Soon, even the brutal must nurture their young.
Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern North America

1. Everything is candy canes
at Christmas— even the teeth
cupped in the palm
of your hands, slick with blood,
that you cling to
like a sachet of seeds.
One boy stays behind
to help you harvest them.

2. The first time you saw her
mother’s mezuzah, you
mistook the coiled
yellow parchment
for flypaper
until you saw the way
she kissed her fingertips
and touched them
to the doorpost.
She taught you the doorway
is a mouth to the home.

3. Her teeth in the surface
of your Chapstick
make furrows like
a two-shared plough.

4. She tells you
the song of a robin
sounds like someone calling
watch out, watch out,
watchout. Her glossy lips make
beak shapes on paper napkins
in the bathroom between classes.
You keep one
crumpled in your pocket
like a treasure map.

5. The doctor tells you Echopraxia
does not mean to practice
echoing. You can’t help
the way your lips move
when she talks. You listen
like a tongue listens
to a toothache.

6. Once, kneeling in the pine bower
behind the school, you wrapped
a hand around the downy chest
of a baby robin, and it bit you
hard enough to split the web
between your thumb and forefinger.
You wondered why
it couldn’t be so easy to cut
the thread beneath your tongue
and set it free.
III. Field Notes for the Magician
Field Notes for the Magician

1.

I watched you resurrect a hummingbird. Your hands in white gloves were two wings fluttering beneath the folds of your cape. You put a pin through its heart. The crowd said, *shake out your sleeves,* so you shook out your sleeves, but that wasn’t how the trick worked.

At home, I practice alchemy over a Bunsen burner, boil quartz crystals in quicksilver, shatter the bodies of glass birds that bob their head in time to barometric pressure. In the freezer—stacks of matchboxes filled with frozen minnows, waiting to be reanimated.

Three taps of your wand— a sudden buzz in the palm of your hand. If I could come back as anything, I’d want it to be in the palm of your hand.

2.

Father can make his whole face disappear behind a hive of honeybees any time he tucks the queen inside his beard. We watch the features of his face contort through a sea of fuzzy yellow, like watching with infrared vision.

Sometimes, bees cluster in apple blossoms, stack together like bullets. Father lures them home with pine smoke and burlap cinders.

He likes to carve the faces of presidents into apples— to seal them in bell jars on a cellar shelf, where they sit in a sticky Mount Rushmore line-up until dehydration turns them all to old men.

3.
I watched you perform the Marvelous Orange
down at Middlebrook auditorium:

to bear peaches and pears, plums, nectarines,
and apples on its snow-white branches.

Sometimes, I pray you will teach me the trick
of summoning fruit.

Sometimes, an apricot spits
from its skin, pit mixing
with the neighbor's chestnuts
on the ground around the fence.

Mother makes a ring of brightly colored water bowls
around the yard, counting the bugs that spin
on the surface at the end of each day—
honeybees only drown in blue bowls.

As if it matters, her determining
what color each insect prefers.

The whole wing of a Luna moth covers
the mouth of the pink bowl; its marking
is the eye atop the pyramid
on the trick dollar
I fold, fold and fold.

We never saw my mother's nipples.
After the mastectomy, she let her dressing gown
fall open at the kitchen table, the web
of scars across her chest strange pentagrams
embroidered to the gods of cancer.

We followed her around
the house, taping shut cereal boxes

she opened at both ends.
On Wanting to Wake Daddy and Ask Him Why

there’s no word for the fear of mirrors in the dark, if we need a name like, *Hylophagia: that oppressive urge to consume glass*, and does he remember? I used to chew the eyes from Teddy Bears until they were all taken away to sit, sightless, in an empty bedroom?

Did he worry I'd get splinters in my tongue?

Padding past half-moons of light left glowing beneath his bedroom door, I could map out that old house I grew up in: here is the stair that always creaked behind me, the gnarled shoulders of a coat-tree slouching after me—here, the hallway where we sat between opposing shaving mirrors, feet pressed together at the soles, trying to count the number of unbroken reflections.

Sometimes, he sends envelops packed up with bottle caps and broken glass. I scatter them on flat surfaces—hope to divine benevolence—wonder if there’s a name for this kind of oracle.

There is no word for the fear of mirrors in the dark.

On a mirror, you can only kiss your lips.
Locks II

For tonight, let’s forget those cellophane squares
jammed shamefully between the slats of the rattling air conditioner
sweetening the air with spearmint and horehound—

the kind of candies old men keep tucked
along the crease of monikered kerchiefs
and press into my palms as payment

for copies, or a smile, or the chance to brush by me
in the file room with their starched blue coats
scraping the rayon of my dress.

For tonight, let’s pretend this fluttering is the wings
of a thousand moths hanging here to taste dust
from the slats of the broken window unit,

not tokens of a currency in sweets
I have carried out since childhood.

Once, you accused me of building my own Point de Artes
along our bedroom wall. This was before we knew

the weight of too many gestures could
bring the footbridge down.
Fieldnotes for the Magician: An Inventory of Illusions

1. 
These are the names we give
the apparatuses for vanishing
words: larynx, throat, trachea, tongue,
anechoic chamber.

A yellow jacket queen
can burrow into walls, dissolve
newsprint insulation
between her jaws, transfigure it
into cells that house eggs.

Some holidays, the postman brings
packages from Father: code words
clipped from Sunday Times,
ests fashioned from twigs and twine,
apparatuses for vanishing loneliness.

2. 
You tell me to list all the things
that luminesce
under the action of X-rays:
porcelain, enamel,
diamonds, glass,
objects covered in calcium tungstate,
clusters of cancer cells
nestled in bronchioles.

Let us now put out the light
and set the Ruhmkorff coil in action!

Suddenly skeletons appear
glowing beneath our skin.
Given: an object reflected from a mirror appears behind the latter at a distance equal to that which separates it from us. The object is closer than it appears.

Given: In the center of the stage is a young girl’s head, the neck of which starts from a satin collar.

Given: to the spectator, the point, $c$, reflected at $C’$, will appear to be the point, $C$.

Given: the head speaks and smiles, and blows out a lighted candle.

Therefore: the absence of the body is demonstrated to the spectators.

Therefore: we see through the glass—darkly, then face to face.

4.
These are the places the magician looks for hidden coins:

behind your ears;
beneath your tongue;
in the mouth of a carp caught by an Apostle;
against the eyelids of the dead;

wrapped in soft pieces of cheesecloth
(a prize for reciting the 23rd Psalm:
Yea, though I walk through the valley

in the aftermath of your appendectomy,
keeping company with Legos
and a wad of gum;
at the bottom of a wishing well;
pushed through a slot in a box labeled 
*Magic Hands* on a hotel bed in a room
overlooking University Hospital,
where Father fed us peanut butter sandwiches
while we waited for the diagnosis.
Stage Fright

Limberjack chatters
at the end of a paddle:
thumbplucked, puppateered
marks time to Dueling Banjoes
or Man of Constant Sorrow.

wooden arms swing
around rusty-nail pinions
the way a shoulder
should never contort, kneecaps
and hips swivel and spread

transmitting the code
of 12/8 time (vibrations
that shake loose joints)
There is no nakedness like
the discovery that you

are the jig-doll, your
long legs unfolding against
the thrum of whiskey
between your ears, chatter
of ice in so many cups,

bow against fiddle,
reeling catgut staccato,
still bodies, and you,
spitted on a taunting gaze
twisting in time to music.
The Rooster

1.
He carried it slung over one shoulder
like a pageant sash, feathers fanning out
across his back in a dull rainbow
ranging from rust to gunmetal.
He’d never won a prize for anything—
not even that pumpkin he watered
with whiskey from his father’s flask—
but he remembered
how silk ribbons seemed to levitate
around the girls of the Bedford County
Dairy Court.

2.
His father wrenched the rooster’s neck
with two tanned hands
steady against the soft wattle—
did it with a single jerk—
and the wailing, which was like
a tree trapped
outside a window in winter
or the noise
when he turned
through the wrong door
at Grandma’s rest home,
stopped.

3.
Once, at the market, Father hoisted him
above the sprawling produce,
and he pointed to the pink plumage
of dragon fruit fanning out
over edges of bins. He
whispered in his father’s ear
that he wanted that one,
and Father made him swear
he wouldn’t waste it,
but he meant to hold it
and study its quills. How easily
the knife, in Father’s hand,
had split the vibrant skin,
exposing pale flesh, flecked,
like marble.

4.
It used to wait for him
on a string laced between
wicker strands
of his bicycle basket.
When he buried his face in
the rooster’s feathers
he smelled rain and peat moss
and felt the tremor of a cluck
that caught in the syrinx.

5.
He hadn’t meant to hit it—
wasn’t even aiming—
but the bird, who loved
to wait for him, followed him
into the woods with his Daisy
Red Ryder air rifle,
and suddenly he couldn’t
stop shooting, because
now his pet was wailing,
or maybe it was him,
and that was how his father found him.

Father used to say a man
sometimes had to try
not to hurt other creatures,
said that was how
the passenger pigeons
all came to be dead—flocks
flying so thick and low
you had to put down your hoe
not to hit one.
Field Notes for the Magician: Sleight of Hand

1. 
Mother teaches me
to read the ages of bald women
hooked to IV stands
in cracked knuckles, the prominence
of veins in fingers and wrists.
We whisper, like the palmists
of the Memorial Oncology Ward

2. 

Mother’s gurney vanishes
between swinging doors,
and Father practices the trick
of folding down ring
and middle fingers,
of straightening pinky, extending
thumb, cupping the symbol
for love in a trembling hand.

The Magician might call this
the Palm Proper—letting
two fingers press into root
of thumb to form a bridge
at the hollow of the hand
where anything small enough
can hide

3. 
After the diagnosis, we listen
to the tick of a wristwatch
covering its face with both hands.
On a sundial, the titanic body
of our nearest star
can be transfigured
into a hand made of shadows.
In a difficult manipulation, the Magician’s hands exchange a silver coin for copper—small maneuvers of fingers masked by larger hand movements.

The surgeon’s hands exchange sharpie for scalpel, marking all the places where it hurts, and turning them over, like the Magician asking Was this your coin? and the coin always reappearing wherever it vanishes.
Autumn Begins In the Garden of Trains
(After James Wright)

The ground sweats the bubblegum sweetness
of rotting papaws. The ground bleeds
coal—coal topples from over packed
freight cars and dusts the ground like black snow.
We stretch out between railroad tracks, flatten
our bodies against the slats, thinking
of fathers nursing Heinekens in foam koozies,
and mothers with fresh lipstick pressed to telephone receivers—
or whatever they’re pressed to—and a future
with Pine Mountain Mining, and waiting
for the sudden breath of steam against our cheeks.
Don’t think about blinking, we say. We want to feel
terror. On gutters and power-lines, blackbirds
flock, flashing the red wounds
they keep tucked beneath their wings.

We walk home the long way, loiter in lots
where garden gnomes and angels watch over
skeletons of Chevys propped on cinder blocks.

Dogs on porches throw back their heads
to howl—open their mouths around
a low-hanging sliver of moon.

The moon sharpens between their teeth.
Scrying

With pushpins and bits of string and blood drawn
from pricked thumbs, Daddy
marks our progress on a Marathon Map
and calls to summon us home from truck stops
or cheap motels, from scenic over looks
dusted with snow and crimped around the edges
with hoof-prints.

He puts one pin in the I-81
where wild ponies toss their mange-styled manes
and lip the pocket-flaps of hikers and families
with camera phones.

He puts a pin
in the Chesapeake Bay, where I lived
one winter with a heron in my bathtub,
and used to practice sleep-driving.
He plots a line between Forts Bragg and Bliss
where Emmett studies pushups and parachute-folding
for the war.

From a kitchen window, Daddy reports:
a goldfinch building nests
in the neck of his storm-drain, a flock of grackles
circling the Blenko factory
where we used to sift through scraps of shattered lamps
and goldfish made of crackle glass.

He used to test our reflexes
with a tuning fork—to plot
the joints along the ley-lines of our skeletons—
scrying for stress
fractures with high frequency vibrations.
Once, cupping an ear
to my scraped and knobby knee, he told me
how the bones in all our bodies
resonate in the same key.
On Wanting to Wake Emmett and Ask Him Why

sound waves travel at higher frequencies
for a person coming home— and does he
remember how we used to break up
Sunday broadcasts of *Top of the Pops*

with a Fisher-Price karaoke mic? How we
read out Mother’s orders for popsicles
and ginger ale, OxyContin and saltines
over the kitchen radio? How we memorized

the channels where she could call for help?
Does he remember the room where he pretended
the Chinese checker filled with chalk powder
was a cherry bomb placed in my palm?

How still he said I had to stand while he diffused it?
Nights, he calls from Seoul, from Fallujah
or Fort Bliss. He’s learning to tie a tourniquet.
He’s practicing parachutes. The dots connected

on my World Atlas make lines
like sutures stitched into the equator.
The Magician Disarticulates the Skeleton

(you) Let me like my hawk

waiting on workbench for scalpel with

penetrate point

wings of bone

pinioned at rest mouth with wires sharpened

papier-mâché

end tongue carved from wood

mend me with branches of osier wax

pum

wash me with soap chemical

(mend me with branches of osier wax

pum

meet end
Works Cited


Vita

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